Ditch’em

Inwood Indiana
Presents

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Gail, do you hear that?

I hear Footsteps...

And voices...

It's coming from downstairs...

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Special Feature
Short Stories by Algernon Blackwood

Imagine our surprise when the ghost of Algernon Blackwood submitted his short stories from a century ago! Spooky! OK Algernon, we will not let you down.

A Fish for Dad.

Bobby Isum Jr. was 9 years old when he went fishing in the pond the locals call *the pit*. The pit is an ominous looking place with black water surrounded by old-growth forest. To access the pond at the bottom, Bobby had to descend the steep banks that surround it on all sides. The locals have all but forgotten the origins of the pit. They just live with it, like some kind of black hole in the middle of Inwood, Indiana. Small towns are like that. Even the most unusual things seem normal when they are in the middle of town. Why people would build homes there is the real mystery.

The kids in Inwood like to tell visitors a comet crash-landed there, but the fact is, the pit is an old remnant left behind after years of deep dredging. Nobody knows how deep it goes or what kinds of caverns the dredging may have opened up beneath the waters. Twenty years ago, several divers ventured into the pit to look for a body, but they never resurfaced. Since then it has been closed to everyone. Closed, officially, that's the rumor, but Inwood is too small to have a Sherriff, or anyone "official" to keep people away. The locals still go to the pit occasionally, and when they do accidents are not uncommon.

Bobby wasn't much of a fisherman; he'd only gone to the pit once before with his dad but he remembered the day with perfect clarity because it was so odd. There was a great deal of conversation, as though Bobby's father, Robert, had so much to say that he could not contain himself. He spent the better part of an hour telling Bobby about the hidden dangers that account for the many "accidents" that happen there. People had a way of dying in the pit, or simply disappearing altogether. Robert explained that the black sticks around the shore can be tricky. They look like sticks but some might be deadly black snakes. Then there were the sloping sides of the pit, covered in slick leaves. A man can slip on those leaves and slide all the way down, maybe even have his head cut off by

the remnants of barbed-wire fences hidden in bushes on the inclines. In the winter, some people simply slip through the ice and die. The rumor is that years ago kids threw some old shopping carts filled with rocks in the pit. If you slip through the ice, Robert explained to Bobby, your clothing gets caught on the sharp edges of those carts, and then the carts start rolling down the steep slopes beneath the black water; they drag people down. Occasionally a hunter mistakes a fisherman for a doe, and drops a deer slug into their skull with a sudden hollow thud. He continued for hours, telling Bobby gruesome story after gruesome story to explain the many horrors that happen at the pit. For Robert, the important thing was to make sense of the "accidents." People don't just go to the pit and die. There are reasons—explanations that make sense, and all those deaths could be avoided if those who died had half a brain. "Darwinism," Robert would say, "the gene pool is shallow in small towns and anyone with an ounce of sense can go fishing and come back alive."

For almost an entire year Bobby had been asking Robert to take him fishing again, but Robert was always too busy working on cars, or going to town to drink beer with his friends. Bobby was almost always alone, but that did not stop him from keeping busy. From a distance, Bobby looked like an adult, only his childish body gave him away in silhouette. The neighbors took to calling him "The Rambling Boy" because Bobby was forever on his own and constantly doing something, but it was not always easy to know what. He seemed to mutter to himself, and he was often seen walking one way, and then the opposite way a few minutes later—he carried himself with the swagger of a grown man who came into his own. He was always up to something, and it was only a matter of time before the idea to go fishing alone overtook him. Bobby had no fear about the pit or the stories. Robert's wisdom seemed sound; "Anyone with an ounce of sense can go fishing and come back alive."

As he was approaching the pit, Bobby had been muttering to himself; he would watch his step on the slick banks, watch for snakes, and come back with a big fish that will impress dad. “He’ll be so impressed that he will want to take me fishing every day! It will be just like it was before,” Bobby thought out-loud to himself, “dad will be spending every day with me. It will be great, if I can just get him excited about fishing again.” Bobby felt a lump in his throat as he threw his line in the water. He really needed to catch a fish. He stood there, at the edge of the pit, for about an hour. The tall oak trees seemed to drop leaves on him constantly, even though he could not see leaves falling from trees on the opposite bank. The wind seemed to whirl around the pit, following the bank, causing an undulating whooshing sound in the trees.

Bobby was like many Inwood Indiana kids, or kids from any small Midwest town for that matter. He really only had a few rules—don’t go on the highway—don’t bother people—be home by dark. He took full advantage of the freedom. Bobby knew where the apple trees were, where the best frogs were, where the spring was that bubbled out of the ground. He knew it all because he was always moving, and now he knew what it was like to be fishing in the pit by himself. Nobody else was there to distract him, and after waiting for fish to bite, he was really itching to move around. Bobby wedged his fishing pole between two trees and slowly started walking around the pit. When he got about a third of the way around, he looked back to see his pole half bent over, wobbling like a corn stalk in a storm.

Bobby spun around to make a run for the pole but his right foot slipped in the mud and he ended up with one foot in the water and the other on the bank—his legs spread widely, protruding like some kind of elegant ballet extension, except that the position was so awkward that he was unable to recover right away. After some effort he managed to slide his waterlogged foot toward the shore, but just as he was about to pull his foot out of the water, he

felt the water grip his foot. It was painful to struggle against and Bobby couldn't free his foot no matter how hard he tried. It was the strangest thing. Bobby could see his shoe in the water, and it did not appear to be stuck on anything. His laces were tied neatly, the edges of his shoe were not torn; there was no barbed-wire or other binding wrapped around his foot, but even after several tries it just wouldn't budge. It was stuck like a wasp in tree sap.

Bobby was in pain but he was also bewildered. It hurt less when he stopped trying to pull, but he had to keep trying. Then a terrifying understanding of his predicament overtook him. He was trapped by something, and there was something else there with him, something big moving in the water. Just twenty feet from the water's edge, some kind of slick and shiny blackness crested like a humpback whale rising before diving deep. The back of the beast rolled across the water producing large waves that soaked Bobby waist deep. He knew he was in trouble, big trouble—probably the kind of trouble all those others had been in before their "accidents" in the pit.

He screamed the kind of scream that mothers never want to hear, the kind fathers have only heard on battlefields or in nightmares. Bobby held nothing back, and he screamed for all he was worth but the pit has a way of swallowing cries. His screams seemed to circle the pit, intermingling with the sounds of whooshing oak trees, never breaking free to summon help. While Bobby struggled to free his foot, a small eruption of black and green bubbles broke the surface of the water, releasing some kind of noxious gas which lingered on the surface like thick fog. It was impossible to tell where the beast was. The fog spread to the full width of the pit, and Bobby could see turtles emerging from the water. There were dozens of them, some as big as doghouses, and they seemed to be panicked. The turtles were trying desperately to run, the way people try to run in nightmares—a slow-motion panicked lumbering, unable to move fast enough to flee from some unseen horror. The situation was starting to feel hopeless.

Bobby was losing his strength. No matter how hard he tried, he could not budge his foot. He could see it; there was nothing visibly restraining him. He could run his hands around his foot and he felt nothing, but no matter how hard he tried, it just wouldn't move. He did not come from a religious family, but he cried out to God anyway, "God Help me—please help me" and as his cries became more pitiful, the creature broke the surface again, this time much higher than before. It undulated several feet above the fog, a hulking black mass and Bobby could see large interlocking black scales. He knew this was definitely some kind of monster.

Then as he pulled on his leg with both hands, he noticed a man standing on the edge of the water about 50 feet away. He seemed to have appeared when Bobby wasn't paying attention. Bobby began pleading and screaming for the man to help, but he did not seem to react to Bobby's panic. He was an older gentleman, a little hefty, wearing pin-stripe overalls and a blue shirt. He seemed to casually stroll in Bobby's direction, smiling calmly—as though he was mildly amused at the situation unfolding. Bobby pleaded louder and louder, but the kindly gentleman never changed—he never sped up, or changed his expression until he was standing leisurely beside Bobby. He seemed to gaze out across the water, like a sailor with his eyes fixed on the horizon, and he could have been deaf for all Bobby knew because no matter what Bobby did to get the old man's attention, his efforts seemed to go completely unnoticed.

Finally Bobby was quiet. He stared at the old man, waiting to see what he would do. Sweat was pouring down Bobby's face, and only after he stopped struggling and screaming did he notice the terrible burning in his throat from the noxious gasses flowing from the pit. His eyes were watering from crying and from the fumes. Somewhere out in the water, from within the fog, there came a low moan and then a spine-chilling stillness. Everything seemed oddly quiet for a long moment, until the old man turned to

Bobby and said, “You know, I used to come fishing here when I was a kid.” Bobby was shaken by what seemed to be a complete lack of compassion for his desperate situation.

“What is that thing?” asked Bobby.
“Ohh never mind old Zelda. She’s just a bit temperamental today.”
“Old Zelda? You gave that thing a name?” asked Bobby.
“Well, everything has a name kid.”

The old man reached in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He lit it and took a long drag. He seemed to hold his breath as though he loved that cigarette, like he would rather be right there with Bobby smoking that cigarette more than anything else in the world, and when he blew out the smoke it seemed to flow from him in an endless stream. First the smoke began to billow into a cloud that engulfed Bobby, stripping away all the noxious gasses, taking away the painful burning sensation in his eyes and throat. Then the smoke seemed to displace the fog completely, sweeping it across the pit like some great wind setting everything right again. Bobby was speechless. He just stood there, dumbfounded by the situation. “This old man must be a ghost or something,” Bobby thought to himself.

Then the old man stopped blowing and let out a couple small coughs. “I really have to give up smoking these things,” he said with a grin. Then he turned to Bobby, “so kid, you know you got a bite, don’t you?” Bobby looked over to his fishing pole. It was still flailing from side to side. “Yeah I guess so.” Then the old man reached out his hand, “Here, let me help you kid.”

Bobby was not sure about whether he should take the old man’s hand or not, but considering his predicament, he really didn’t have a choice. He reached out and as soon as he clasped the old man’s hand, his foot was suddenly released from the water. Bobby quickly walked a few steps away from the bank and stopped to rub his ankle. A large

turtle was returning to the water. Its shell was covered in coral and embedded with several huge clam shells. “Those can’t be from around here,” Bobby thought to himself, “coral is only found in the ocean.” It was all so unreal, and everything that was happening seemed to be dreamlike, one shocking thing after another. For a moment Bobby thought about making a run for it. He thought about running all the way home and never looking back, but there was something about that old man, something that made Bobby feel safe enough to gather his things.

He worked his way back around the pit to where his fishing rod was jammed between two trees. After about 10 minutes of reeling, he finally landed a catfish so big he could hardly heft it over his shoulder. “Looks like some good eating kid,” said the old man, “that’s the kind of fish that makes a man proud of his son, wouldn’t you say?” The old man seemed to know things, and this made Bobby even more uncomfortable. “I better be getting home, thanks for the help old man. I think you saved my life.”

Bobby started climbing up the bank of the pit, heading up the same way he came in. When he reached the top and stepped out into the sunlight, he heard a voice coming from the pit, “Remember I said everything has a name kid, mine’s Larry.”

Glenn Lyvers

In memory of Larry D. Clevenger
Dec. 27, 1950 – Sept. 3, 2013
PLYMOUTH — Larry Dale Clevenger, 62, died in the arms of his wife at 4:10 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 3, 2013 in their home in Inwood. He died after several years of battling lung disease.

“THE Man of Inwood,” as he was lovingly known by family, friends and neighbors, was born Dec. 27, 1950 in Rochester to Harold Dean Clevenger and Elnita Ruth (McClain) Hart of Argos. In 1963, the family moved to Inwood where he had lived for 50 years. He met Linda Kay Alwine when they were pre-teens and he immediately knew he would marry her someday.

Knockwurst on Dark Rye with Extra Mustard

I had a nightmare last night. They only occur on days that I have a knockwurst sandwich on dark rye with extra mustard and a dill pickle on the side. Since I love knockwurst on dark rye with extra mustard and a dill pickle on the side they happen often.

In last night's nightmare, I was dressed in green Chuck Taylor All Stars (no socks) and a reversible brown leather jacket. That was it. The rest of me was au naturel. The city streets were bustling with activity, legitimate and not so legit--if you know what I mean. A three-story tan brick house interested me. From the outside, the house looked immaculate. It was the type of house you could airlift from the city and drop into an upper middle class suburb and it would fit right in.
All the windows blackened when I stared at the house. I floated up the concrete steps and through the front door like the specter that I was. In the living room was a couple, married, comfortable, non-communicative. He was watching a basketball game on television. She was leafing through a magazine. Neither person interested me.

I walked up the stairs to the second floor. Why I choose to walk the stairs rather than float was simple. I needed the exercise, I told myself. This thought amused me. The energy from a smile much broader than mine enjoyed it even more.

At the first door on my right, a little girl was beating her younger brother at a computer video game. Neither they--nor the game--interested me.

Next door to the children was a bathroom. Further down the hall on my right was the room of Percy Wilson. I knew Percy--at least that's how it felt. The same sort of feeling you have in the conscious realm when you first meet someone and you feel--not know or believe or suspect--but feel you have known them all your life.

Percy's door was locked. I could see through it as if it were air. Percy prepped a vein. The substance had been cooked. The syringe was at the ready. Percy found a living vessel, and then tied back his thinning pale arm. He picked up the syringe and with delirious pleasure plunged it into his river of life.

A smile of pure ecstasy crossed his face. Being of spirit, I saw what he saw and saw what he was experiencing simultaneously. He fell back on the bed like a rock. To him everything was happening in slow motion. His room became surrealistic visions of remarkable images while morphing into mutations produced by his mind's altered state. Percy believed that substance made him free. It imprisoned him instead. I wanted to tell him that but I couldn't. It was not allowed. I knew that in the same way I knew Percy.

Percy collapsed into his conscious mind of altered state slipping deeper and deeper into a black hole abyss. First, there would be violent convulsions. Then spasms, vomiting, pissing and shitting, concluding with asphyxia and an eerie calm. Death would take him abandoning his soiled shell as physical evidence of his soul. I left before the scene unfolded. I'd seen it dozens of times. Since I love knockwurst on dark rye with extra mustard and a dill pickle on the side, I'll probably see scenes like his a lot more.

Now this is when it really gets weird. Oftentimes, I hear or experience a connection in my conscious state that makes me doubt it was all a dream. The following morning of this particular dream, I overheard suits in the copy room gossiping about what caused the death of the son of one of their colleagues. One of the suits claimed he knew Stan Sutton's son was a junkie and probably died of a drug overdose. Another said Maria Sutton was devastated at the loss of their teenage son, Percy. In summary, they all agreed it was another tragedy in a world froth with tragedies.

It had happened again. My dream manifested into reality. It made me question the whole déjà vu, karmic, out-of-body, seer, shaman thing. Am I in some way a catalyst in these visions? Alternatively, am I an observer or a watcher? Do I control what I dream--or do, or reason? Is life or death within my power? What is real and what is imagined? Are conscious and subconscious, spirit and flesh, members of the same club as darkness and light? Are they visions instead of nightmares, or is my essence that of a grim reaper here to harvest souls?

Who knows? Those are not my questions to answer. Whatever my purpose, whatever my native, I am fully committed to it. This I know as well as my own face. Just as I know, I will never give up my love for knockwurst on dark rye with extra mustard and a dill pickle on the side.

Michael Lane

Frangipani

A qipao in hundreds-old wardrobe,
Phoenix sacrifices in bleeding fest,
If we ever used it to test Men's
fidelity like Taishanese matriarch did,
Up-lifting the damsel in seamstress,
Carmine threads of pins and needles; unifying
the erected shrub, to be Frangipani's groom.

Walking pavement
If ever your nostril responded
To the wanderlust
Hush! Speak not a word.
Pretend you're illiterate
'til it's gone

It happens at the
Pungent sub-station –
Groom's farming maggots
Boys & girls made of recycled fibers
Face-painting cheap-diluted colors
Talisman, Shamans, please go away
Little Frangy wants to play

Deborah Wong

Cancer

Before the tar ever touched my lips
I would pull my hair out strand by strand.

Lumps, lumps and clumps plastered to barber
floors and shower walls; I took my meals

as IVs, laid still in the bleach-doused
humming capsule of my room, waiting

to turn bald. Come devour me, Cancer!
Ride this path I've paved with ash to my

diseased lungs and strip away my hair
flung like so many dandelion stems

little squirming follicles, daisy
chains of dead hair shriveling away;

why not revel in the maggots when
all flesh ends up as white decay?

Hannah Kuster

An American Menthol Spirit

A breath is all you need,
sometimes.
A moment turns over
and becomes beautiful

An echo is what is left.
An echo of you voice
leaving me breathless
I will breathe again,
I think.

I didn't find you in a dream
but I find you there
now and again.

Does a moment
make or break me?

I wish I knew.
I wish I knew.
I wish you could hear.
I wish you were here,
when I was thinking tonight.

Words float through smoke
and voices carry,
but i wish i could carry this
heavy stone,

most call a heart.

You will continue everyday,
I just wish it was with me
I hope this changes.

Our morning routine could sync up
a whole lot easier than you think,
I will wake up early,
with a reason.

I want your love
to flourish, to unfold
all around me.
Burn down the chapel,
known formally as my past,
with that spark,
your spark,
and we will walk away,

happy.

Charles Gardner

I am the Branch that is Bent

I am the branch that is bent but never broken
Through wind, and rain, and snow I stand
Bending towards the ground with a beautiful, wooden arch
Like Atlas, I've carried the weight of the world upon my broad shoulders
Under sunny skies I cast my long shadow across a rocky path
Moonlight twinkles off of my snowy appendages
And with every fiber of my being, I tighten when you rest your body along mine

I am the branch that is bent but never broken
Though ravaged by the changing seasons
I never break as I make this slow progression downwards for all to see
Like Pericles, my effigy has been erected throughout time immemorial
Beneath the clouds above I contemplate the inevitable
Rainbows stretching across grassy hills at parallel angles
With every snap as I hold you, the universe ignites once again in a cyclical phenomenon

I am the branch that is bent but never broken

T.J. Cheverie

See'n

I wish they laid him in it. I mean, I wish they laid him in his fleece—the gray fleece jacket he always wears. Why is Papa laying with that strange tie around his neck? It makes him look stringy—like chaw. Papa don't look stringy—don't wear nothing around his neck neither

Papa always wears the gray fleece. The one missing threads everywhere like his bald head. Papa always says hairs have minds of their own and never sit still—just like me. But I did. I sat for hours on Papa's lap—as still as a stone.

Papa has long white hairs sticking out of his neck at the place where he zippers the fleece to, right up under his chin. The fleece has threads sticking out just like that, in some places. The bare spots on Papa's fleece—sometimes—sometimes, they are fields.

Martha and I plays in those fields. Martha likes horses—I don't. But we plays in those fields anyway. Martha rides her horse all smarty-pants and smiles at me and Papa. Papa always wears the gray fleece. He was wearing it the day Martha stopped.

We were sitting on Papa. Martha was tucked under his smoking arm—I was on his knee. When Martha stopped, I walked into the field with her. Martha turned pink. She was born blue. Papa never used his smoking arm after Martha come along.

After Martha stopped, Papa used his smoking arm again. I like the smoke smell—Martha couldn't. Papa said it was inevitable — like rain on a Saturday in April—why Martha stopped (whatever that means). When Martha stopped it was like she could smell smoke for the first time.

I wish they laid him it it—I mean, I wish they laid him in his fleece—in the gray fleece jacket he always wears. The gray fleece jacket the color of everything in Wilson's Holler. Everything the color of the ash that sifts down from the smokestack at the stamping mill.

I wish they laid him it it. In the gray fleece jacket that smells like Prince Albert, and smoke, and Papa. The gray fleece jacket he always wears because he's always cold, even in July. The gray fleece jacket he wears every day—even the day Martha stopped.

Reverend Blackburn talks, Mama sobs and I watches a stone slide slowly down a muddy gray pile of clay next to the hole where Papa is going to be put. I looks up at the rain and closes my eyes until I can see Martha. She is waving at Papa from way over a big green field covered with bright yellow dandelions.

Before I opens my eyes I seen Papa wearing his gray fleece—the one he always wears—the one he was wearing when he stopped.

John Wulf

The State Fair

We drove to Syracuse every August
for the oldest in the country. Canopied
under a black and orange booth,
you bored teens and captivated parents
with your recycled recruiter's speech.
You were a salesman. People liked you.

You had statistics memorized:
85% graduate in four years, 96% receive
some form of financial aid— the truth
stretched. But your handshake
and penny loafers were so convincing.
And so was I— ten-year-old daughter

sitting in a lawn chair, wearing a nametag.
I felt important passing out SUNY pennants
and pins. My tanned thighs stuck
to the criss-cross plastic of the seat,
as summer blew through the barn doors
smelling of manure and fried dough.

During your break we gambled on games.
Men and women wearing canvas
waist aprons shouted at us like auctioneers
advertising the art of deception.
They jingled change in their pockets,
pointed to the grand prize.

We tossed quarters into tiny
mouthed teacups, threw darts
at deflated balloons, left defeated
with a plastic bag in hand, half-dead
goldfish swimming circles inside,
our backs to the life-sized gorilla

still perched high on its shelf.

Meredith Devney Mullins

In Nomine Patris

Some people, like me, walk their dogs, no one walks cats, while in Desert Hot Springs, CA, guys walk their ankle bracelets. I heard the story at work, and even though it came from a person whose brother owns a filthy car lot at the corner of Hacienda and Palm Drive, still sounded as a regular exaggeration for plot building purposes; until I actually paid attention to it. DHS is strategically positioned on the opposite, northern side of I-10 from Palm Springs. It's tough reputation is only surpassed by its harsh reality. It is a naked city. Faith is not pampered, nor hope encouraged; there is no place to lay one's exhaustion: but instead pinnacles skewer it undisguised against vacancy. Instead of talking about the good old times, people here whisper about even worse recent past.

Due to my nostalgically claimed early years spent in a sister environment, I love it here; it's my raw madeleine. When I visit the local Vons, the local Stater Brothers, it's all cry beloved country. Yet it feels natural, feels free of bullshit conventions that day by day strangle my sense of freedom, with fake excuses offered as a part of the package. The most thought-provoking thought in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking. Guys here do, otherwise soon they wouldn't be walking anything, wouldn't be able to walk, breathe. It's a tough competition and it's called survival. These aren't ignorants unable to perceive their own ignorance, they do seek remedy where remedy could be found. They don't fall in love with their bracelets, still they don't chop their foot in order to get rid of them; they know where they stand, and it doesn't look good – it sure looks like the sand of Desert Hot Springs. Whenever I fight my own phantoms, quite often, I think of their encapsulated options and laugh at my petty beasts and small time temptations, since insignificant they stand in any civilized comparison. The moment these fellas hit the street they know they're as good as dead, at least as wounded or arrested again for violating parole. It's a tough walk and it takes a man to do it; no amateurs and wanna-

bes here. Excluded by their birth and taste from the social order, they are not aware of any diversity. Nothing in the world is irrelevant to them, every single item on the daily menu has emotions written all over. This order, fearful and feared, whose details are all inter-related, has a meaning which escapes them despite their marvelous capacity to grasp mutually distinct realities and draw a spark from their juxtaposition. Their days are hardened with screaming sunlight and boredom like last year's loaves of bread: one began to cut them with blunt knives without appetite, with a lazy indifference echoing with the flat sound of the wooden clogs on the cobblestones, deep, hollow and powerful.

Their affairs cannot ever occur with any precision. They are too big and too magnificent to be contained in mere facts. They are merely trying to occur, they are checking whether the ground of reality can carry them. And they quickly withdraw, fearing to lose their integrity in the frailty of realization, as the dark Gods of pain are surfacing from the immemorial filth of time. Part of the affairs is the fact they wrestle with repulsion almost every single day. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable grayness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, mostly without spectators, without clamor, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat. Because they are the way they are, things don't stay the way they are too long, as unexpected within expected may pop out just at any random tick.

Oh, my brothers! You are outside life, you are above life, you have miseries which the ordinary man does not know, and it is for this that men refuse to forgive you; you poison their peace of mind, you undermine their imagined stability. You have irrepressible pains whose essence is to be inadaptable to any known state, indescribable in words. You have repeated and shifting pains, incurable pains, pains beyond imagining, pains which are neither of the body nor of the soul, but which devour both. And I share

your suffering, and I ask you: who dares to ration our relief? We are not going to kill ourselves just yet. In the meantime, leave us the hell alone. When we speak the word 'life,' it must be understood that we are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of facts, but to that fragile fluctuating center which forms never define. We have the excitement of seeing the crux coming irresistibly to the surface through the skin and the eyes and upsetting the composure of our feelings. It is thus that the few lucid, well-disposed people who have to struggle on the earth find themselves at certain hours of the day or night in the depth of certain authentic and waking nightmare states, surrounded by the formidable suction, the formidable oppression of a kind of civic magic which will soon be seen appearing openly in social behavior. None of us has ever walked an ankle bracelet, written, painted, visited or called his parole officer, or lived in a separate reality, except literally to get out of hell.

It seems that Desert Hot Springs gradually turns into a materialized extension of their awareness, that the decrepit state of these once decent buildings, with their broken gutters, walls blackened by rainwater, crumbling plaster revealing the coarse masonry beneath it, windows boarded up or clad with corrugated iron, precisely reflects their state of mind. Perhaps they lose their sense of reality to the precise degree to which they are engrossed in their broken environment, and perhaps that is why they see in the increasing complexity of their mental constructs a means for greater understanding, although they intuitively grasp they will never be able to fathom the intangibles that govern their course through life.

Immediately when you arrive in Desert Hot Springs, for the first or the eleventh time, you notice the dead air. An absolute silence prevails inside the town; and even within the busy places like the flea markets there is a hushed quality in the air, as if the quiet were a conscious force which, resenting the intrusion of sound, minimizes and disperses sound straightaway. Then there is the sky,

compared to which all other skies seem fainthearted efforts. Solid and luminous, it is always the focal point of the landscape. At sunset, the precise, curved shadow of the earth rises into it swiftly from the horizon, cutting into light section and dark section. When all daylight is gone, and the space is thick with stars and lurking temptations, it is still of an intense and burning blue, darkest directly overhead and paling toward the earth, so the night never really goes dark.

You leave the parking lot of the local Stater Brothers behind, pass the homeless section lying outside, go to your car, or out to a nearby dollar store, you'll freeze in an abrupt esoterism. Presently, you will either shiver and hurry back inside the walls, or you will go on standing there and let something very peculiar happen to you, something that everyone who lives here has undergone and which the French call le bapteme de solitude. It is a unique sensation, and it has nothing to do with loneliness, for loneliness presupposes memory. Here in this wholly alien scenery lighted by some unknown stars like flares, even memory disappears. A strange and by no means pleasant process of reintegration begins inside you, and you have the choice of fighting against it, and insisting on remaining the person you have always been, or letting it take its course. For no one who has ever stayed in the Desert Hot Springs for a while is quite the same as when he came. Possibly the logical question to ask at this point is: Why come here to begin with? The answer is that when you've been here and undergone the baptism of solitude you can't help yourself. Once you have been under arrest of this vast luminous, silent town, no other place is quite strong enough for you, no other surroundings can provide the supremely satisfying sensation of existing in the midst of something that is absolute. You will go back, whatever the reason you may find to justify the return, since the absolute has no price.

What are they doing here, what am I exploiting in DHS other than low rent housing commensurate with even lower income of mine? They all come to this large parking lot which in a civilized area would be named by the magic word 'mall,' and hang out an entire afternoon, lulled into a state of vague ecstasy by the people in motion around them. It is that happy frame of mind into which these guys project themselves so easily – the mere absence of immediate unpleasant preoccupation starts it off, and the front view of an eerie locale, or anything that occupies the eye without engaging the mind, is perfect for sustaining it. It is the world behind the world, where reflection precludes the necessity for action and the calm which all things seek in death appears briefly in the guise of repletion; where the spirit emerges as finally persuaded that the juice of perfection is within reach, no matter how fragile or chancy it actually exists.

Occasionally, before or after entering the Stater Brothers supermarket, I'd slow down, stop, and exchange a few words with Steeler, a young, bright Mexican, fairly tall and slim and, of course, tattoos all around, with eyes that gaze into deserted infinity built of silica. He'd bum a cigarette from me here and there, and our word exchange would grow with every next encounter. Initially, we were both struck by how many things we have in common; from being brought up in barbarous surroundings, hating bullies, to perusing a lot. He also serves as my local journalist: I have a genuine interest in how the underworld community in my vicinity breathes. Steeler tells me that a few days ago, in an instant, be became conscious of a grim vision in the air, something which had been there all the time but which he had never isolated and identified. The mise en scène was in him, he was a part of it, and so was the doom a glimpse of which he caught; it whispered to him how short time is, how the world he lives in approaches its end. It was the premonition of inevitable defeat and annihilation, and it had always been there with him and in him, as elusive and as real as our conversation. Steeler pulls two loose cigarettes out of his pocket and

hands one to me. 'Ah, man' he sighs. 'Who knows what's going to happen to me. Do you? Then again, I always have 'hog' to go to.'

Weed and its derivatives are strictly prohibited in Desert Hot Springs – regardless of the California's recently eased marijuana laws and all the hoopla around its 'medical use' – and the natural correlative of this ban is that the angel dust or 'hog', far from being frowned upon as it is in other towns painted with a more civilized brush, is consumed almost freely; being unsupervised; it can be bought at any relevant street corner. This fact is no mere detail – it is of primary social importance, since the psychological effects of the two substances are diametrically opposed to each other. Weed blurs the personality by loosening inhibitions, delivering feelings of invulnerability and exaggerated strength, including distortions of space, time, and body image. It provides with a sense of participation. Angel dust abolishes no inhibitions; on the contrary it reinforces them, pushes the individual further back into the recesses of his own isolated personality, pledging him to contemplation and inaction. There is a close relationship between the culture of a given boomtown and the means used by its members to achieve release and euphoria. For the local DHS cops the gist is in issuing of undeserved traffic tickets. For the civic parole officers the endless humiliation of their parolees is rated higher than sex. For the writing community the means has always been alcohol; for those arrogant in their ignorance it has been hashish: the former seeks dynamics of inspiration, the latter chases delusions of the mainstream. If a reading audience wishes to touch the realm of taste, first let it give up the mainstream; the rest will follow, more or less as a manner of course. Conversely, for a writing community – if one existed here – if it desires to isolate itself in a radical fashion from fancy barbarians ante portas and introduce to our ankle bracelet audience what words mean when used in the right order and backed by calvaries behind them, the quickest and surest way is to keep on writing. After all, who is a writer if not a spy sent into life by the forces of

death. His main objective is to get the information across the border, back into afterlife. Then he can be given a mythic personality: he spent time among us, betrayed us, and took the material across the border to Mexico.
After finishing his sentence, Steeler appears to me a relieved man: that monkey off his chest rejoined the circus and left Desert Hot Springs in search of fresh victims. His look lost ten years of suffering. These are the first moments of his new being, a strange new existence in which he already glimpsed the element of timelessness that would surround him. The person who frantically has been counting the seconds on his way to catch a train, and arrives panting just as it disappears, knowing the next one is not due for many hours, feels something of the same sudden profusion of time, the momentary sensation of drowning in an element too rich and too plentiful to be consumed at once.

'And let me tell you one more thing, Jorge: the sky here's very strange. I often have the sensation it's a solid thing up there, protecting us from what's behind . . . nothing, I suppose.' Steeler shifts from one leg to another.
'Sure. Have you seen The Truman Show, it's a movie? No? Your thought reminded of it. Let me tell you something, Steeler: there always lies a challenge behind what we see, be it, say, the horizon, or a sentence, and most of the time we're unable to touch it and find out what we're up against; so you better get used to it, yet keep on reaching beyond. What is strange here is not the sky above Desert Hot Springs – it's you realizing it, and while quite capable of doing so you still have no plan to get out of your life's Dodge here, being enlaced in too many emotions that immobilize you right where you are as we speak. I know I'm a smart ass, but I'm also an intelligent ass as well, and like you, I paid for that education dearly. An intelligent hell is still better than your dumb hog paradise, Steeler. In comparison to what you and I have suffered from ourselves, the humiliation and suffering inflicted on us by others fade into insignificance. How old are, twenty eight? OK, close enough. You're already heavily indebted by all

the student loans forced upon you by your merciless destiny: get better get your money's worth. People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The guys who get on in this world are those who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and if they can't find them, make them. Are you ready to kill or be killed over a skirt or a card game where the other fella is cheating? Are you ready to be one of the idiots that make tragedies still possible in this hi-tech age? Are you ready to be called scum, a sinner, a whore? Are you going to stand here for the rest of your freakin' life smoking hogs and shit, like a captain who is trying to preserve his ship by never leaving the port; are you going to do something about it? Get real, Steeler! In the next world they will not ask you why were you not Pancho Villa, they will ask you why were you not Steeler. As much as I enjoy talking to you, my vision is not to see you ever again when I come here to buy the groceries. Period. You think I'm going to stick around DHS until I die?'

Desert Hot Springs, where God seems to have left the receiver off the hook and went fishing, speaks the language of the desert, and it is here to teach you the most valuable lesson in your life: the lesson of your utter insignificance. One of those moments when, whatever be the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees. 'You are finite,' desert tells you in a voice of boredom,' and whatever you do is from my point of view futile.' As music to your ears this of course may not count; yet the sense of futility, of limited significance even of your best, most ardent actions is better than the illusion of their consequence and the attendant self-satisfaction. And this stillness of desert does not in the least resemble a peace. It is the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looks at you with a vengeful aspect. Steeler sensed it behind the clouds.

The book about this town and its hot thermal waters should be read by everyone but those with clamped lidlocks on their eyes, such as in A Clockwork Orange or Laser-Assisted Sub-Epithelial Keratectomy. It mirrors like a fun house mirror and amplifies like a distorted subwoofer one of the great poppycocks of our time, the imprisonment and the life on parole of the wild imagination. The wilderness part has been so debased that imagination – being imaginative rather than being the lynch pin of our existence – now stands for a synonym for something outside ourselves. Like a Grisham novel, one skeumorph after another – his books are read like the gospel by impressionable amateurs in this heart-attack-serious business, amateurs who have no idea a novel should come into contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present, which keeps the genre from congealing – or some new laxative, or even a veiled insult to some cheesy idol glued to our hearts. What a wild summer recipe: live at the last Western frontier before dementia eats away your spelling skills!

Freakin' imagination has to cease being our link, I mean our most personal link, with our depersonalized selves. What it's good for, still, is to simply imagine having breakfast at Tiffany's before the first bite into Egg White Delight McMuffin. What is schizophrenia if not a horrifying state where what's in your Tiffany box doesn't match up with what's inside that muffin. No wonder imagination has become a synonym for style. Because the style is dead and readily buried by peasants just in time for them to fire their tall Deeres and start heading for a night at the stadium. No one even meditates about lights out under the starlessly thick desert dome, let alone a brochure inquiry, or a sample of thermal waters. The last one who tried got killed at the Dillon's Roadhouse, some two miles from the aforementioned corner of Hacienda and Palm Drive. From what I heard post festum, he was badly slow at the draw. At least he got shot, got somewhere. What scares me even more is the common negligence when it comes to detail and precision. What happened to counter

mainstream slow hand – who shot that fella? Not being heard is no reason for silence.

Backstabbed by self-inflicted wounds and bleeding profusely, this tiny town offers a living inside a movie, where half the male population walks like Clint Eastwood in Pale Rider despite the fact that they have recently received a prosthetic left leg made in Somalia, while the other half considers itself being Clint Eastwood. In this instance, as you can see, nature, social nature, which is a second nature within nature, amused herself by making truth more interesting than fiction; whose beauty an artist (at this time there really is one in DHS) had lately painted as an ideal envenomed arrow.

But the ultimate values which the cultivated spectator derives from this desert scenery where the sand is speckled by yucca trees and shrub are derived at a second remove, as the result of reflection upon the immediate impression; with the cause surfacing behind the plain, deceiving effects. As for the rest of them, they fall into animal stupor that gapes at existence and likes itself.

The day will arrive when at the crash of dawn I will put a leash around my neck and walk myself in a leisurely manner, one step at a time, out of Desert Hot Springs never to come back. Not even for a brief sojourn. Then another day comes and DHS no longer has any significance. All I will remember is likely to be perception itself, the hell of forms and figures devoid of emotion and detached from the past reality of this unreal environment. The bottom line will read: I lived in an apparent world that constantly renewed its own meaningless image within a living world that was itself perceived outside of nature. And since the appearance of things is no longer definitive but limitless, this fictional awareness now frees me from

the reality external to myself. In a word, my stay in this forgotten desert boomtown was one of those perfect episodes which occur more frequently in memory than in life, since we can remember minutely and precisely only the things that never really happened to us.

George Djuric

Speaking of Frisbee (AZ)

"What a lovely time we had in Frisbee!"
This was a notable addition
--the mistake of a guy older than me--
to our family's small-joke pantheon.
We were riding up a hill in Kartchner Caverns,
a famous state park, celebrated site,
in an electric cart, twelve tourists packed tight,

when, unprompted, he remarked to his wife
how much he'd liked "Frisbee": how good the shops,
how tasty the lunch. By this stage in life,
she was used to correcting him. He stopped
talking right away. People laughed, then stopped.
We drove over for a look: "Frisbee" was
a good place, a pleasant detour for us.

We saw shop after shop, stocked with antiques
or just good old stuff. The prices seemed fair.
I bought some used sunglasses for five bucks,
which, back in my own habitat, I still wear.
Bisbee, an old mining town --have you been there?--
surrounded by copper-colored earth, scooped
from the landscape like soup in a spoon.

A plan took shape. There were signs everywhere:
this charmer "For Rent," that one "For Sale, or Lease."
We especially liked the bright, singing air.
Clotheslines abounded; the laundry must be sweet.
Most buildings were brick, high above the streets,
built on wood pillars or up steep inclines.
You know these old towns, staked above the mines.

Scribbling numbers as we rushed to the car,
we ducked into one last, cavernous shop.
They sold kids' stuff: toys, gum, candy bars.
But there, alas, the penny fantasy dropped.
We heard news that brought us to a screeching stop.
A gold-mining co. had just renewed old rights.
Cyanide in paradise, new misery, old fights.

"Guess we'll have to keep looking," sighed my wife,
"for our dry-air getaway. Oh, dear! 'Bisbee!' "
Back on Arizona highways, making up time,
heading for a place with a hill we could climb,
I remembered a girl from forty years ago.
"Speaking of Bisbee, remember So-and-So?
I heard she lives there. Poor her! Poor Frisbee!"

Ron Singer

Urban Legends

Every town and city has them – tales of the unseeable, myths of the unknowable, legends of the past come into the present. We know them as urban legends. As a child, I just knew them as local stories.

The first one I remember hearing I believed completely. I still recall both the vivid details and the obscure reality of the flooded hospital. Near Sasebo was a golf course used by Navy personnel. My father sometimes took us all out to the site with him; while he played a round of golf, we would picnic and hike the low hills. The story of the hospital began before the war when Japan wanted to hide the buildup of men and equipment. A hospital was built under ground to hide it from spies. Seven stories were built completely below the surface, with only necessary superstructure above ground level.

During the war, the hospital treated casualties from distant battles, men recovering from wounds and battle fatigue. The low hills kept the numbers of wounded from the prying civilian eyes, yet close enough to unload from ships calling at Sasebo harbor. I was too young to understand battle fatigue, or even battle, so drew worse images in my imagination than the realities experienced later in life.

To hide the purpose of the hospital from the west, and salvage national pride in being a nation of strong-minded men, the hospital was flooded upon the surrender in 1945. Being located close to the ocean facilitated the flooded and prevented the capture and use of the facilities by the United States. It also concealed any evidence of the psychiatric wards and patients.

ancient tales
stir imaginations
winter candlelight

The second tale I heard from peers concerned an abandoned building across the street from the apartment building we moved into in 1960. Half of the building held furniture for use by families moving into the apartments. I was able to go there with my parents to select the furnishings we would be using after we moved into our new home. Weather was reclaiming the other half. Through dusty glass, partly covered by wooden louvers, we could see remnants of broken furniture: a desk, a chair, a filing cabinet.

The story went around that this portion of the building had been used by the Japanese army for offices until one officer shot and killed another over some trivial argument. I even heard that just a few years before I arrived, the body was still visible through the glass, but that time had erased it from view. On some days, when the clouds moved across the sun, one could almost see a skeleton in the shade of the desk and chair.

In the courtyard outside this office was a cement cistern, filled then with rainwater. The story went about that another body had been dumped into this water. Some of the older boys swore that the building had been used as a torture site and the victims dumped under the floor boards or into the cistern to hide them. I did see a helmet, sort of like a pith helmet famous for being worn by explorers, in the dark water. No body, though.

rain waters
collected by time
hidden stories

Beyond the storehouse and abandoned office stood two smaller apartment buildings, which housed the Navy nurses. When Trick-or-Treating at these buildings, a wide berth was given to the old office and cistern. I never went near these two places after dusk.

Weird noises emanated from the building at night; cries of pain, scraping and shuffling sounds, a few bangs and bumps, though I never saw anything unusual.

spirits of men
roaming decrepit halls
winter wind

Joann Grisetti

Collective Guilt

The lure of the woods lies in the magic of the unknown becoming knowable; the discovery for the self of nature's wonders. Parents who want to shelter their children often make up stories about monsters to be found in the woods by disobedient children. Some of these stories are true.

Sasebo was built around a natural harbor formed by the rising volcanic mountains. Throughout the town were many pockets of land too steep, too rugged to make houses or streets. We called these areas "the woods" and loved to go exploring. The Japanese parents told their children to stay out of the woods because of the nasty Americans. The American parents told their children to stay out of the woods because of the nasty Japanese. They both described a horrible toy, a metal cylinder about a foot long with fins at one end. As we compared notes, all of us children decided that they were really some sort of magical toy that our parents did not want us to find.

lure of the woods
holding the forbidden
discoveries

I learned many things from my time in the woods. Although I never found one of the magic toys, I do know two boys who did. During the war the Americans had dropped many bomblets designed to put holes into a house or road. Most of them exploded on impact – some did not. These were the metal cylinders, or magic toys, we were warned about. Two boys from my school found one and picked it up. In an attempt to discover the magic they began turning it over, spinning it, and eventually, playing catch with it. No magic. Disappointed, they decided to bring it to school the next day and started for home. One boy tripped and fell, dropping the cylinder onto a rock. The fall released the magic.

He lost one arm, his friend a hand.
bloody hands
revealing our collective guilt

As a parent I took my children into the woods with me. I wanted them to discover the true magic and not be bound by fear. I wanted them to shed the collective mistrust of the unknown.

Joann Grisetti

The weirdness finally wears off when there's only five minutes remaining. It takes the dregs of my limited self-control to stop myself from jumping off the nutter couch and pointing triumphantly at Laura and shouting 'Ha!'
I don't move. But my face must have. Because she pauses in the middle of her sentence.
'You wanted to say something?' she says, arching her eyebrow in the way that she does so that it disappears behind the thick black upper rim of her funky Gucci glasses.
I think quickly. 'I was wondering what happened to your old pot plant?'
She glances over her shoulder at the empty space on her desk between the computer and the inbox tray where a tall, spiky, phallic-like cactus used to sit. She turns back. 'It died,' she says simply.
I can tell she doesn't believe me. I don't care. I'm still pissed off she suggested Olanzapine 'Just in case'.
I knew I shouldn't have told her what had happened at the hospital.
As soon as I did I realized I'd made a mistake. It was the look she shot me. Something about it said here we go again.
Her chair squeaked as she'd leaned forward. 'What did you say you saw?'
I'd laughed to show it was nothing. 'It was nothing.' I laughed again. 'I knew as soon as I saw it that it wasn't really there.' I looked out along the jagged line of building tops that crossed the breadth of her office window. When I looked back she was scribbling on her pad.
Sand ran down my skin.
'What?' I said. 'You've never seen something out of the corner of your eyes that just turned out to be a shadow.'
She stopped and looked at me. Her nostrils twitched. I felt like grabbing that Mont Blanc pen of hers and ramming it up one of those nostrils.

Then she smiled. ‘Of course I have.’ Then she capped the pen and put the pen on the coffee table and covered the pen with the pad. Face down. Then she told me a pithy anecdote about a snake in her garden turning into a stick. Then she brought up the Olanzapine.
I knew I shouldn’t have told her.
‘Are you going to get another one?’ I say, wishing I’d thought of something better than the cactus to try and distract her with.
Her rubesque lips pucker a fraction. ‘No.’ She crosses her grey wool-skirted, black-stockinged, high-heeled, quite-well-shaped-for-fiftyish legs and frowns. ‘I’m trying to understand why you’re still refusing to sign this contract,’ she says.
Laura and her contracts. A year’s gone by and she’s still stuck on them. I know the easiest thing to do would be to give in and say yes. But I always thought they were ludicrous. I mean really, just because you sign a promise with your shrink not to harm yourself, or not to purge, or not to steal, or not to be a compulsive sex addict, etc., doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll keep it.
Anyway, I have another reason now.
I lean back into the couch. I run my hands over my belly, feel the reassuring swell of my uterus beneath. So different to three years ago.
I smile.
‘Because you can trust me.’
‘I do trust you,’ she says. ‘But I’d still like you to sign this contract.’ She holds out her pen to me.
I keep my hands folded.
‘If you trust me, why do you want me to restart the Olanzapine then?’
Laura sweeps back a strand of hair that’s strayed onto her face. ‘Because as I explained to you before, pregnancy and the post-partum period, especially the post-partum period, are a high risk time for recurrences of prior psychological problems.’ She pulls her glasses down a fraction, making her eyes grow larger.
I’d avoided those magnified eyes of hers when she’d called me into her office today. I was hoping that she’d forgotten

what I'd yelled as I'd stormed out a year ago, slamming the door so hard behind me that the handle hurt my hand. And as I walked the short distance from her office door towards the centre of the room – where the same nutter couch and the same squat coffee table and the same purple rug with the wavy yellow trim sat waiting for me – I kept expecting her to say something. Something like 'I knew you'd be back eventually'.
But she didn't.
Instead, as the nutter couch enveloped me in its big, soft, brown, leathery-smelling hug, she just stood next to her desk, holding her elbows, gold bracelets and gold earrings jiggling.
'So,' a kind of smile creased her cheeks. 'Can I touch it?'
All was forgiven.
Until she mentioned the Olanzapine.
I knew I shouldn't have told her.

~~~OOO~~~

Things I remember:
- a short, sharp, shiny knife;
- the cold night air on my breasts;
- hearing the mournful hoot of a train whistle as its bright beam transected the linked wire fence above my head;
- the sticky treacle of blood in my eyes;
- the salty smell of his sweat;
- the painful rocky ground;
- the crinkle of litter under my back;
- reaching out, trying to grasp the line of distant houselights in my hand;
- the blazing sting as he stubbed out his cigarette on my clit.
~~~

Things I don't:
- the broken bottle;
- whether he was circumcised or not;
- what he was saying when he tried to set my hair alight;
- if his tie was plain or striped;
- the name of the person who found me curled up next to my car;
- Mark holding the phone to my ear while I cried to Mum;
- signing the police statement;
- testing my urine three weeks later;
- slashing my wrists.

This last bit isn't exactly true. I can remember fetching the box cutter from the garage. Then watching as the bright red spickled patterns splashed across the white-tiled bathroom floor. But I can't remember the bit in-between. Laura calls this a classic example of dissociative fugue in a depersonalized state secondary to a severe reactive depression.
I call it not wanting to be me.

Suvi Mahonen

Tamara's Promise

Feeling a new gold band slide on her ring finger, six aeons after sharing life after life with him, Tamara would regret the promise she made to him in front of an extinguished fire: I will always love you.

Amélie Olaiz (translated by Toshiya Kamei)

Clouds Catch Little Light at Midnight

Clouds catch little light at midnight, but still,
they can be seen drifting
over dark fields; precious and new like an infant's wispy hairs
-behemoths of these blackened
skies; holding life, holding chaos.

The catch of snow over the landscape bares nothing
but silence, maddening the ghost of flora.

What is the use of knowing when this is all
the world has offered forth?

In these lands, where abandoned machines scatter
infinite, rusting back to the gut earth
as relics of our fathers' labors, the only knowledge
is sorrow.
The only sorrow is knowledge.

Elias Red

Birds

As I was walking in the Botanical garden in Paris yesterday, I noticed green parrots on the trees.
I texted my brother right away - "What a phenomenal time we live in! Sebastian, now green parrots live for free in Paris, France..."

Over the bridge, that I got to after crossing the botanical garden, overlooking the Seine River, I saw people feeding the gulls. Homeless people obviously, received old left-out meat from a butcher, and they were putting it on the rail of the bridge. The smell of the meat attracted scores of seagulls, exactly the way you saw them in Hitchcock's' movie.

They were excited. All these gulls made it through the winter, thanks to the beggars, and the beggars through charity...What a strange circle was forming now.

And I remembered me and Helen saving a Starling that could not fly anymore. We had found it on the sidewalk two weeks ago, taken the subway through the huge suburban areas of Paris, all the way down to Maison Alfort to a bird shelter. I emailed the bird shelter to weeks ago to find out that they had just released the starling..

More outcasts, me and Helen this time, reaching out for birds...

The parrots are of a light green color and make high pitched sounds; you can see them in almost every large garden in and around the city. You can see scores of crows too, waiting to be fed on the lawns—they are very large and dark, they often chase the gulls as it is a very aggressive species, but gulls are faster than crows.

I have often seen one lone crow successfully fighting with a large number of seagulls...

You don't see that many birds when you leave the city for the countryside. Out there, in open nature, birds are cautious with human beings, maybe because they have been hunted for centuries by them, or maybe because these are two distinct populations, the rural and the urban, both sensing vastly different behaviors?

Anyway, everything is different than it used to be, I wonder what my late father would have thought, if I could have reached out to him in his grave and let him know that parrots live in Paris, France, now, thirty years after he died? He would not have believed me I guess.

Ivan de Monbrison

The Other Place

I dream: fishbowl house, Sausalito shoreline.
Floors of rusted linoleum,
paint-spackled chairs. Doilies. Space for indulgence,
spend silk-robe days slathering brie on crackers with fig spread.

There, I read and write, the music loud as I like and
I never turn on the air because it's asylum,
and I do as I please.

I'm alone, not lonely,
night doors stay unlocked, windows swung wide
so that men can peer inside,
but they don't strangle beat kill me, hurt me.
They just watch me sleep.

Julie Bartoli

The Forest

The earth left me with nothing to embrace except the emptiness that filled the wooded area where I often walked. The Forest, as I called it, was not an established park or main attraction in my neighborhood. I don't think anyone knew of its existence, and if someone did, that person never gave any acknowledgement of its presence. The only reason I discovered The Forest was because of its close proximity to my home. Perhaps it was only a mass of trees in a dead space, but I gave it a name to restore some of its dignity and to show my respect for all that it had done for me.

The Forest's entrance had barely any trees, but the few that were there looked large and strong enough to hold my weight if I were to choose one to climb. Sometimes, before venturing any further into the area, I would pick a spot where no tree grew. I would stand there and concentrate, hoping that my presence would somehow persuade the ground into thrusting up new plants from beneath the grass to create a connected mass of foliage. I did notice the sprouting of a couple of tiny trees a few weeks ago, and I was happy to think that I participated in some part of their creation.

If I were asked to choose my favorite part of The Forest, I would have said that it was the area in the back by the long chain-link fence. No other part of The Forest could replicate the feeling of safety that overwhelmed me when I was hiding in the back among the leaves, bark, and fallen branches. I would crawl across dirt and sit not cross-legged, but with more pressure placed on my left thigh as I leaned sideways. There on the ground, I would surround myself with a barrier of autumnal leaves, and it felt effortless to glide my fingers through the holes in the fence and grab onto nothing but its thin interwoven material.

I often wondered if the woods beyond the fence felt envious of The Forest. Or perhaps it felt a sense of endless loneliness which could only be relieved by becoming a part of the space where I sat. It would be difficult, however, for those trees to walk through The Forest's entrance and experience the feeling of safety that its atmosphere always provided. Only the leaves had a chance of making it into The Forest with the help of a strong wind or just pure luck from an inner determination to end their ongoing isolation.

Maybe that is why I enclosed myself in leaves—to show them that I too was lonely. I sought to reward them with a feeling of togetherness while praying that the pressure from our united energy would cause the fence to collapse, transforming The Forest into a larger haven. There, outsiders could lose themselves amongst the plant life and find solace in their bewilderment of being unable to find a way out.

Ashley Sgro

Luang Prabang

A croak of a bullfrog as it leaves the bullfrog.
Planted feet
stagger

as gibbus elders
shaken to their roots like wind-pierced lotuses
bow

at the waning moon.
Village sleet melting,
kids and dogs flood from their huts.

Cooped up ‘til dawn,
stooped Masters squat in a pasture
well plowed. Steam rising,

ch'i withered,
Daoists with horned toads in their hair
cry twice then silence.

Gerard Sarnat

Dolls

Nailed into each pine,
Like watchers: rosary black
Whiteless eyes, toddler smiles
Older than the canopies.

Passing by the middle tree:
His grimace preserved in the bole's gnarl
Knotted from the lopped bough.
Cricket-caught life-longed sounds

We never heard. One by one, passing the one
Beam of light, we touch his frozen tears.
Fearful of penance, reverent for prize,
No turning back from the twelve nuns.

Jonel Abellanosa

Man with the Cure

The palimpsest holds memories
Of how the smile shifted and vanished
As the thumb dipped in rose attar
And anointed the forehead
With a saltire – the unforgettable sign,
Townsfolk said, waking the bedridden,
Parched tongue quickened
To saltiness of blooming life.
The artist's sketch was retouched
Twenty times over five decades
And it couldn't be clearer
No one could accurately remember.

Jonel Abellanosa

So Very Alone

My name is Susan and this is my story.

When I was nine years old my parents and I moved to a rundown farmhouse. This house was in the middle of nowhere. We were miles from our nearest neighbor. I didn't know anyone in the town of Inwood, Indiana that was about fifteen miles away. This made me feel so very alone.

About a month later my Ghost made his first appearance. It was a windy night. I was lying in bed trying to sleep. I heard floor boards creaking. I looked up to see my closet door slowly open. I was scared, my heart was pounding out of my chest, but I got out of bed and closed the door. I crawled back into bed. But in a few minutes I heard floor boards creaking, and the closet door came open again.

I ran as fast as I could to my parent's room. I woke them screaming, "There's a Ghost in my room!" My parents assured me that Ghosts don't exist. I wanted to sleep in their room but my Dad took me back. I cried and begged the whole way not to go back into that room.

He calmly explained, "In an old house like this, all kinds of weird things happen. The wind whips through holes in the wall. The wind is the reason your door won't stay closed."

I never talked to my parents about this again. I knew my Dad would call it, "Your wild imagination." He would also say, "You're getting to old to believe in ghost." Why couldn't they understand that I was not making this up? This did not comfort me and it made me feel so very alone.

But my Ghost continued to visit. When I was about eleven I fashioned a crude lock. I installed it on the outside of the closet door. But this did not deter my Ghost. The lock would come undone and the door would open. I even had a friend go into the closet and try to get the lock open. She couldn't do it but my Ghost did.

I convinced myself that this indeed was, "My wild imagination." I grew up and graduated High School. I went to college where I met my future husband Robert. We were married and had our son Bobby JR.

My husband and I had been married for a little over six years. Bobby was four years old. For the last six months Robert had become moody and depressed. I tried to help but he shunned my efforts. Robert became angry over my nagging. This made me feel so very alone.

I came to the conclusion that Robert and I needed time away from each other. But when I brought up the subject Robert became angry. He accused me of "Running out on him." After calming down and thinking it over Robert agreed that, "We do need some time away from each other."

We went to stay with my Mom. She still lives in the old farmhouse, which is a five hour drive. My Dad had passed away two years ago. On the trip Bobby assured me, "I'm a big boy and need a room by myself" After arriving I made a cozy bedroom for him in the corner of my Mom's sewing room. He was very pleased and felt like a big boy. But staying in my old room me nervous and I again felt so very alone.

On the third night I couldn't sleep so I sat in bed reading. The closet door opened. My Ghost was back. I got out of bed and shut the door, and fastened the lock. I went back to bed and continued to read.

I heard a rattle. The lock came undone and the door opened. I lost it and yelled, "Damn it leave me alone!" The door closed; this had never happened before. I waited and watched; the door opened again. This time all my hanging clothes were on the floor.

I tried not to panic. But I had to get out of that room! I was dizzy from all the emotions coursing through me, but I walked quickly out and went to my son's room. I could see by his night light that he was peacefully sleeping.

I sat on the floor next to his bed. I asked myself, 'What am I going to do? I can't sleep in that room anymore?' Finally I started to doze but was awakened by a groggy, "Mommy, Mommy wake up." I asked, "Baby what is it?" He said, "You need to say you're sorry." I asked "Sorry to who?" "You have to say you're sorry to your Ghost."

I swear my heart stopped, at least for a second. I kissed Bobby and told him to go back to sleep. I reluctantly returned to my room. I felt a cold chill running throughout my body. My clothes were still on the closet floor. But now my dresser was open and the contents strewn about.

I walked to the middle of the room even though my legs felt like putty. I said aloud, "I'm sorry I didn't mean to make you mad. But can't you understand how terrified you made me for years?" I felt something touch my shoulder.

I asked myself, 'Do I turn or run?' I turned and there he was, my Ghost. He looked to be about twenty and he had the bluest eyes. His mouth was moving but I said, "I can't hear you." He motioned for me to close my eyes. I did, now I could hear him. He said, "I'm sorry I never meant to scare you. I only came to you on days you seemed so very alone."

"Now I understand, I will leave and never bother you again." I felt something brush my cheek, like a kiss.

I opened my eyes and he was gone. Not only was he gone but all my belongings had returned to their right places. I said, "Peace be with you, may you never feel so very alone."

I knew I had to go home and face Robert. I was determined not to lose him. So the next morning Bobby and I left Mother's to return home.

When we arrived I unlocked the front door. I saw the light on in Robert's study. I went in and Robert was sitting in his overstuffed chair crying. I asked, "Honey are you O.K.?"

He gave a little smile and said, "Yes. But I had the strangest dream last night. I woke up and there was a man standing at the foot of the bed. I swear he had the bluest eyes! He said, "You know you love her. If you don't work to save your marriage you'll end up so very alone."

Shirley Smothers

Drag Queen from Hell

His name was Louis. He was quite a sight to see, I suppose, standing six-foot-three and wearing red stiletto high-heels. His painted red lips sloped downwards in a frown. A white mask hid his brown skin. Pink elbow-length gloves covered up his dark hands. His lean, muscular chest was exposed in a lime green cocktail dress. His sinewy biceps flexed superfluously as he clutched his solid ax in his hands. His powerful runner's legs rippled with muscle as he stomped through the snow covered streets.

He peeked inside the window of Jamie Wallace. Jamie's skin was as fair and white as he wished his face was. Her blonde hair cascaded over her slender shoulders. Her pouty, red lips smacked of eroticism. ''Why can't I look like her,'' thought the psychotic Louis.

The mask he wore had pouty red lips and blonde plastic-hair. Jamie's husband, Alex, was watching the couple's daughter Lizzie sing in a church Christmas pageant. Jamie set the ham down on the table and checked her watch. ''Alex and Lizzie should be home any minute.''

Louis waited until he saw Jamie vanish into the kitchen before slipping into the house and sneaking up the stairs. Louis hid in Jamie and Alex's bedroom closet. Five minutes later Alex and Lizzie walked through the front door. Lizzie's red curls bounced as she walked. Alex's red curly-hair resembled pubic hair, coarse and out f control. ''How was the pageant,'' Jamie asked.
''It was superb. Our daughter was so amazing her singing brought tears to my eyes,'' Alex boasted.
Daddy stop it; you're embarrassing me,'' Lizzie said.
Alex smiled. ''I can't help it you're my little girl you'll understand one day when you're a mommy!''
''I'm never getting married; boys are gross,'' Lizzie groaned.
Jamie chuckled. ''I have a feeling that one day you might feel differently towards boys.''
''God I hope so,'' Alex groaned.
''I don't want another Aunt Mary in the family.''

‘’ Never mind that let’s all bow our heads for grace,” Jamie said.
The family bowed their heads and Jamie began reciting the prayer. ‘’Lord we thank you for this meal we are about to receive on this fine Christmas, and we pray for many more splendid years together as a family, amen.”
Alex looked up and smiled at his wife. ‘’That was a lovely prayer sweetheart!”
‘’Thank you honey,” Jamie said.
The lights went out. Lizzie screamed. ‘’Relax,’’ Alex said. We probably just blew a fuse or something.”
The lights turned back on and Alex saw his wife slumped over: her head rested on the table. An ax was buried deep in her skull. Alex rushed over to his dead wife and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, sobbing. He soon came to the realization his daughter was missing. ‘’Lizzie where are you,” Alex called to his daughter. No reply.

Alex saw a bloody arrow painted on the wall that pointed up the stairs. He climbed the steps. On the wall another bloody arrow pointed toward Alex’s bedroom. Alex gasped when he saw his daughter bound to the bed with rope and gagged with masking tape. ‘’Oh my God baby are you alright,” Alex yelled. Lizzie’s eyes went wide with fear and desperation. Alex looked over and saw Louis gripping a large axe in his powerful yet feminine gloved-hands. Alex ducked and tackled the killer to the ground. The mask fell off in the process. ‘’Louis what the fuck did you do? You killed my wife! You fucking nutcase!”

Louis sobbed. ‘’I’ve worked with you for eleven years and I love you; I couldn’t stand seeing you love Jamie when you should’ve loved me, I can make you happy baby, just give me a chance,” Louis confessed.

Alex straddled the killer and picked up the axe. Louis screamed as Alex buried the axe in his brain.

Doug Robbins

It's Only A Little Insomnia

nothing to lose any sleep over
but I am lying here thinking of
my Great, Great, Great, Great
Grandfather Xavier Frances
who lived in Wintzenbach
(Winterbrook) France and
how he must have walked
or hooked up the wagon
to go the two miles up
the road to Oberlauderbach
(I don't know what that means)
France to see Eva, Eva Stultz
his future second wife and how
important it must have been
for him to see her, and marry her
because his first wife had died
suddenly in childbirth and he had
four children to raise and it was important
then to have a mother (as it is even now)
and so he would trek those two miles
on foot or in the wagon to court her
(woo her) and I wonder what she must
have thought of him and the prospect
of raising a dead woman's children
but of course she needed a husband
(it was the thing to do back then)
and he probably looked pretty
good back then, with his tangled
beard and farmer's clothes
and maybe she wasn't the prettiest
girl in the village and maybe there
weren't a lot of eligible men lying
around and he was willing to come
all that distance just to see her
(woo her) and so she was wooed
and what was that first night like
in that strange town, after church
and the buggy ride, perhaps her

mother kept the kids, and here
she was about to sleep with
this strange man with the tangled
beard and as she undressed she
could feel his eyes on every inch
of her imperfect skin as if she were
a pig or a cow he had traded for
and wanted to know if he would
get his money worth out of this one
and anyway she survived that night
and many others and bore him four
more children (including my future
Great Great Great grandmother Marie
Ann Keller who my future mother
Maryann was named after but
that's a story for another sleepless
time) as well as the trip across
all of France, and The Atlantic
until they got to New York
where she got sick and
wasn't allowed in and so
they went on to Niagara Falls
for two years and then moved
to Monterey in 1846 where they
hacked out a farm from the wilderness
and lived together there for another
12 years before they both died
a week apart from the cholera
(which was common then)
and they were buried side
by side in a field beside
a wood and where they
have lain all these years since
slowly dissolving like memory
until nothing was left, not even
bones and no one even knew
or thought of them anymore
until now, on this night
I've called them to come
and whisper to me

of their naked nights
together, and their puzzlement
at the world that just kept on
turning with their earthly bodies
plowed under, with the very earth
they once held in their hands
holding them in quietude,
until now, when I,
I could not sleep
and so woke them
from their dreamless sleep
to comfort me with their story
to comfort me for a time
until sleep comes
to take them
to their home
in the rich, dark soil
of my dreams.

Brion Berkshire

The Doldrums' of March

The day was so dull, almost shadow-less,
and I was so alone, even a shadow
would have given me comfort.

Pages of ancient tomes, full of musk, call to me;
for there has always been comfort there.
I light lamps damning the florescent pall.
Walls become whitewashed,
blue-tinged harbingers of death,
when bathed in the flicker of florescent light;
I will not succumb.

I worship beneath
the shadow-casting gold of incandescence.
The 300-watt glow
of my gifted torchiere soothes me.
I place a thin-skinned cheek
upon the chill of plaster wall,
wishing to submerge myself in shadow.

Ah, the page that calls, the keys which click,
when pen has gone unfound, are all I have.

Why leave, my heart cries out,
there is only the cold of the grave,
and none to mourn your passing.
Only the sterile page, the plastered walls,
the shadowed-stage?
No, I argue with my weary self, waylay this
Keats-like gloom of poverty and tombs, and rise!
The sun will shine at winter's end to daffodils.

Deborah Guzzi

Stygian Doubts

The rottenness of it all is no less foul for having been bleached white. This is the conclusion I come to. I walk with a scarf covering my mouth through the dimly lit catacombs of the faithful. The arched ceiling holds a dangling string of incandescent bulbs which caste a sickly yellow glow on my shoes and the cavities full of thighbones. “Why are all the bones the same,” I ask. The guide smiles. “Tens of thousands of heaven seekers wish to be buried here. There’s only so much room,” he said. “Even today people pay for holy ground.” Ghostly, armless, rib-less, headless, specters seem to rise un-braced, oh the indignity of it all. I picture them searching for the missing parts of themselves. I sneeze through the paisley scarf, stumble back; back, following the arrows in reverse, seeking the way out; just as frantically as they had sought the way in. The rest of the group trudges on; after all, they had paid their coin to Charon.

Deborah Guzzi

There's No Place Like Home

I come from a land of red neck drinkers, who mount deer heads on walls without sheetrock. It was a simpler time then. You shot or hooked what you ate. I can smell the butter blackening in Gram's cast-iron fry pan, the smell mixing with that of the open flame on the gas water heater, which stood in the tiny kitchen and the purple-red deer meat, as it sizzled. I can still see the gash in the imprinted flowers on the homemade butter; its beauty martyred to slather the pan. The butter, in its depression-glass dish, sits atop a white porcelain table with a red edge. I kneel on one of the chairs, staring past the potted violets out the picture window toward the house next door. My knees knock the edge and the silverware bangs in its hidden draw.

I come from a land where, through a picture perfect window, a little girl can see rows of candy colored gladiola's growing, beside the home of the neighbor boys; the boys whose Father liked to flash his private parts to little girls. No, this was not the end of the yellow brick road, but the land of bullies, beer and bullshit pedophiles, far from picture perfect.

Deborah Guzzi

Sounds from the Deep

I press my ear
against her belly
hoping to hear
some whale song,
and I feel a tremor --
the slight push
from inside.
At the ultrasound,
the rapid thump
of her heartbeat
drums through me
as the bean
pulses on the screen.

Paul Piatkowski

The Spell

Four minutes is what he demands every night since his father-in-law died. Mr. Lakin stands up. With the backs of his legs, he slowly scoots his chair behind him. It screeches across the floor, but he shows no response. He turns his head to the right, as he does even when someone approaches his left ear. He looks down. Surprisingly, the chair doesn't suit him tonight. He taps the leg; it quickly adjusts. With the chair now evenly behind his narrow body, he looks back up. He takes his left hand and rubs his fingers across his cracking lips as he cuffs his chin, surprised to feel a prickly patch of hair. The spot surprises him. In all his meticulousness, something is wrong. Mr. Lakin is off tonight.

Being conscious of eyes upon his movement and aware of his minute snafus, he grunts and looks around. Oh, an idea. He wants them to see his mind—the clever, rare profundity of it. Then, of course, he wets his lips. He bites down. He wants his family to admire his concentration. His eyes remain unwavering from the rusted silver watch spinning in the center of the mahogany table. The clock turns 9 o'clock. He slowly chants, holding onto each syllable. The room's dirty eggshell walls begin to contrast. The light never goes dark. Cracks appear and vanish within the same second. A photo of the family begins to rapidly tick the wall, appearing like a clock possessed to show its prowess, with its furious hands losing control. The photo succumbs—Mr. Lakin, Mrs. Lakin, Junior Lakin, and Boy. It breaks. Mr. Lakin, though, holds his focus—mostly. A couple of whiskers sprout from the side of his face during the ritual, but they leave, as the summoning fades. Success. Mr. Lakin looks at his wife and his son. He wants his nightly applause. He asks himself, "Don't I deserve it?" They clap. Boy wags his tail.

"Wife, now you go," Mr. Lakin instructs Mrs. Lakin. He values the ritual too much to omit even the tiniest command.

“Wait,” Junior interrupts. “Why do you always do the same thing every night? Don’t you think mom and I are competent enough to do this without you explaining every single detail? You know, we aren’t stupid. We know what happens if we don’t do it. I was too young to remember, but Mom tells me stories, you know? We do just fine by ourselves. We could even get it started without you.”

“Junior, you listen and you listen now,” Mr. Lakin says, pushing his finger into Junior’s chest. “Unless you want to go back to how we were before we finally got your grandfather’s watch, I suggest that you shut up and do as I say.”

Junior doesn’t verbally respond; he stares at his father.

“Wife, now you go,” Mr. Lakin, again, instructs Mrs. Lakin.

Mrs. Lakin stands at her command. She whispers her words, and she masterfully completes her process. She sits. No whiskers, no snouts, not even a growl. She shows no signs of weakness.

Mr. Lakin applauds his wife’s performance, while Junior locks eyes with his mother. She leads Junior’s eyes to Boy’s. They agree. Junior and Mrs. Lakin know what they must do.

Junior stands immediately, not giving Mr. Lakin a chance to instruct him. He leaps onto the table to grab the watch. He grasps it, but he puts it down. Junior slides off the table and returns to his chair.

Still seated, Mr. Lakin stares at Junior. Never, in all his years, has the ritual taken more or less than exactly four minutes. Mr. Lakin tries to continue, but he can’t break his stare with Junior.

Junior doesn't cower. Still looking into his father's eyes, he begins moving.

Junior reaches his end of the table and turns for his father. Mr. Lakin attempts to stand, but he falls. He gets on his knees to peek above the table. He sees his wife. He sees Junior. He sees Boy. Mrs. Lakin has her father's watch in her hand.

Mr. Lakin has his hands at the edge of the table. He appears like an observer, spying from the outside. But Mr. Lakin is a husband, a father; in fact, he tells himself, he is the husband, the father of this family. "I did not tell you to touch that watch. Put it down now," Mr. Lakin demands.

Mrs. Lakin tilts her head and looks at her husband. She sees him better than she has in years. She remembers. She is the one who knows all the spells. She is the one who taught Mr. Lakin all those years ago, when love was new.

Mrs. Lakin pounds on the table. She yells. Violently, the walls shake. The floor rolls, with small waves. The portrait, already on the ground, bounces. The already broken glass pieces break into tiny shards.

Mr. Lakin, still on the ground, peering above the table, tries to stand. He grabs the chair to help him up, but its stability is gone. He collapses again onto the floor. He shouts, "Stop! Stop this now! Stop! I said stop!"

Something unimaginable happens. Boy touches the watch.

"Don't you dare let that mutt touch that watch! Mary. Don't. You. Dare!" Mr. Lakin, feverishly sweating, yells from the floor, while still trying to get to his feet.

Junior and Mrs. Lakin look at Mr. Lakin. Without turning away from his eyes, they hold Boy's paw against the now glowing surface of the old watch. They chant together, as a family. A new family. The one who challenged his father on

so many occasions, the one who mocked his father's foolish nightly ritual and was forbidden from participation, the one who had been what Mr. Lakin so desperately was afraid to become—Boy is back tonight.

Mrs. Lakin, Junior, and Boy all stand side-by-side. Mr. Lakin watches, helplessly crying, unable to even get to his knees.

Mrs. Lakin and her sons walk outside. Junior and Boy climb into the car. She doesn't—not yet.

She enters the house again and approaches her husband. She stands over him, as he wobbles back-and-forth against the dirty floor. She considers laughing, but she doesn't. She considers speaking to him, too, but she doesn't. Instead, she opens her father's watch and speaks four words. The spell Mr. Lakin fought for so long overtakes him. His nose appears wet; his two legs become four; his tail wags. When she turns to leave, she thinks she sees him chasing it. Satisfaction, almost.

Mrs. Lakin goes back outside to join her boys inside the car.

"Sons," she asks, "what do you think about being free? Like we used to be?" She turns to look at them in the backseat.

Boy replies, "I think I'd be okay with it. As long as we stick together."

"Junior?" Mrs. Lakin asks for her other son's approval.

"Yeah. I don't remember a lot," he says looking at his brother, "but as long as we stick together, I'm fine with it, too. "

"Okay. If you both are sure. But first, I have something I need to do." Mrs. Lakin gets out of the car. Her boys join her side, as they look at their house. She takes her father's

watch and begins chanting. It's over quickly. The house collapses and bursts into flames. A helpless yelp echoes, but it's quick. Sparks shoot across the night sky. Then, she smiles.

Mrs. Lakin turns to Junior and Boy, and they each agree again. It's decided. She uses the watch one last time. In unison, a pack of three wild dogs run howling into the open, night air.

Bradley Sides

It wasn't funny anymore. All their snide remarks about my limp had worn thin and I couldn't find an ounce of humor in what my coworkers considered harmless fun. Granted, I said nothing when the subtle digs began during their first week on the job, but now, three months later, the gag was still going strong. Perhaps my quiet demeanor signaled I was a willing target, or my smile a consenting nod for their acrid jokes. Enough was enough and I should have blasted my tormentors the first time the word gimp was flung in my face.

Grooms Zack and Tully leaned against the railing of the open-air barn, pointing and laughing as they smoked their cigarettes. I plodded through the deep sand of the walking ring, which emphasized my ailment even more, and I felt as though I was parading naked before them. At times I thought I spotted the makings of a good horsemen in these novices, but my attempts to instruct them were met with shrugging shoulders and a “Who cares?” attitude. So I stopped offering years of knowledge to this indifferent audience and reasoned it was better to keep silent. The slow meticulous process by which I had learned my craft did not apply to these fools; their philosophy was to do the work without much effort, get paid, then bolt out the door to bet the Daily Double. The boss' much too liberal nature made it easy for them to oil their way into his confidences, which made the rest of us on the shed wonder how he ever got to train forty plus head of horses in the first place. Damn, if only he hadn't told me to cool out Victory for Rome after a late morning gallop, my work would have been finished and I'd be back in the solitude of my dormitory room finishing that paperback I picked up at the bodega.

No one had made me so conscious of my awkward gait before. In this line of work, furious kicks received from startled thoroughbreds eventually take their toll on a body, not to mention a seven-day work-week with the occasional

Sunday off. This leg of mine had endured much, but then I knew what I was getting into back in '73 when I announced to astonished family and friends that I had chosen the racetrack over college. I hung around the stable gate hoping trainers driving onto the grounds would stop and say they had work for me. All through the summer and autumn, disinterested eyes either stared straight ahead or gazed with vulgar intent. I countered the offers that had nothing to do with equine care with a polite "Not me" and resumed my vigil on the steps outside the Pinkertons' office. If no job surfaced by the end of the year, I promised myself I would hop any van heading south and check out the Ocala horse farms. Thankfully, someone spared me an uncomfortable ride down I-95.

"Hey!" A male voice shattered that quiet Christmas dawn. "Know how to handle a pitchfork?"

I sprinted through the piles of snow, though slipped on an ice patch which landed me at the feet of a small, rather scraggly individual with bits of hay and straw dust clinging to his coat. The man peered at me through grimy spectacles as I rose to my feet unassisted.

"I worked at a riding academy during high school." My reply came off sounding like a shameless boast.

"Well, I'm running a racing stable, not a riding academy," he snapped. "Or at least I'm trying to. Say, you aren't one of them women libbers? Because if you are, I can't use you."
His manner, as well as his appearance, put me off and I turned to leave.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said, removing his cap which revealed a mass of matted, gray curls. "I hoped to spend Christmas with the family, but I got a shed full of horses and no help. You got a job, if you want."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Come on, we've got a lot of mucking out to do."

He walked into the barn and I followed without any further questions or qualms, all those arduous, precious years ago.

“Hey, mama!” Tully shouted as I stopped to catch my breath. “Need some crutches?”

“That won't help,” Zack added. “More likely she could use one of those electric wheelchairs to buzz around in. Just tie the horse to it and she’s got it made.”

I ignored the remarks and quickened my pace, hoping somehow that would miraculously make my limp invisible. This brilliant maneuver only increased the agony in my knee and forced me to halt again, but Victory for Rome grew impatient with the inactivity and rubbed his head hard against my jacket. He pranced a few steps ahead of me on the shank, then eyed me as if to say, “Well, are you coming?” I whispered a tired “All right, Vic” and continued our walk.

Zack hobbled about, imitating my malady as his friend hooted and cackled with inane glee. God help me, I still had ten minutes left before I could return the horse to his stall and hightail it away from this place. I fought the impulse to launch a verbal assault, since screaming like a fishwife would be unwise alongside such a fractious and expensive two-year old. So I made mental notes of the choice expletives I would hurl at them later, away from the workplace, and imagined their pea brains unable to handle my merciless offense. But these were fanciful images never meant for reality, for I knew too well, the coward in me had grown deep, comfortable roots.

A warm breeze stirred the leaves of the palms towering over the barn as an aphotic hue enveloped the sky. At first, soft droplets fell, but while hurrying the colt toward the stable, the drizzle had become a downpour. The fronds of the palmetto trees crackled harshly from the pummeling rain, making Victory for Rome buck and neigh as we darted into the stable. I tried to calm his agitation with reassuring pats on his shoulder, but my own uneasiness heightened upon seeing my antagonists waiting ahead with toothy grins. Our boss had apparently slipped away to the backstretch kitchen before the cloudburst and was undoubtedly enjoying a cup of coffee while the Florida heavens battered the area. I would prefer a soaking in the deluge than being stuck indoors with Tully and Zack, but the storm had already turned the walking ring into a mud pool.

The heavy rain failed to alleviate the humidity. With one hand free and the other on the shank, I struggled to remove my jacket, but the wet material clung to my skin. I cursed myself for the difficulty I was having with what should have been a simple task. Impatient Victory for Rome pounded the dirt with his hoof.

Zack approached. “Let me help, old girl” he said and tugged at the obstinate sleeve.
I numbly complied despite the warning bells clamoring in my head. He threw the jacket aside and clamped his hand on my shoulder.

“What’s your hurry?” Tully chimed in. “Hell, lame or old, doesn’t make any difference to us.”

“I . . . I have to finish,” I replied, my words barely audible.

Zack's fingers dug into my skin. “Time ain’t been very good to you, gimp," he laughed. "Maybe you could use some action. A little bit on the side . . . who’s to know?”

I snapped out of my daze and shook free of his grip. The colt lurched forward, dragging me with him. Despite the jolt to my leg, I was grateful for the almost intuitive move my companion had made. His massive strides lengthened and quickened to a frantic clip as we made our way toward the corner of the barn. My efforts to slow him went unheeded. He snorted and danced about sideways, delighting in the fact that he was in complete control now. Blackness had descended across the backstretch as gusts of wind tore through the shed, along with a churning invasion of broken branches and trash. My trembling pleas to stop became lost amidst the tumult. Dust and debris clouded my vision. Even in his frenzied state, I had to rely on Victory for Rome to guide my steps. My hands ached from hanging onto the lead, my legs buckled from exhaustion, yet we had made it to the other side of the barn. The horse abruptly stopped when two figures emerged from the shadows. I fell against his pulsating body and struggled for breath.

I gasped, “When the boss finds out—“

“Nothing,” Tully interrupted. “He won't find out nothing."

He reached for the shank, but I let it drop to the ground. As Zack went to retrieve it, the horse reared and came down on his arm, the sharp hooves ripping a deep gash in his skin.

“Damn!” he cried, trying to stop the bleeding with his bandanna. “I’ll kill that no-count piece of shit!”

Victory for Rome's nostrils flared, savoring the scent of the damage he had inflicted. My body shook uncontrollably as I steered the horse past the men. By now, Tully’s whining had taken on histrionic proportions. His associate propped him against the wall, then rushed toward me.

"It's not finished!" Zack shouted, striking me in the back with his fist.

Victory for Rome released a piercing squeal and with teeth bared, lunged at my assailant who toppled back into a row of stacked hay. The colt circled about as I clung to the end of the shank. He was a wild, primitive thing, bucking and rearing, clearly relishing every moment of this unrestrained behavior. In spite of my feeble efforts to settle him, I admired his spirit, applauded his dance of freedom---he was magnificent.

Zack struggled to regain his footing. With pinpoint accuracy, the colt let loose one swift kick which connected with the groom's leg. I heard the sharp crack, heard the guttural moans from the crumpled body on the ground and felt no remorse. Perhaps I would be calling him gimp now. As far as I was concerned, those two lowlifes were victims of their own misconduct.

The horse ceased his tirade. Once again docile, he nudged me to move on. The rain and winds slowly subsided. I led my comrade to his stall, made sure he had settled in, then phoned security from the boss' office. I bolted the door and waited. Something I had been reading the previous night popped into my head.

'All sorts of things occur to help one that never otherwise would have occurred.'

Not sure if it was Goethe. When I'd get back to my room, I'd have to find that page again.

M. E. Mitchell

Cold Moon

Slowly the passenger train crept out of the station past knots of people waving at those on board.
"You're not waving," an elderly woman seated across from Lugar remarked after she finished waving at her daughter and grandchildren.
"Excuse me?"
"Didn't anyone come to see you off?"
He shook his head.
"You only here on business?"
"No. This is where I live."
"I'm surprised no one's here to see you off," the officious woman observed, tapping a fingernail against the side of her small, veined nose.
He looked up from the magazine folded across his lap.
"I'm only going to be away for the weekend."
"A lot can happen in a weekend, though," she said.
"Those who care about you should know that. They should be here to say goodbye. That's my opinion, anyway, for what it's worth."
He smiled politely and looked back at his magazine.
"Nothing, right?"
"Sorry?"
"That's what my opinion is probably worth to a young man like yourself, isn't it? Nothing."
"No, not at all, ma'am."
She smiled, not believing him for an instant, and propped a pillow behind her neck and closed her eyes.

~~~OOO~~~

The carriage swayed a little as the train roared through a narrow turn, waking Lugar who until then had not realized he had fallen asleep. Quickly he looked at his watch and saw that he had been on the train for nearly two hours. He was astonished, not having any idea he was so tired. Then he noticed that the inquisitive woman was no longer seated across from him but instead there was a bearded man playing chess against himself on a small magnetic board.
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Turning, he gazed out the window at the trees which spun by so quickly that he imagined the limbs were hands waving at him as he passed. They were the ones seeing him off this morning, he thought, smiling.

~~~OOO~~~

Lugar had not been on a train in years, not since he was a boy, and Aidan, a friend of his mother's, invited him to go fishing one weekend. Along with a couple dozen other anglers, they rode a rickety little silver and blue freight train that travelled up and down the Breakneck River. They were packed inside the one passenger car so closely it was difficult to turn without banging into someone but he didn't mind because he always enjoyed being with Aidan as much as any of his mother's male friends.

He scarcely had any memory of his father who, according to his mother, perished in a multiple car traffic accident on his way home from a motorcycle race where he worked on the crew of one of the riders. Because he didn't have a father at home his mother encouraged her various men friends to do things with him that a father would likely do with his son. So he was taken to baseball games, to bowling alleys and wrestling matches, even once to a racetrack where he was shown how to bet even if he was too young to place the bet at a window. But only Aidan took him out of town aboard a train on a fishing trip, and even though he didn't catch anything he remembered that weekend more clearly than any of the other places his mother's friends too him. Not only was it the first time he had spent a night away from home but Aidan made him a promise that somehow he managed to keep.

"You'll catch something, Matty," he told him when they reached their fishing spot. "I guarantee it."
"You do?"
"Absolutely."
And though he was disappointed when they failed to get even a bite, he still was adamant that the youngster
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would catch something that day.
"What?" Lugar asked skeptically.
"Fire."
"Fire? I don't understand."
"Here," he said, kneeling down on the ground, "I'll show you how to get fire. That's something worth knowing, isn't it?"
"I guess."
"Of course, it is, Matty. Now, if you're ever in the woods without some matches, you'll know how to make a fire." At once, he picked up a foot-long branch and, after making sure it was dry, gathered a handful of brown pine needles as tinder. Vigorously, then, he spun the stick between his hands until the tinder began to smolder then blew on it until the needles ignited into a small flame.
"Now you do it."
"I don't think I can."
"Sure you can."

It took him quite a while but eventually he did produce a very thin flame, if only for an instant, and felt as satisfied as he had ever felt. Of all his mother's male friends Aidan was the only one who taught him something he still remembered even if, so far, he had not needed to use the knowledge. And for that he was very grateful.

~~~OOO~~~

The train rattled along a narrow river that reminded him of the river he fished with Aidan many years ago. A single man stood along the bank, casting his line, and he wondered if it might be Aidan. He had not seen him in years, doubted if he even would recognize him, because he was friends with his mother for such a brief time. Some of her male acquaintances were around for months but others only a few weeks like Aidan.

~~~OOO~~~

Out of the corner of his eye Lugar noticed the bearded passenger staring at him, probably thought he recognized him. He had received that reaction a lot since his picture appeared in the newspaper a couple of weeks ago. Numerous people looked at him as if they were sure they had met him somewhere, their eyes full of confusion and curiosity, while others who did recall seeing his picture in the paper often asked to shake his hand for what he did.

Two weeks ago, soon after he got home from a concert at the opposite end of town, he saw smoke pouring out of an upstairs window in the Christofferson house across the street. Immediately he rushed over to the house where half a dozen other neighbors had gathered on the front lawn. They assured him the fire station had been alerted and that a truck should be arriving any moment. Then he heard a scream from somewhere upstairs and, before he quite realized it, he barged through the front door. The hallway was engulfed in smoke and, after covering his mouth with a handkerchief, he charged up the winding staircase where he found the grandmother on her knees outside her bedroom. Her forehead was bleeding, her eyes stark with fear. Quickly he picked her up and stormed back down the staircase and out the door.

A couple of days later, a picture of him visiting the elderly woman in the hospital appeared on the front page of the Metro section of the morning paper. As a result, he received so many congratulatory calls and messages that he felt like someone who had scaled some towering mountain peak but soon was embarrassed by all the attention and was relieved when it began to taper off by the end of the week. Of course, he would be pleased to shake the hand of the bearded chess player if he asked but would just as soon not be bothered. Among the messages he received in connection with his rescue of Mrs. Christofferson was from a second cousin in Lewiston he never knew he had who sent along an old newspaper clipping about a three-year-old boy from Lewiston who vanished from his

bedroom late one night. His reputed cousin claimed he was that boy, taken twenty-six years ago from his father by his aggrieved mother, and included the Lewiston address of the person she said was his father.

He was stunned, not believing the claim for a moment. His mother died in a boating accident last summer but he was sure if she had taken him from his father, as this supposed cousin charged, she would have told him. He was absolutely sure of it yet, a few days later, he found himself aboard a train bound for Lewiston. It happened almost before he knew it, much as it did when he stormed into the burning Christofferson house.

~~~OOO~~~

The train slowed down as it approached another station. Two more, Lugar figured, then it would be in Lewiston. Once again, as he waited for the train to pull out, he removed from his coat pocket the wrinkled newspaper clipping sent to him earlier in the week. The name of the abducted boy was Andrew, not Matthew, and, according to the article, "Have You Seen Andy?" fliers were posted all around town by his desperate father. He was surprised the clipping didn't include a picture of the youngster even though he doubted if he could recognize what he looked like at that age. He had seen other pictures taken when he was a boy and seldom was able to identify himself. Back then, his mother told him, his hair was almost blond, not dark brown as it was for as long as he could remember, and his face was as round as a billiard ball.

~~~OOO~~~

Across the street from the Lewiston station was a Hertz office and, as soon as Lugar retrieved his lone suitcase from the baggage carousel, he went over to the office and rented a car for the weekend.
"Have you been in Lewiston before?" the agent asked after she handed him the keys to a new Taurus.
"I don't believe so."

"You don't know?" she said, surprised. "Are we that unmemorable?"
He shook his head, a little embarrassed by his answer. "What I mean is that I might've been here when I was a kid. I'm not really sure."
"There's no one you can ask?"
"Not anymore I'm afraid."
"Well, maybe you'll remember if you've been here before once you've had an opportunity to explore our city a little bit," she said and slid across the counter a street map.
"Maybe so."

Once he got in his car he looked at the map for a few minutes, struggling to figure out the shortest route to the street where the person alleged to be his father resided. He had never been very adroit at reading maps and, more often than not, stopped along the way to ask for directions. And today was no exception because soon after he left the Hertz lot he pulled into a gas station and asked the attendant how to get to Mulberry Street.
"That's clear across town," the guy said, softly clicking his teeth together, then gave him some general directions that at least pointed him in the right direction.
"Thanks."
"I take it you haven't been there before?"
He shook his head, not really knowing if he had or not.
"Well, if I were you, friend, I'd keep my windows rolled up and my doors locked. There are some pretty ornery characters in that part of town."
"I'll do that."
"You be sure you do."

It took him close to twenty minutes to reach Mulberry Street which, at first, did not appear much different than the other streets he had seen in Lewiston. But then, the farther north he proceeded, the worse condition the houses were in, with more than a few appearing abandoned as if the residents had fled from a frightful storm. Chimneys were falling apart, with bricks strewn like leaves across the roofs, many windows were broken and patched with electrician tape. Some doors were wide

open as if someone were expected at any moment. In the front yards were dismantled cars, pieces of furniture, ropes hanging from the limbs of trees, bicycles and scooters, even a couple of bathtubs. There were things everywhere but the only people he noticed were a few old men who glared at him from their front porches. The house he was looking for was in the middle of a block that, like so many other blocks he had passed, looked as if a tornado had swept through it, with shingles and scraps of tarpaper scattered across the lawn. He pulled up in front of it and started to turn off the engine then changed his mind and circled the block and parked across the street from the brittle little brown house. He was about to open the door when he abruptly drew his hand back, not really sure what to say to the man who lived there. He stared at the house for a moment, wondering if anyone was inside because it looked abandoned like so many other houses on the street. If the man who was his father was still there, he still didn't know what to say to him, despite all the things he had rehearsed in his head during the train ride, still didn't know if he really wanted to meet him after all these years. He was as much a stranger to him as someone who lived in another country. So he decided to wait in the car, hoping perhaps to get a glimpse of him, figuring that might help him decide whether he wanted to introduce himself.

He seldom ever asked his mother about his father because he didn't really have any memory of him but once after she took him skating at a rink in a shopping mall over town he asked her if his father could skate. She thought a moment. "Only under a cold moon." His eyes crinkled in confusion. "What's that mean?" "Your father said he'd only skate when the pond that we lived near when we first got married froze over, which never happened even in December because it just never got that cold."

"So you never saw him skate?"
"I never did so I don't know if he could or not since your father never was one to admit he couldn't do something."

He also was reluctant, at times, to acknowledge that he was unable to perform a particular task, Lugar thought, continuing to stare at the brown house. Apparently he had inherited something from his father, after all, despite his mother's insistence that he had nothing in common with him.

~~~OOO~~~

Nearly an hour later, after dozing off in the car, Lugar was awakened by a closed fist banging against his window. Startled, he looked up and saw a burly man with scraggly brown hair motioning for him to roll down his window and he did cautiously.
"You run out of gas, mister?"
He shook his head.
"So why are you sitting here?"
He noticed then another man standing behind the one at his window, staring at him intently beneath a blue watch cap. "I'm waiting for someone."
"Who would that be?"
"The man who lives in that brown house," he said, jerking a finger toward the place.
"Well, mister, you'll be waiting an awfully long time I'm afraid."
"Why's that?"
"Because no one lives there anymore," he said firmly.
"Hell, hardly anyone lives on this block anymore."
"You do, though?"
"Yeah, I do. And that's why I'm curious when I notice someone who doesn't belong here."
"Oh."
"Oh," he replied, deftly mimicking the tension in Lugar's voice.
"You know where the man who lived there went to?"
"Nope. All I know is he isn't there now."
"Well, I suppose I better be on my way then."
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"I suppose you better."

At once, he started the engine and drove past the curious man, wondering if he really knew if the owner of the brown house was gone, wondering indeed if he might be the owner. He had no idea, of course, but one thing he did know was that he didn't belong here. And, as he drove toward the moon beginning now to gleam through the clouds, he decided he didn't have to meet his father to know that his mother was right to take him away from this place.

T.R. Healy

The Old Man in Winter

December snows
coat ice windows
inside, my bony fleshless frame.
They bury,
insist that I must stay
in this coffin house
they have prepared for me.
I wail but the wind out-wails me.
I curse
but weather is the curses
often thousand like souls.
Landscape, damp and gray,
stark, skeletal trees bid me join them.
I cling to bed, to bannister,
as if that's any use.
Chills of past history,
fleeting echoes of old violence,
stains on the walls,
mocking doorways,
creaking staircases -
that's where the outside
gets its grim ideas.

John Grey

In The Snake Pit

Who was it said, fortune awaits?
Who chewed on greed so long, he spat honey?
And what will the yellowing pages of the history book reveal?
A desecrated boneyard? A patchwork of skull caverns, their sockets blinking reptiles? No heroes here.

Teeth cut lip. Eyes devour the thoughts behind them.
Toe crumples into hair. Stomach snaps like violins.
Hissssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss.

Serpents slither around ankles, glide up to trembling knees.
Between toxin and terror, blanched man, coral skin.
Oh the mouth, sharp and sudden. And the patience, three coils deep.
And sacred stones, chilled with the next swarm.
Snakes are the answer. But whoever asks this question in the steam of darkness. One man screams so hard, his head blows out before his lamp does.

John Grey

A Drunken Walk By the Graveyard

These yews are ancient.
How willfully, they spread
their roots through
this dark and frigid cemetery,
silently lauding their long lives
over the blackening stones.

And then there's the berries
in the bushes, bursts of grim laughter
at the joke that nothing would
be blood-red anywhere here
but for them.

Only the earth's flesh
survives the worms' onslaught.
Not even mourning has endured.
Sure, the doves still mob
the gardens, but to feast, not sob.

If bodies want to spoil it
for the quiet, the sameness,
they'd better hurry while they still
have flesh on bone,
dig themselves out from below,
break up the surface's haughty throne,
poison the yews with gargoyle stares,
thresh the berries like fresh crimson victims,
brush aside the birds,
so they can do the true devouring.

Otherwise, this is just another graveyard
in just another town.
And I'm dead drunk
not drinking in the dead.

John Grey

To Begin With

As the tiny town of Broken Creek, Oklahoma slept, a plague of tornadoes struck in the night. Some people were swept away, some were crushed, and some were felled by flying debris. Few were left to bear witness. Chancey du Plessis was one of them.

From beneath a mattress in a bathtub she emerged, holding in one hand Mr. Winkles, wrapped in his blanket, and in the other the grubby paw of baby brother Remi, picking his barefoot way among shards of glass, glittering forms cleaved along unseen lines of stress, and around nails, long consigned to the darkness of wooden planks, now exposed to the clarity of morning light. They were joined by Critter, who had been sniffing around for the dog food to which he was accustomed, before finally allowing more primal instincts to take over in foraging for the edibles hidden beneath the rubble.

Chancey looked around, wondering where, in the midst of the flattened landscape, her parents might be. They had gone to Mr. and Mrs. Jackson's house for the evening, but Chancey had no idea where the Jacksons lived. The evidence suggested it was a moot point anyway. She tried to find the driveway, but the blue van that had been there when the babysitter, Daisy, had gone out to it to visit with her boyfriend Joey after dinner, was nowhere in sight. While the moment could have been a tipping point into panic, Chancey's mind slid instead down a slope toward more practical considerations. She was thirsty, Mr. Winkles was hungry, and Remi had personal hygiene issues below the waist. As Chancey looked around, she saw the sign for the giant retail/grocery/home improvement store where her mother shopped. While Chancey was fairly certain that the store was not located near where the sign sat on the ground a mere hundred or so yards away, she decided they would head in that direction anyway.

The gutted refrigerator had come to rest neatly next to the sign for the store from which it had come. Within, Dolores Quartermain lay curled up around a two-and-a-half gallon bottle of water, and held clutched in her hands a half dozen chocolate bars, with nine more stuffed in the pockets of her cargo pants. As the band of survivors led by Chancey du Plessis approached, Dolores pushed open the refrigerator door and stood up, presenting herself to Chancey as a figure of substantial possibility: savior, guide, fellow traveler, or foe, each bearing for Chancey an excitement peculiar to the role.

Dolores peered, eyes hand-shaded against a light she did not foresee ever returning, at the group approaching. She studied them dispassionately as they picked their way toward her, finding it easier to concentrate on the awkward, hesitant movements of two children and a dog than on the destruction around her which, on a good day, would be well nigh incomprehensible. And this was not shaping up to be a good day.

“Hey,” Dolores said as Chancey got within conversational distance.

“Mama says I ain't supposed to talk to strangers,” Chancey replied. She looked around. “But Mama ain't around. So, hey.”

“Name's Penny,” Dolores said.

“Name tag says 'Dolores',” Chancey said, leaving the obvious question implied, if set jaw and narrowing eyes are any kind of indicators.

At twenty-eight Dolores Quartermain felt too young to be named Dolores, so she went by Penny in all but the most legally and professionally necessary situations.

“What's your name?” she asked Chancey by way of diversion.

“Name's Chancey. This here's my brother Remi, that there dog's Critter, and this,” she said, holding him out toward Dolores, “is Mr. Winkles.”

“Nice to meet you all. Any idea where your folks are?”

“They went to the Jackson's house last night, but I don't know where that's at.”

“Well,” Dolores said with a smile she hoped the youngster could not interpret, “I doubt the Jacksons know anymore either.”

“This ain't where the store's usually at, is it?” Chancey asked, gesturing to the sign.

“No,” said Dolores, “I don't think so. Then again, I don't know where anything is at the moment.”

Everyone but the dog sat down and leaned back against the refrigerator. Dolores broke out candy bars and water so that, aside from diaper problems, Chancey's immediate concerns were addressed. Most of the next hour was spent discussing how they had all ended up here, and where 'here' might be.

Dolores Quartermain, it turned out, was the Assets Protection Manager at the retail/grocery/home improvement store where Mrs. du Plessis shopped. She had begun working there fresh out of college, where she had majored in marketing, and minored in philosophy with a course load that listed toward comparative religious studies, whereupon at the age of twenty-five a bachelor's degree had been conferred upon her. She was on the fast track into management from the start. With her drive, intelligence, and ability to think, in corporate-speak, 'outside the box', she had risen quickly. What she understood from the outset was that, though a degree was a managerial requirement, there existed no necessary correlation between education and the ability to perform

the job. This had become apparent when the storms hit. While degreed professionals ran in panicked circles, Dolores gathered customers and coworkers and ushered them to the safety of an interior hallway in the backroom. When the twister struck, she was caught doing a final check of the sales floor for stragglers in the appliance department. She pulled the racks out of a display refrigerator, and as walls came down and the roof began to lift away, she grabbed candy bars and bottled water from a nearby end cap and leaped inside. Dolores Quartermain was a young woman of resourcefulness, a survivor, someone who had honed the ability to think quickly and act decisively, not in college, but after she dropped out as a sophomore, took the name 'Penelope Nichols', and began a two year career as an actress in adult films. A year after quitting, when the money and cocaine had run out, she went back to college, transferring from the insular world of College of the Surf to the anonymity of the University of Oklahoma. Gone were the big hair, blue mascara, and stripper wear; she now wore a pony tail, no make up, horn-rimmed glasses, and clothes that would have made Mae West appear vaguely Amish. And that is how she came to be here, wherever 'here' might be.

As a relative newcomer to the stage of history, Chancey du Plessis had arrived at this juncture endowed with what was known in the folk parlance of her ancestors as 'horse sense'. Weather Channel tornado specials and repeated drills at school had sharpened and focused an innate decisiveness, sometimes misinterpreted by elders as stubbornness, to such a degree that the instant the lights went out and civil defense sirens came on, she wrangled a mattress with one hand, Remi in mid-poop with the other, and got them all, along with Mr. Winkles, into the tub.

It quickly became clear to both Dolores and Chancey that thinking-outside-the-box-horse-sense was, at this point, a necessity for survival. A slight breeze, timid cousin of the previous night's visitors, fluttered, able to stir only slight remnants of the works of Man. Every movement seemed a

pale and impotent response to some judgment, a choked appeal at this undeserved sentence. The chirps and songs of returning birds mixed with an occasional moan or cry that seemed to come from a distance, as if what remained of yesterday's world had slipped into a universe, parallel in Gaussian spacetime to that of Chancey and Dolores, polar points of intersection becoming the ghosts of a former reality. Clearly, no one was coming to help them any time soon.

Thirst quenched and hunger at bay, the first order of business was to strip Remi from the waist down and seat him in a clean-looking puddle of water, where his natural inclination to thrash around contributed to his cleansing. All agreed that he could remain in a state of nature for the time being. As Remi air-dried, Chancey stepped over what appeared to have once been the contents of a storage shed—bent and twisted garden tools, deceased weed-whacker, decapitated lawn mower (rear leaf bag still miraculously attached)--to sit beside Dolores and stare off across a flatness that gave them both, woman and child, the same unobstructed view of what was left of the town.

"Food, clothing, shelter," Chancey said, as if reciting a grocery list or set of chores.

You read my mind, kid," Dolores replied. She stood up, looked around, and began putting her world back together, beginning with an overturned grocery cart. Its wheels were bent, but as far as Dolores could tell, that did not matter; there existed no clear path down which to push it anyway. But it gave them somewhere to put supplies. The operation took on the aspect of a shopping spree in some piece of surrealist cinema, Chancey completing the picture by finding a small fiber glass boat, with a length of rope attached, into which they could put the cart and drag it with them across the blasted landscape.

Dolores soon got her bearings. They were on the eastern edge of town, and the damage was almost total. Dolores

reasoned, if only by the process of elimination, that their best chance for help lay westward, where some part of town might have escaped annihilation. In addition, most of the larger structures, such as the high school, with its gym, auditorium, and football field, were there. Dolores figured that any relief efforts would be based in and emanate from that area.

By mid-morning, they were moving, starting, stopping, back-tracking, sifting through wreckage for items to add to their cart. A traveling polis, each member of this body public moved independently, at his or her own pace, choosing the path most befitting character and capacity, yet with only minor fluctuations in relative distance and position among the members. It was slow going, and difficult to tell if one was following a road or cutting through someone's dining room; place settings and traffic lights lay hopelessly jumbled together in places. Still, Dolores liked to know where she stood and where she was headed. She developed a method for doing just that. If one followed what seemed to be a road until one came to what seemed to be an intersection, one might find a street sign which would yield a pair of names. At the next intersection, if one found another street sign with a name that matched one of the previous ones, one could be relatively certain that was the street being followed. Though not infallible, the results were within the acceptable range as far as Dolores was concerned. She soon felt much better about where they were going, if for no other reason than that she now had names to attach to places once again.

By noon, the grocery cart held: three dented cans of pink salmon, two whistles, a jar of instant coffee, six cans of still-pressurized spray cheese, a bicycle air pump, two bags of hard candy, a box of half-inch wood screws, an undamaged three-pack of cigarette lighters, a canister of protein powder, an assortment of plastic dinnerware, and a claw hammer qua can opener, which Dolores presently began using to pry into lunch, a can of CorpMart brand

Low-Fat Caffeine-Free No Gluten Low Sodium Sugar-Free Vegetarian Turkey Chili Without Beans.

“You're not going to use that, are you?” Chancey protested as Dolores began working on the can with what Chancey felt was an implement of suspect cleanliness. “You don't know where that thing's been.”

“Kid,” Dolores laughed, “this thing doesn't know where I've been.”

The group also managed to procure a box of size 3T disposable diapers, but they were so saturated with water that it was apparent there was no point in getting Remi to wear one. It was agreed that in the interest of his lower half, exposed as it was to full afternoon sun, a water-logged towel fastened at the waist was sufficient. Remi could still swing free and let loose, much like the unhousebroken version of Critter, who was beginning to forget his former training in the new found freedom of what for him was a return to an antelapsarian Eden in the land of Canine.

“I don't know much about little kids,” Dolores said. “What does Remi eat?”

Chancey shrugged. “Handful of dirt now and then.”

As they pushed westward, encounters with the living were few and far between. Most passed by in the quietude of shock and despair, eyes averted, never to be raised in recognition of shared suffering. Dolores realized that there were simply not enough people left to achieve the critical mass necessary for a good communal cry. What had once been rescue teams wandered past occasionally, betraying blunt sorrow and shattered sense of purpose, lethargic in the knowledge of their own irrelevance. Even the small bands of looters, who no doubt began the day with the enthusiasm of future war criminals in basic training, seemed listless and misdirected, one group of teenage boys forgoing the price-gouging opportunities offered by an

overturned truck filled with unbroken five gallon carboys of fresh water in favor of attempting to get high by inhaling the contents of a case of canned compressed air. Though Dolores tried to lead her companions past them at a discrete distance, one of the boys glanced up from his frustrated exertions and saw them.

“Hey baby!” he shouted, “what do you got in the cart?”

“Ooh,” said another, “check out the cute little piece she's got with her.”

The entire group of perhaps a dozen put by their revels and approached the girls with what to Chancey was palpable menace.

“Give them what they want,” she whispered.

“I don't think so,” Dolores said, knowing, as Chancey did not, that what these boys wanted extended beyond the confines of the cart. “I don't fucking think so.”

Certain lessons of her past served Dolores well. As everyone who works in retail knows, lower rungs on the corporate ladder hold most company rules, procedures, and policies somewhere between utter contempt and complete indifference. It was an innocuous form of hazing for Sal Chatman, Produce Manager (or “Head of Lettuce” as he was known to his underlings), to get new managers to attempt to enforce some silly rule no one followed. One day, he wandered over to Dolores as she was watching the replenishment team stock the floor in the early morning hours.

“You know, Dolores,” Sal said, sounding somehow both off-handed and officious, “that guy over there is using a box cutter on cases clearly labeled otherwise.”

Dolores sighed. She knew sending the hot-shot young manager to tell a man how to do his job, one that, moreover, she had never done, was a childish way of reinforcing the power structures and mistrust of superiors that are at the core of how corporate America works. She could only hope the guy was smart enough to catch that, by tone of voice and body language, neither of them should take this seriously.

“You do know that symbol on the box means you're not supposed to use that thing on it, right?” Dolores asked.

“Technically that's true,” he replied, “but you see, what it really means is that you need to take care,” and here he turned upon her a lurid smile haunted by the ghosts of teeth long departed, his undecipherable neck tattoo throbbing into life with his quickening pulse, “to pay attention to angle of entry and...depth of penetration.”

Obviously she had been set up. Dealing on a daily basis with the likes of Kenny Wayne Pennebaker was a major factor in the departure of her two predecessors after only a combined four months on the job. But Dolores had learned how to handle his kind in far harsher work environments than this. Poor Kenny Wayne Pennebaker. She turned upon him the full force of what came to be known among co-workers as the Withering Glance, which, when prolonged past the point of endurance, became the Petrifying Stare. What had simply kept her alive and sane in the world of porn made her a legend in retail.

This bunch of dickweeds didn't stand a chance. Disposed of and dispersed, they were henceforth a threat to none but themselves.

~~~OOO~~~
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From his privileged perch in the child seat of the cart, Mr. Winkles alerted Chancey to the presence of a woman, partially obscured to them at the moment by an intact chimney, a free-standing objective correlative difficult to surpass in conveying a sense of irrevocable loss and isolation. Chancey tugged at Dolores' sleeve and pointed toward the woman, whose movements were as aimless as those of everyone else they had seen, but whose eyes shone with a faith-based tenacity held in place by a zeal Dolores found unmistakable.

“Lost everything,” she said as the group approached her, “but praise be to God for saving my life.”

“Yeah, it's a miracle all right,”Dolores replied. The woman knelt and looked up at her.

“Would you like to join me in a prayer of thanks for His mercy?” she asked.

“I'll tell you what,” Dolores replied, “you stay down there and give thanks to God for the great gifts He has bestowed upon you this day, while I stand here and think up some way to thank Him for killing all these people, maybe come up with a prayer on behalf of those who are unable to do so at the moment because they are too busy sifting through, no doubt gratefully, all the destruction He so mercifully graced them with last night.”

As Dolores turned and led the others away, Chancey glanced back at the woman, still kneeling and unmoving, with an expression Chancey thought looked part angry, part not understanding what had just occurred. Chancey felt no anger, but did find the episode beyond her understanding.

As for Dolores, she had first become interested in religion as a fit subject for serious study as a junior in high school. She had attracted the attention of a local college student, one of those young men who tries to define his public

image by the book people will see him reading. She also understood his attempts to manipulate her by flattering her on the sharpness of her mind on the one hand, while gently denigrating the uneducated naivete of her thinking on the other. On a dare from him she read, in two weeks, a difficult book of intimidating length, one which he himself had never been able to finish. It was there she was startled into fascination by a quote on page 266, which she later learned came from the Bhagavad Gita: “Even those who worship other gods worship me although they know it not.” From then on she had little use for and less patience with dogmatic narrow-mindedness. In addition, her suitor lost interest.

~~~OOO~~~

The sign sat like a giant toe-tag atop the rubble: Ka Chang's Donut Shop and Video. Chancey watched Dolores absent-mindedly shift around a pile of DVD's with her foot. Dolores knelt down, picking up a DVD case. She looked at it for a few moments before tossing it away with a smile that, to Chancey, did not seem to mean what she thought a smile meant, as if the lips and eyes were parts from two different faces feeling two different emotions. As Dolores resumed her search for useful items, Chancey wandered over and looked at the cover:
CAITLIN O'GASM & PENELOPE NICHOLS in
Cock Less Monster 5
HOT Highland Lassie Lezzie Munch Fest!
Two girls in plaid bikinis sharing a loose embrace faced outward. Chancey thought one of them could easily be taken for Penny's younger sister. Perhaps, thought Chancey, she was, that she and Penny were on a shared quest to recover a lost family. Chancey felt a new tenderness toward Penny, as if their roles had been reversed and she, Chancey du Plessis, was the keeper of Penny, lost little girl.

~~~OOO~~~

Dolores turned over the large wooden sign. The bottom half was broken off. “Whispering Pines”--the signifier remained, but the signified had been torn away. Dolores and Chancey began looking around, each of their heads the center point of an ever-widening circumference in search of its limit.

“Do you see any tombstones around here?” Dolores asked.

“No,” Chancey replied, undistracted by the randomness of the question. “My granny should be around here somewhere.”

“Your granny is buried in Whispering Pines?”

“No, silly, Whispering Pines is the name of the old folks home where she lives now since Pawpaw died.”

Dolores gave the half-chuckle and smile that Chancey could never seem to connect with mirth. The girl could see that Penny had made a realization. Chancey did not understand, but instead of responding with her usual curiosity, which often struck adults as a cute but annoying form of interrogation, Chancey gave Penny space to work her way through the moment.

As if to repay this courtesy, Dolores offered, without the armature of emotional distance, “My mom is buried in Whispering Pines Cemetery.”

In what seemed to Chancey a spasm of impracticality and superhuman strength, Dolores wrestled the sign into the boat. When she wiped her upper lip with the back of her hand, Chancey was not sure if Penny was wiping away sweat, or if it was the reflex following a quick sniffle.

~~~OOO~~~
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Chancey sat down to rest and began picking through the twisted frame of a picture postcard rack. Dolores wound her way over debris that had once been a dollar store and stood behind the child, who had found a postcard that was in surprisingly good condition and depicted some part of Oklahoma that was much more scenic than Broken Creek even during the town's better days. Chancey sat still, her only motion her right forefinger moving over the surface of the photo, tracing some figure, invisible and meaningless except to Chancey, the ephemeral mandala that mapped her universe and was beyond paraphrase. After a few moments, Chancey stood up, walked over to the cart, and put in the postcard. In the beginning, thought Dolores.

~~~OOO~~~

As the leading edge of the sun touched the jagged western horizon, a contour shaped perhaps by trees, perhaps by buildings, perhaps merely by further evidence of God's indifference or death, Dolores realized they would not reach conventional habitation, temporary or otherwise, before darkness fell, relieving the pain of present sight and cursing them with blindness to future dangers. She spotted ready-made shelter, a panel truck rolled over onto its side. Close inspection revealed it to have been a newspaper delivery truck, still filled with bundled, predominantly dry copies of the Sittaway County Statesman.

“Listen up, troops,” Dolores said, “we need to gather up as much of the largest, driest pieces of wood we can find. We'll warm up, dry out, and start out in the morning.”

Minutes later, Dolores had piles of newspapers blazing, adding kindling, then larger bits of wood, always at the ready with more paper as needed to help dry out and ignite the oft-times still damp boards and sticks. A stable, steady blaze was soon achieved, with plenty of fuel set nearby to dry and add. Dolores went through the cart and pulled out a few bits of clothing, two damp towels, and a torn blanket. She and Chancey strung the boat's tow rope from the rear
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view mirror bracket on the van's driver side door to a metal fence post that, though bent, retained enough verticality to hang up and dry what would be used for bedding.

Earlier, Chancey had found a large pot, a skillet, and three chipped, though usable, mugs. Dolores filled the pot from one of their three recently acquired five gallon jugs of water and set it on the fire, along with the skillet. Dinner was served. Dolores had instant coffee and a protein shake, while the kids ate hot canned salmon, spray cheese, and hard candy. They all shared the spiderwort/chickweed stir fry Dolores had prepared. Critter and Mr. Winkles were left to fend for themselves, which seemed to suit them just fine, Critter seeming especially happy to relieve Remi of a portion of his salmon.

As Chancey got the others ready for bed, Dolores put more water on the fire and began shelling acorns she had been gathering throughout the day. It was deep in the night by the time she had boiled the tannin out of the acorns, ground them into meal, added water to form a mush, and set the mush out to sour overnight. The others were fast asleep, Chancey curled up under a large towel with Mr. Winkles, Remi, in a tangle of mismatched clothing, using Critter as a pillow. Dolores looked at Chancey, an expression of fierce resolve on the girl's face even in sleep. Though her experience around young children was limited, Dolores believed that when confronted with this kind of destruction and the loss, probably permanently, of both parents, most would succumb to the paralysis of hysterical fear. Chancey, however, pushed ever forward with a faith that, if misplaced, was not blind, because it was chosen with eyes wide open on a reality willfully conjured. Dolores, swearing to herself to protect that faith, tried to stay awake, to watch over them, but she soon began to drift off. As if by design, Chancey woke up.

“You can go to sleep, Penny,” she said, “I'll stay up and watch a while.”

Without a word, Dolores gave her a nod, perceptible only to tried, trusted friends. As she dropped off, she had the sudden thought, why or what it meant she would never know: life is not brutal for someone who has no word for brutality. Fatigue overcame confusion, and she entered the deep, dreamless sleep of the truly exhausted. Chancey, who took her responsibilities seriously, remained at her post as long as she could, at which point she was relieved by the ever-vigilant Mr. Winkles.

When Chancey woke, Dolores was up, grinding freshly roasted dandelion root into coffee and cooking piles of acorn sourdough flapjacks. Before setting out, they took the Whispering Pines sign from the boat, along with a can of red spray-paint they had found. On the back of the sign they left a message for any who might come behind them, and leaned it against the side of the truck:

StiLL Alive
HeadEd WEST
D. QuaRtERmaiN
C.&R du Plessis
CriTTEr&MR WiNKLEs
P.S. wateR in Truck

The taut and severe flatness of the land began giving way to a series of dips and swells, undulations not far enough removed from flatland prairie to be called rolling hills, but intervals of slight change in elevation nonetheless. The effect was invigorating, each new prospect bringing fresh hope in spite of whatever new horrors they might find over the next rise. As they moved westward, they realized that those heading back the other way, in search of survivors or the repair of personal losses, were more upbeat the further west they were encountered.

Chancey found this heartening; Dolores saw in it the best moment these people would have all day, as they headed east toward increasing waste, death, and savagery.

As they descended a gentle slope, free of debris and covered in grass that seemed unaware of catastrophe, a figure, tall, broad, erect as no other encountered thus far, rose from the summit before them and walked down, long, confident strides sending his unbuttoned overcoat billowing out behind him, broad-brimmed hat shading his face, paradoxically focusing attention on his eyes, so blue they seemed to generate their own light.

“Well hello there!” he said, his deep voice at once reassuring and slightly incongruous. Chancey stepped forward, thrusting out a hand.

“Howdy,” she said, “my name is Chancey. Her real name's Dolores, but you can call her Penny. Those two rolling around on the ground are Remi and Critter. Critter is the dog. And this is Mr. Winkles. He don't talk much, so don't take it personal.”

Amused and momentarily at ease, Dolores stood back and let Chancey carry the conversation. Chancey told the man about the people they had met, and he told her, while casting his glance at Dolores to make sure she was getting the information, that the Red Cross had arrived and a tent city for temporary shelter had been set up on the high school football field.

“By the way,” he said, reaching into a coat pocket from which he pulled a thermos that seemed far too large ever to have fit there, “got some coffee here if you'd like some.”

“God yes,” Dolores said, taking the proffered cup with gratitude too profound for expression, but which the man seemed to understand nonetheless.

“As of right now,” he continued, enunciating each word so it could bear the full weight of his conviction, “every single person in back of me is at that field. I am the leading edge of the survival front, people. You all hurry on there. I've got to go on. We'll meet again soon, once everyone's gathered safely home.”

“How do you know we'll make it?” Chancey asked.

“I wouldn't pass you by if you couldn't,” was the last thing they heard him say as he walked with steady purpose over the rise they had just descended.

“You heard the man,” Dolores said. “Every living soul this side of him is at the Red Cross camp; let's go.”

As if filled with the energy of the stranger's absolute certitude, all fatigue left them, and they marched on, freed from the burden of worry for their fate.

“Come on, Remi,” Chancey said, “we're almost to Mama and Daddy.”

Of course, thought Dolores, where else could they be in the mind of Chancey du Plessis?

~~~OOO~~~

Around midday, they topped a rise made taller by the remains of a semi-trailer left there carelessly by the storm. In the distance stood, like a vertical miracle, a single light standard, several hours away, but a standing promise nonetheless that a measure of publicly sanctioned relief was this day within reach. Dolores looked at all they had gathered, cared for, preserved, and protected. Soon they would no longer need any of it, nor even have to use most of it. If we had to, thought Dolores, we could have rebuilt the town ourselves.
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Meanwhile, as Chancey sifted through the effects of someone who had never existed for her, and who probably no longer existed for anyone else as well, she came across something which made her heart skip a beat.

“Look!” she cried out. “A phone!”

“Used to be maybe,” Dolores said, “probably trash now.”

“It turns on!”

“Okay, kid, but you're not going to get...”

“A signal!”

“Alright, kid, but that doesn't mean...”

“It's dialing Mama's number!”

“But kid, the circuits are all going to be...”

“It's ringing!”

“Look, kid, just don't get your...”

“Hello...Mama?”

“I'll be damned.”

“Mommy! Daddy!” the girl squealed, the long suppressed, unspoken doubt finally acknowledged in extinction. Dolores Quartermain smiled, the now unambiguous clarity of bright sun and blue sky reflected in her face. It was left to Remi to spoil the moment.

“Sweet Jesus!” gasped Dolores. “Ask them if the Red Cross brought along any diapers.”

Bob Carlton

The Lily

The once-white lily has darkened.
Her virginal petals now seem singed
with browned edges curving upward
shriveling inside themselves until
they break away one by one
spilling over the side of the vase
carried by the steady blast
of a nearby air conditioning unit
landing on the untouched ivory keys
of a neglected Steinway

Tiffany Harmon

Whisper

I hear a whisper on a still day
there is no wind to carry it
it hasn't come through the rustling leaves
or the birds squawking over the clouds
I hear it within
inside
again
it rattles around my skull
echoing and pounding
telling me to wait for night
after the haze of the supernatural
has blocked the stars from view
it will be time
to emerge from the shadows
a new creature
devouring whatever is necessary
to satiate the whisper

Tiffany Harmon

Without Rain

The verdant valley
where we once walked
is a barren wasteland
now that the rain
refuses to fall. Refuses
to nourish our valley.
The gods of the sky
called the gods of the ground.
Mother Earth started a feud
which none want to end.
The stream where we frolicked
is all dried up too.
Only fish bones crushed
into the dirt remain.
Their scales cracked long ago
and peeled off and dissolved
leaving only the chalky spines.

Tiffany Harmon

Comfort in the Burnout

There is comfort in the burnout.
And It becomes Easier to deal with the mediocrity of the moment;
When your Confidence grows Rusty....
Stay in the Complacency of monotonous repetition,
Be warned the Toxic Workplace can overtake you.
It is painfully obvious only in the opportunistic getaway; can there be impending relief from the Comfort in the burnout.
And a chance to Overcome the fade-away.

Bob Eager

Certain houses, like certain persons, manage somehow to proclaim at once their character for evil. In the case of the latter, no particular feature need betray them; they may boast an open countenance and an ingenuous smile; and yet a little of their company leaves the unalterable conviction that there is something radically amiss with their being: that they are evil. Willy nilly, they seem to communicate an atmosphere of secret and wicked thoughts which makes those in their immediate neighborhood shrink from them as from a thing diseased.

And, perhaps, with houses the same principle is operative, and it is the aroma of evil deeds committed under a particular roof, long after the actual doers have passed away, that makes the gooseflesh come and the hair rise. Something of the original passion of the evil-doer, and of the horror felt by his victim, enters the heart of the innocent watcher, and he becomes suddenly conscious of tingling nerves, creeping skin, and a chilling of the blood. He is terror-stricken without apparent cause.

There was manifestly nothing in the external appearance of this particular house to bear out the tales of the horror that was said to reign within. It was neither lonely nor unkempt. It stood, crowded into a corner of the square, and looked exactly like the houses on either side of it. It had the same number of windows as its neighbors; the same balcony overlooking the gardens; the same white steps leading up to the heavy black front door; and, in the rear, there was the same narrow strip of green, with neat box borders, running up to the wall that divided it from the backs of the adjoining houses. Apparently, too, the number of chimney pots on the roof was the same; the breadth and angle of the eaves; and even the height of the dirty area railings.

And yet this house in the square, that seemed precisely similar to its fifty ugly neighbors, was as a matter of fact entirely different—horribly different.

Wherein lay this marked, invisible difference is impossible to say. It cannot be ascribed wholly to the imagination, because persons who had spent some time in the house, knowing nothing of the facts, had declared positively that certain rooms were so disagreeable they would rather die than enter them again, and that the atmosphere of the whole house produced in them symptoms of a genuine terror; while the series of innocent tenants who had tried to live in it and been forced to decamp at the shortest possible notice, was indeed little less than a scandal in the town.

When Shorthouse arrived to pay a "week-end" visit to his Aunt Julia in her little house on the sea-front at the other end of the town, he found her charged to the brim with mystery and excitement. He had only received her telegram that morning, and he had come anticipating boredom; but the moment he touched her hand and kissed her apple-skin wrinkled cheek, he caught the first wave of her electrical condition. The impression deepened when he learned that there were to be no other visitors, and that he had been telegraphed for with a very special object.

Something was in the wind, and the "something" would doubtless bear fruit; for this elderly spinster aunt, with a mania for psychical research, had brains as well as will power, and by hook or by crook she usually managed to accomplish her ends. The revelation was made soon after tea, when she sidled close up to him as they paced slowly along the sea-front in the dusk.

"I've got the keys," she announced in a delighted, yet half awesome voice. "Got them till Monday!"

"The keys of the bathing-machine, or—?" he asked innocently, looking from the sea to the town. Nothing brought her so quickly to the point as feigning stupidity.

"Neither," she whispered. "I've got the keys of the haunted house in the square—and I'm going there to-night."

Shorthouse was conscious of the slightest possible tremor down his back. He dropped his teasing tone. Something in her voice and manner thrilled him. She was in earnest.

"But you can't go alone—" he began.

"That's why I wired for you," she said with decision.

He turned to look at her. The ugly, lined, enigmatical face was alive with excitement. There was the glow of genuine enthusiasm round it like a halo. The eyes shone. He caught another wave of her excitement, and a second tremor, more marked than the first, accompanied it.

"Thanks, Aunt Julia," he said politely; "thanks awfully."

"I should not dare to go quite alone," she went on, raising her voice; "but with you I should enjoy it immensely. You're afraid of nothing, I know."

"Thanks *so* much," he said again. "Er—is anything likely to happen?"

"A great deal *has* happened," she whispered, "though it's been most cleverly hushed up. Three tenants have come and gone in the last few months, and the house is said to be empty for good now."

In spite of himself Shorthouse became interested. His aunt was so very much in earnest.

"The house is very old indeed," she went on, "and the story—an unpleasant one—dates a long way back. It has to do with a murder committed by a jealous stableman who had some affair with a servant in the house. One night he managed to secrete himself in the cellar, and when everyone was asleep, he crept upstairs to the servants' quarters, chased the girl down to the next landing, and before anyone could come to the rescue threw her bodily over the banisters into the hall below."

"And the stableman—?"

"Was caught, I believe, and hanged for murder; but it all happened a century ago, and I've not been able to get more details of the story."

Shorthouse now felt his interest thoroughly aroused; but, though he was not particularly nervous for himself, he hesitated a little on his aunt's account.

"On one condition," he said at length.

"Nothing will prevent my going," she said firmly; "but I may as well hear your condition."

"That you guarantee your power of self-control if anything really horrible happens. I mean—that you are sure you won't get too frightened."

"Jim," she said scornfully, "I'm not young, I know, nor are my nerves; but *with you* I should be afraid of nothing in the world!"

This, of course, settled it, for Shorthouse had no pretensions to being other than a very ordinary young man, and an appeal to his vanity was irresistible. He agreed to go.

Instinctively, by a sort of sub-conscious preparation, he kept himself and his forces well in hand the whole evening, compelling an accumulative reserve of control by that nameless inward process of gradually putting all the emotions away and turning the key upon them—a process difficult to describe, but wonderfully effective, as all men who have lived through severe trials of the inner man well understand. Later, it stood him in good stead.

But it was not until half-past ten, when they stood in the hall, well in the glare of friendly lamps and still surrounded by comforting human influences, that he had to make the first call upon this store of collected strength. For, once the door was closed, and he saw the deserted silent street stretching away white in the moonlight before them, it came to him clearly that the real test that night would be in dealing with *two fears* instead of one. He would have to carry his aunt's fear as well as his own. And, as he glanced down at her sphinx-like countenance and realized that it might assume no pleasant aspect in a rush of real terror, he felt satisfied with only one thing in the whole adventure—that he had confidence in his own will and power to stand against any shock that might come.

Slowly they walked along the empty streets of the town; a bright autumn moon silvered the roofs, casting deep shadows; there was no breath of wind; and the trees in the formal gardens by the sea-front watched them silently as they passed along. To his aunt's occasional remarks Shorthouse made no reply, realizing that she was simply surrounding herself with mental buffers—saying ordinary things to prevent herself thinking of extra-ordinary things. Few windows showed lights, and from scarcely a single chimney came smoke or sparks. Shorthouse had already

begun to notice everything, even the smallest details. Presently they stopped at the street corner and looked up at the name on the side of the house full in the moonlight, and with one accord, but without remark, turned into the square and crossed over to the side of it that lay in shadow.

"The number of the house is thirteen," whispered a voice at his side; and neither of them made the obvious reference, but passed across the broad sheet of moonlight and began to march up the pavement in silence.

It was about half-way up the square that Shorthouse felt an arm slipped quietly but significantly into his own, and knew then that their adventure had begun in earnest, and that his companion was already yielding imperceptibly to the influences against them. She needed support.

A few minutes later they stopped before a tall, narrow house that rose before them into the night, ugly in shape and painted a dingy white. Shutterless windows, without blinds, stared down upon them, shining here and there in the moonlight. There were weather streaks in the wall and cracks in the paint, and the balcony bulged out from the first floor a little unnaturally. But, beyond this generally forlorn appearance of an unoccupied house, there was nothing at first sight to single out this particular mansion for the evil character it had most certainly acquired.

Taking a look over their shoulders to make sure they had not been followed, they went boldly up the steps and stood against the huge black door that fronted them forbiddingly. But the first wave of nervousness was now upon them, and Shorthouse fumbled a long time with the key before he could fit it into the lock at all. For a moment, if truth were told, they both hoped it would not open, for they were a prey to various unpleasant emotions as they stood there on the threshold of their ghostly adventure. Shorthouse, shuffling with the key and hampered by

the steady weight on his arm, certainly felt the solemnity of the moment. It was as if the whole world—for all experience seemed at that instant concentrated in his own consciousness—were listening to the grating noise of that key. A stray puff of wind wandering down the empty street woke a momentary rustling in the trees behind them, but otherwise this rattling of the key was the only sound audible; and at last it turned in the lock and the heavy door swung open and revealed a yawning gulf of darkness beyond.

With a last glance at the moonlit square, they passed quickly in, and the door slammed behind them with a roar that echoed prodigiously through empty halls and passages. But, instantly, with the echoes, another sound made itself heard, and Aunt Julia leaned suddenly so heavily upon him that he had to take a step backwards to save himself from falling.

A man had coughed close beside them—so close that it seemed they must have been actually by his side in the darkness.

With the possibility of practical jokes in his mind, Shorthouse at once swung his heavy stick in the direction of the sound; but it met nothing more solid than air. He heard his aunt give a little gasp beside him.

"There's someone here," she whispered; "I heard him."

"Be quiet!" he said sternly. "It was nothing but the noise of the front door."

"Oh! get a light—quick!" she added, as her nephew, fumbling with a box of matches, opened it upside down and let them all fall with a rattle on to the stone floor.

The sound, however, was not repeated; and there was no evidence of retreating footsteps. In another minute they had a candle burning, using an empty end of a cigar case as a holder; and when the first flare had died down he held the impromptu lamp aloft and surveyed the scene. And it was dreary enough in all conscience, for there is nothing more desolate in all the abodes of men than an unfurnished house dimly lit, silent, and forsaken, and yet tenanted by rumour with the memories of evil and violent histories.

They were standing in a wide hall-way; on their left was the open door of a spacious dining-room, and in front the hall ran, ever narrowing, into a long, dark passage that led apparently to the top of the kitchen stairs. The broad uncarpeted staircase rose in a sweep before them, everywhere draped in shadows, except for a single spot about half-way up where the moonlight came in through the window and fell on a bright patch on the boards. This shaft of light shed a faint radiance above and below it, lending to the objects within its reach a misty outline that was infinitely more suggestive and ghostly than complete darkness. Filtered moonlight always seems to paint faces on the surrounding gloom, and as Shorthouse peered up into the well of darkness and thought of the countless empty rooms and passages in the upper part of the old house, he caught himself longing again for the safety of the moonlit square, or the cozy, bright drawing-room they had left an hour before. Then realizing that these thoughts were dangerous, he thrust them away again and summoned all his energy for concentration on the present.

"Aunt Julia," he said aloud, severely, "we must now go through the house from top to bottom and make a thorough search."

The echoes of his voice died away slowly all over the building, and in the intense silence that followed he turned to look at her. In the candle-light he saw that her face was

already ghastly pale; but she dropped his arm for a moment and said in a whisper, stepping close in front of him—

"I agree. We must be sure there's no one hiding. That's the first thing."

She spoke with evident effort, and he looked at her with admiration.

"You feel quite sure of yourself? It's not too late—"

"I think so," she whispered, her eyes shifting nervously toward the shadows behind. "Quite sure, only one thing—"

"What's that?"

"You must never leave me alone for an instant."

"As long as you understand that any sound or appearance must be investigated at once, for to hesitate means to admit fear. That is fatal."

"Agreed," she said, a little shakily, after a moment's hesitation. "I'll try—"

Arm in arm, Shorthouse holding the dripping candle and the stick, while his aunt carried the cloak over her shoulders, figures of utter comedy to all but themselves, they began a systematic search.

Stealthily, walking on tip-toe and shading the candle lest it should betray their presence through the shutterless windows, they went first into the big dining-room. There

was not a stick of furniture to be seen. Bare walls, ugly mantel-pieces and empty grates stared at them. Everything, they felt, resented their intrusion, watching them, as it were, with veiled eyes; whispers followed them; shadows flitted noiselessly to right and left; something seemed ever at their back, watching, waiting an opportunity to do them injury. There was the inevitable sense that operations which went on when the room was empty had been temporarily suspended till they were well out of the way again. The whole dark interior of the old building seemed to become a malignant Presence that rose up, warning them to desist and mind their own business; every moment the strain on the nerves increased.

Out of the gloomy dining-room they passed through large folding doors into a sort of library or smoking-room, wrapt equally in silence, darkness, and dust; and from this they regained the hall near the top of the back stairs.

Here a pitch black tunnel opened before them into the lower regions, and—it must be confessed—they hesitated. But only for a minute. With the worst of the night still to come it was essential to turn from nothing. Aunt Julia stumbled at the top step of the dark descent, ill lit by the flickering candle, and even Shorthouse felt at least half the decision go out of his legs.

"Come on!" he said peremptorily, and his voice ran on and lost itself in the dark, empty spaces below.

"I'm coming," she faltered, catching his arm with unnecessary violence.

They went a little unsteadily down the stone steps, a cold, damp air meeting them in the face, close and mal-odorous. The kitchen, into which the stairs led along a narrow passage, was large, with a lofty ceiling. Several doors

opened out of it—some into cupboards with empty jars still standing on the shelves, and others into horrible little ghostly back offices, each colder and less inviting than the last. Black beetles scurried over the floor, and once, when they knocked against a deal table standing in a corner, something about the size of a cat jumped down with a rush and fled, scampering across the stone floor into the darkness. Everywhere there was a sense of recent occupation, an impression of sadness and gloom.

Leaving the main kitchen, they next went towards the scullery. The door was standing ajar, and as they pushed it open to its full extent Aunt Julia uttered a piercing scream, which she instantly tried to stifle by placing her hand over her mouth. For a second Shorthouse stood stock-still, catching his breath. He felt as if his spine had suddenly become hollow and someone had filled it with particles of ice.

Facing them, directly in their way between the doorposts, stood the figure of a woman. She had dishevelled hair and wildly staring eyes, and her face was terrified and white as death.

She stood there motionless for the space of a single second. Then the candle flickered and she was gone—gone utterly—and the door framed nothing but empty darkness.

"Only the beastly jumping candle-light," he said quickly, in a voice that sounded like someone else's and was only half under control. "Come on, aunt. There's nothing there."

He dragged her forward. With a clattering of feet and a great appearance of boldness they went on, but over his body the skin moved as if crawling ants covered it, and he knew by the weight on his arm that he was supplying the force of locomotion for two. The scullery was cold, bare,

and empty; more like a large prison cell than anything else. They went round it, tried the door into the yard, and the windows, but found them all fastened securely. His aunt moved beside him like a person in a dream. Her eyes were tightly shut, and she seemed merely to follow the pressure of his arm. Her courage filled him with amazement. At the same time he noticed that a certain odd change had come over her face, a change which somehow evaded his power of analysis.

"There's nothing here, aunty," he repeated aloud quickly. "Let's go upstairs and see the rest of the house. Then we'll choose a room to wait up in."

She followed him obediently, keeping close to his side, and they locked the kitchen door behind them. It was a relief to get up again. In the hall there was more light than before, for the moon had travelled a little further down the stairs. Cautiously they began to go up into the dark vault of the upper house, the boards creaking under their weight.

On the first floor they found the large double drawing-rooms, a search of which revealed nothing. Here also was no sign of furniture or recent occupancy; nothing but dust and neglect and shadows. They opened the big folding doors between front and back drawing-rooms and then came out again to the landing and went on upstairs.

They had not gone up more than a dozen steps when they both simultaneously stopped to listen, looking into each other's eyes with a new apprehension across the flickering candle flame. From the room they had left hardly ten seconds before came the sound of doors quietly closing. It was beyond all question; they heard the booming noise that accompanies the shutting of heavy doors, followed by the sharp catching of the latch.

"We must go back and see," said Shorthouse briefly, in a low tone, and turning to go downstairs again.

Somehow she managed to drag after him, her feet catching in her dress, her face livid.

When they entered the front drawing-room it was plain that the folding doors had been closed—half a minute before. Without hesitation Shorthouse opened them. He almost expected to see someone facing him in the back room; but only darkness and cold air met him. They went through both rooms, finding nothing unusual. They tried in every way to make the doors close of themselves, but there was not wind enough even to set the candle flame flickering. The doors would not move without strong pressure. All was silent as the grave. Undeniably the rooms were utterly empty, and the house utterly still.

"It's beginning," whispered a voice at his elbow which he hardly recognized as his aunt's.

He nodded acquiescence, taking out his watch to note the time. It was fifteen minutes before midnight; he made the entry of exactly what had occurred in his notebook, setting the candle in its case upon the floor in order to do so. It took a moment or two to balance it safely against the wall.

Aunt Julia always declared that at this moment she was not actually watching him, but had turned her head towards the inner room, where she fancied she heard something moving; but, at any rate, both positively agreed that there came a sound of rushing feet, heavy and very swift—and the next instant the candle was out!

But to Shorthouse himself had come more than this, and he has always thanked his fortunate stars that it came to him alone and not to his aunt too. For, as he rose from the

stooping position of balancing the candle, and before it was actually extinguished, a face thrust itself forward so close to his own that he could almost have touched it with his lips. It was a face working with passion; a man's face, dark, with thick features, and angry, savage eyes. It belonged to a common man, and it was evil in its ordinary normal expression, no doubt, but as he saw it, alive with intense, aggressive emotion, it was a malignant and terrible human countenance.

There was no movement of the air; nothing but the sound of rushing feet—stockinged or muffled feet; the apparition of the face; and the almost simultaneous extinguishing of the candle.

In spite of himself, Shorthouse uttered a little cry, nearly losing his balance as his aunt clung to him with her whole weight in one moment of real, uncontrollable terror. She made no sound, but simply seized him bodily. Fortunately, however, she had seen nothing, but had only heard the rushing feet, for her control returned almost at once, and he was able to disentangle himself and strike a match.

The shadows ran away on all sides before the glare, and his aunt stooped down and groped for the cigar case with the precious candle. Then they discovered that the candle had not been *blown* out at all; it had been *crushed* out. The wick was pressed down into the wax, which was flattened as if by some smooth, heavy instrument.

How his companion so quickly overcame her terror, Shorthouse never properly understood; but his admiration for her self-control increased tenfold, and at the same time served to feed his own dying flame—for which he was undeniably grateful. Equally inexplicable to him was the evidence of physical force they had just witnessed. He at once suppressed the memory of stories he had heard of "physical mediums" and their dangerous phenomena; for

if these were true, and either his aunt or himself was unwittingly a physical medium, it meant that they were simply aiding to focus the forces of a haunted house already charged to the brim. It was like walking with unprotected lamps among uncovered stores of gunpowder.

So, with as little reflection as possible, he simply relit the candle and went up to the next floor. The arm in his trembled, it is true, and his own tread was often uncertain, but they went on with thoroughness, and after a search revealing nothing they climbed the last flight of stairs to the top floor of all.

Here they found a perfect nest of small servants' rooms, with broken pieces of furniture, dirty cane-bottomed chairs, chests of drawers, cracked mirrors, and decrepit bedsteads. The rooms had low sloping ceilings already hung here and there with cobwebs, small windows, and badly plastered walls—a depressing and dismal region which they were glad to leave behind.

It was on the stroke of midnight when they entered a small room on the third floor, close to the top of the stairs, and arranged to make themselves comfortable for the remainder of their adventure. It was absolutely bare, and was said to be the room—then used as a clothes closet—into which the infuriated groom had chased his victim and finally caught her. Outside, across the narrow landing, began the stairs leading up to the floor above, and the servants' quarters where they had just searched.

In spite of the chilliness of the night there was something in the air of this room that cried for an open window. But there was more than this. Shorthouse could only describe it by saying that he felt less master of himself here than in any other part of the house. There was something that acted directly on the nerves, tiring the resolution,

enfeebling the will. He was conscious of this result before he had been in the room five minutes, and it was in the short time they stayed there that he suffered the wholesale depletion of his vital forces, which was, for himself, the chief horror of the whole experience.

They put the candle on the floor of the cupboard, leaving the door a few inches ajar, so that there was no glare to confuse the eyes, and no shadow to shift about on walls and ceiling. Then they spread the cloak on the floor and sat down to wait, with their backs against the wall.

Shorthouse was within two feet of the door on to the landing; his position commanded a good view of the main staircase leading down into the darkness, and also of the beginning of the servants' stairs going to the floor above; the heavy stick lay beside him within easy reach.

The moon was now high above the house. Through the open window they could see the comforting stars like friendly eyes watching in the sky. One by one the clocks of the town struck midnight, and when the sounds died away the deep silence of a windless night fell again over everything. Only the boom of the sea, far away and lugubrious, filled the air with hollow murmurs.

Inside the house the silence became awful; awful, he thought, because any minute now it might be broken by sounds portending terror. The strain of waiting told more and more severely on the nerves; they talked in whispers when they talked at all, for their voices aloud sounded queer and unnatural. A chilliness, not altogether due to the night air, invaded the room, and made them cold. The influences against them, whatever these might be, were slowly robbing them of self-confidence, and the power of decisive action; their forces were on the wane, and the possibility of real fear took on a new and terrible meaning.

He began to tremble for the elderly woman by his side, whose pluck could hardly save her beyond a certain extent.

He heard the blood singing in his veins. It sometimes seemed so loud that he fancied it prevented his hearing properly certain other sounds that were beginning very faintly to make themselves audible in the depths of the house. Every time he fastened his attention on these sounds, they instantly ceased. They certainly came no nearer. Yet he could not rid himself of the idea that movement was going on somewhere in the lower regions of the house. The drawing-room floor, where the doors had been so strangely closed, seemed too near; the sounds were further off than that. He thought of the great kitchen, with the scurrying black-beetles, and of the dismal little scullery; but, somehow or other, they did not seem to come from there either. Surely they were not *outside* the house!

Then, suddenly, the truth flashed into his mind, and for the space of a minute he felt as if his blood had stopped flowing and turned to ice.

The sounds were not downstairs at all; they were *upstairs*—upstairs, somewhere among those horrid gloomy little servants' rooms with their bits of broken furniture, low ceilings, and cramped windows—upstairs where the victim had first been disturbed and stalked to her death.

And the moment he discovered where the sounds were, he began to hear them more clearly. It was the sound of feet, moving stealthily along the passage overhead, in and out among the rooms, and past the furniture.

He turned quickly to steal a glance at the motionless figure seated beside him, to note whether she had shared his

discovery. The faint candle-light coming through the crack in the cupboard door, threw her strongly-marked face into vivid relief against the white of the wall. But it was something else that made him catch his breath and stare again. An extraordinary something had come into her face and seemed to spread over her features like a mask; it smoothed out the deep lines and drew the skin everywhere a little tighter so that the wrinkles disappeared; it brought into the face—with the sole exception of the old eyes—an appearance of youth and almost of childhood.

He stared in speechless amazement—amazement that was dangerously near to horror. It was his aunt's face indeed, but it was her face of forty years ago, the vacant innocent face of a girl. He had heard stories of that strange effect of terror which could wipe a human countenance clean of other emotions, obliterating all previous expressions; but he had never realized that it could be literally true, or could mean anything so simply horrible as what he now saw. For the dreadful signature of overmastering fear was written plainly in that utter vacancy of the girlish face beside him; and when, feeling his intense gaze, she turned to look at him, he instinctively closed his eyes tightly to shut out the sight.

Yet, when he turned a minute later, his feelings well in hand, he saw to his intense relief another expression; his aunt was smiling, and though the face was deathly white, the awful veil had lifted and the normal look was returning.

"Anything wrong?" was all he could think of to say at the moment. And the answer was eloquent, coming from such a woman.

"I feel cold—and a little frightened," she whispered.

He offered to close the window, but she seized hold of him and begged him not to leave her side even for an instant.

"It's upstairs, I know," she whispered, with an odd half laugh; "but I can't possibly go up."

But Shorthouse thought otherwise, knowing that in action lay their best hope of self-control.

He took the brandy flask and poured out a glass of neat spirit, stiff enough to help anybody over anything. She swallowed it with a little shiver. His only idea now was to get out of the house before her collapse became inevitable; but this could not safely be done by turning tail and running from the enemy. Inaction was no longer possible; every minute he was growing less master of himself, and desperate, aggressive measures were imperative without further delay. Moreover, the action must be taken *towards* the enemy, not away from it; the climax, if necessary and unavoidable, would have to be faced boldly. He could do it now; but in ten minutes he might not have the force left to act for himself, much less for both!

Upstairs, the sounds were meanwhile becoming louder and closer, accompanied by occasional creaking of the boards. Someone was moving stealthily about, stumbling now and then awkwardly against the furniture.

Waiting a few moments to allow the tremendous dose of spirits to produce its effect, and knowing this would last but a short time under the circumstances, Shorthouse then quietly got on his feet, saying in a determined voice—

"Now, Aunt Julia, we'll go upstairs and find out what all this noise is about. You must come too. It's what we agreed."

He picked up his stick and went to the cupboard for the candle. A limp form rose shakily beside him breathing hard, and he heard a voice say very faintly something about being "ready to come." The woman's courage amazed him; it was so much greater than his own; and, as they advanced, holding aloft the dripping candle, some subtle force exhaled from this trembling, white-faced old woman at his side that was the true source of his inspiration. It held something really great that shamed him and gave him the support without which he would have proved far less equal to the occasion.

They crossed the dark landing, avoiding with their eyes the deep black space over the banisters. Then they began to mount the narrow staircase to meet the sounds which, minute by minute, grew louder and nearer. About half-way up the stairs Aunt Julia stumbled and Shorthouse turned to catch her by the arm, and just at that moment there came a terrific crash in the servants' corridor overhead. It was instantly followed by a shrill, agonised scream that was a cry of terror and a cry for help melted into one.

Before they could move aside, or go down a single step, someone came rushing along the passage overhead, blundering horribly, racing madly, at full speed, three steps at a time, down the very staircase where they stood. The steps were light and uncertain; but close behind them sounded the heavier tread of another person, and the staircase seemed to shake.

Shorthouse and his companion just had time to flatten themselves against the wall when the jumble of flying steps was upon them, and two persons, with the slightest possible interval between them, dashed past at full speed. It was a perfect whirlwind of sound breaking in upon the midnight silence of the empty building.

The two runners, pursuer and pursued, had passed clean through them where they stood, and already with a thud the boards below had received first one, then the other. Yet they had seen absolutely nothing—not a hand, or arm, or face, or even a shred of flying clothing.

There came a second's pause. Then the first one, the lighter of the two, obviously the pursued one, ran with uncertain footsteps into the little room which Shorthouse and his aunt had just left. The heavier one followed. There was a sound of scuffling, gasping, and smothered screaming; and then out on to the landing came the step—of a single person *treading weightily*.

A dead silence followed for the space of half a minute, and then was heard a rushing sound through the air. It was followed by a dull, crashing thud in the depths of the house below—on the stone floor of the hall.

Utter silence reigned after. Nothing moved. The flame of the candle was steady. It had been steady the whole time, and the air had been undisturbed by any movement whatsoever. Palsied with terror, Aunt Julia, without waiting for her companion, began fumbling her way downstairs; she was crying gently to herself, and when Shorthouse put his arm round her and half carried her he felt that she was trembling like a leaf. He went into the little room and picked up the cloak from the floor, and, arm in arm, walking very slowly, without speaking a word or looking once behind them, they marched down the three flights into the hall.

In the hall they saw nothing, but the whole way down the stairs they were conscious that someone followed them; step by step; when they went faster IT was left behind, and when they went more slowly IT caught them up. But never once did they look behind to see; and at each turning of the

staircase they lowered their eyes for fear of the following horror they might see upon the stairs above.

With trembling hands Shorthouse opened the front door, and they walked out into the moonlight and drew a deep breath of the cool night air blowing in from the sea.

Algernon Blackwood

A Haunted Island

The following events occurred on a small island of isolated position in a large Canadian lake, to whose cool waters the inhabitants of Montreal and Toronto flee for rest and recreation in the hot months. It is only to be regretted that events of such peculiar interest to the genuine student of the psychical should be entirely uncorroborated. Such unfortunately, however, is the case.

Our own party of nearly twenty had returned to Montreal that very day, and I was left in solitary possession for a week or two longer, in order to accomplish some important "reading" for the law which I had foolishly neglected during the summer.

It was late in September, and the big trout and maskinonge were stirring themselves in the depths of the lake, and beginning slowly to move up to the surface waters as the north winds and early frosts lowered their temperature. Already the maples were crimson and gold, and the wild laughter of the loons echoed in sheltered bays that never knew their strange cry in the summer.

With a whole island to oneself, a two-story cottage, a canoe, and only the chipmunks, and the farmer's weekly visit with eggs and bread, to disturb one, the opportunities for hard reading might be very great. It all depends!

The rest of the party had gone off with many warnings to beware of Indians, and not to stay late enough to be the victim of a frost that thinks nothing of forty below zero. After they had gone, the loneliness of the situation made itself unpleasantly felt. There were no other islands within six or seven miles, and though the mainland forests lay a couple of miles behind me, they stretched for a very great distance unbroken by any signs of human habitation. But, though the island was completely deserted and silent, the

rocks and trees that had echoed human laughter and voices almost every hour of the day for two months could not fail to retain some memories of it all; and I was not surprised to fancy I heard a shout or a cry as I passed from rock to rock, and more than once to imagine that I heard my own name called aloud.

In the cottage there were six tiny little bedrooms divided from one another by plain unvarnished partitions of pine. A wooden bedstead, a mattress, and a chair, stood in each room, but I only found two mirrors, and one of these was broken.

The boards creaked a good deal as I moved about, and the signs of occupation were so recent that I could hardly believe I was alone. I half expected to find someone left behind, still trying to crowd into a box more than it would hold. The door of one room was stiff, and refused for a moment to open, and it required very little persuasion to imagine someone was holding the handle on the inside, and that when it opened I should meet a pair of human eyes.

A thorough search of the floor led me to select as my own sleeping quarters a little room with a diminutive balcony over the verandah roof. The room was very small, but the bed was large, and had the best mattress of them all. It was situated directly over the sitting-room where I should live and do my "reading," and the miniature window looked out to the rising sun. With the exception of a narrow path which led from the front door and verandah through the trees to the boat-landing, the island was densely covered with maples, hemlocks, and cedars. The trees gathered in round the cottage so closely that the slightest wind made the branches scrape the roof and tap the wooden walls. A few moments after sunset the darkness became impenetrable, and ten yards beyond the glare of the lamps that shone through the sitting-room windows—of which

there were four—you could not see an inch before your nose, nor move a step without running up against a tree.

The rest of that day I spent moving my belongings from my tent to the sitting-room, taking stock of the contents of the larder, and chopping enough wood for the stove to last me for a week. After that, just before sunset, I went round the island a couple of times in my canoe for precaution's sake. I had never dreamed of doing this before, but when a man is alone he does things that never occur to him when he is one of a large party.

How lonely the island seemed when I landed again! The sun was down, and twilight is unknown in these northern regions. The darkness comes up at once. The canoe safely pulled up and turned over on her face, I groped my way up the little narrow pathway to the verandah. The six lamps were soon burning merrily in the front room; but in the kitchen, where I "dined," the shadows were so gloomy, and the lamplight was so inadequate, that the stars could be seen peeping through the cracks between the rafters.

I turned in early that night. Though it was calm and there was no wind, the creaking of my bedstead and the musical gurgle of the water over the rocks below were not the only sounds that reached my ears. As I lay awake, the appalling emptiness of the house grew upon me. The corridors and vacant rooms seemed to echo innumerable footsteps, shufflings, the rustle of skirts, and a constant undertone of whispering. When sleep at length overtook me, the breathings and noises, however, passed gently to mingle with the voices of my dreams.

A week passed by, and the "reading" progressed favorably. On the tenth day of my solitude, a strange thing happened. I awoke after a good night's sleep to find myself possessed with a marked repugnance for my room. The air seemed to stifle me. The more I tried to define the cause of this

dislike, the more unreasonable it appeared. There was something about the room that made me afraid. Absurd as it seems, this feeling clung to me obstinately while dressing, and more than once I caught myself shivering, and conscious of an inclination to get out of the room as quickly as possible. The more I tried to laugh it away, the more real it became; and when at last I was dressed, and went out into the passage, and downstairs into the kitchen, it was with feelings of relief, such as I might imagine would accompany one's escape from the presence of a dangerous contagious disease.

While cooking my breakfast, I carefully recalled every night spent in the room, in the hope that I might in some way connect the dislike I now felt with some disagreeable incident that had occurred in it. But the only thing I could recall was one stormy night when I suddenly awoke and heard the boards creaking so loudly in the corridor that I was convinced there were people in the house. So certain was I of this, that I had descended the stairs, gun in hand, only to find the doors and windows securely fastened, and the mice and black-beetles in sole possession of the floor. This was certainly not sufficient to account for the strength of my feelings.

The morning hours I spent in steady reading; and when I broke off in the middle of the day for a swim and luncheon, I was very much surprised, if not a little alarmed, to find that my dislike for the room had, if anything, grown stronger. Going upstairs to get a book, I experienced the most marked aversion to entering the room, and while within I was conscious all the time of an uncomfortable feeling that was half uneasiness and half apprehension. The result of it was that, instead of reading, I spent the afternoon on the water paddling and fishing, and when I got home about sundown, brought with me half a dozen delicious black bass for the supper-table and the larder.

As sleep was an important matter to me at this time, I had decided that if my aversion to the room was so strongly marked on my return as it had been before, I would move my bed down into the sitting-room, and sleep there. This was, I argued, in no sense a concession to an absurd and fanciful fear, but simply a precaution to ensure a good night's sleep. A bad night involved the loss of the next day's reading,—a loss I was not prepared to incur.

I accordingly moved my bed downstairs into a corner of the sitting-room facing the door, and was moreover uncommonly glad when the operation was completed, and the door of the bedroom closed finally upon the shadows, the silence, and the strange *fear* that shared the room with them.

The croaking stroke of the kitchen clock sounded the hour of eight as I finished washing up my few dishes, and closing the kitchen door behind me, passed into the front room. All the lamps were lit, and their reflectors, which I had polished up during the day, threw a blaze of light into the room.

Outside the night was still and warm. Not a breath of air was stirring; the waves were silent, the trees motionless, and heavy clouds hung like an oppressive curtain over the heavens. The darkness seemed to have rolled up with unusual swiftness, and not the faintest glow of color remained to show where the sun had set. There was present in the atmosphere that ominous and overwhelming silence which so often precedes the most violent storms.

I sat down to my books with my brain unusually clear, and in my heart the pleasant satisfaction of knowing that five black bass were lying in the ice-house, and that to-morrow morning the old farmer would arrive with fresh bread and eggs. I was soon absorbed in my books.

As the night wore on the silence deepened. Even the chipmunks were still; and the boards of the floors and walls ceased creaking. I read on steadily till, from the gloomy shadows of the kitchen, came the hoarse sound of the clock striking nine. How loud the strokes sounded! They were like blows of a big hammer. I closed one book and opened another, feeling that I was just warming up to my work.

This, however, did not last long. I presently found that I was reading the same paragraphs over twice, simple paragraphs that did not require such effort. Then I noticed that my mind began to wander to other things, and the effort to recall my thoughts became harder with each digression. Concentration was growing momentarily more difficult. Presently I discovered that I had turned over two pages instead of one, and had not noticed my mistake until I was well down the page. This was becoming serious. What was the disturbing influence? It could not be physical fatigue. On the contrary, my mind was unusually alert, and in a more receptive condition than usual. I made a new and determined effort to read, and for a short time succeeded in giving my whole attention to my subject. But in a very few moments again I found myself leaning back in my chair, staring vacantly into space.

Something was evidently at work in my sub-consciousness. There was something I had neglected to do. Perhaps the kitchen door and windows were not fastened. I accordingly went to see, and found that they were! The fire perhaps needed attention. I went in to see, and found that it was all right! I looked at the lamps, went upstairs into every bedroom in turn, and then went round the house, and even into the ice-house. Nothing was wrong; everything was in its place. Yet something *was* wrong! The conviction grew stronger and stronger within me.

When I at length settled down to my books again and tried to read, I became aware, for the first time, that the room

seemed growing cold. Yet the day had been oppressively warm, and evening had brought no relief. The six big lamps, moreover, gave out heat enough to warm the room pleasantly. But a chilliness, that perhaps crept up from the lake, made itself felt in the room, and caused me to get up to close the glass door opening on to the verandah.

For a brief moment I stood looking out at the shaft of light that fell from the windows and shone some little distance down the pathway, and out for a few feet into the lake.

As I looked, I saw a canoe glide into the pathway of light, and immediately crossing it, pass out of sight again into the darkness. It was perhaps a hundred feet from the shore, and it moved swiftly.

I was surprised that a canoe should pass the island at that time of night, for all the summer visitors from the other side of the lake had gone home weeks before, and the island was a long way out of any line of water traffic.

My reading from this moment did not make very good progress, for somehow the picture of that canoe, gliding so dimly and swiftly across the narrow track of light on the black waters, silhouetted itself against the background of my mind with singular vividness. It kept coming between my eyes and the printed page. The more I thought about it the more surprised I became. It was of larger build than any I had seen during the past summer months, and was more like the old Indian war canoes with the high curving bows and stern and wide beam. The more I tried to read, the less success attended my efforts; and finally I closed my books and went out on the verandah to walk up and down a bit, and shake the chilliness out of my bones.

The night was perfectly still, and as dark as imaginable. I stumbled down the path to the little landing wharf, where

the water made the very faintest of gurgling under the timbers. The sound of a big tree falling in the mainland forest, far across the lake, stirred echoes in the heavy air, like the first guns of a distant night attack. No other sound disturbed the stillness that reigned supreme.

As I stood upon the wharf in the broad splash of light that followed me from the sitting-room windows, I saw another canoe cross the pathway of uncertain light upon the water, and disappear at once into the impenetrable gloom that lay beyond. This time I saw more distinctly than before. It was like the former canoe, a big birch-bark, with high-crested bows and stern and broad beam. It was paddled by two Indians, of whom the one in the stern—the steerer—appeared to be a very large man. I could see this very plainly; and though the second canoe was much nearer the island than the first, I judged that they were both on their way home to the Government Reservation, which was situated some fifteen miles away upon the mainland.

I was wondering in my mind what could possibly bring any Indians down to this part of the lake at such an hour of the night, when a third canoe, of precisely similar build, and also occupied by two Indians, passed silently round the end of the wharf. This time the canoe was very much nearer shore, and it suddenly flashed into my mind that the three canoes were in reality one and the same, and that only one canoe was circling the island!

This was by no means a pleasant reflection, because, if it were the correct solution of the unusual appearance of the three canoes in this lonely part of the lake at so late an hour, the purpose of the two men could only reasonably be considered to be in some way connected with myself. I had never known of the Indians attempting any violence upon the settlers who shared the wild, inhospitable country with them; at the same time, it was not beyond the region of possibility to suppose. . . . But then I did not care even to think of such hideous possibilities, and my imagination

immediately sought relief in all manner of other solutions to the problem, which indeed came readily enough to my mind, but did not succeed in recommending themselves to my reason.

Meanwhile, by a sort of instinct, I stepped back out of the bright light in which I had hitherto been standing, and waited in the deep shadow of a rock to see if the canoe would again make its appearance. Here I could see, without being seen, and the precaution seemed a wise one.

After less than five minutes the canoe, as I had anticipated, made its fourth appearance. This time it was not twenty yards from the wharf, and I saw that the Indians meant to land. I recognized the two men as those who had passed before, and the steerer was certainly an immense fellow. It was unquestionably the same canoe. There could be no longer any doubt that for some purpose of their own the men had been going round and round the island for some time, waiting for an opportunity to land. I strained my eyes to follow them in the darkness, but the night had completely swallowed them up, and not even the faintest swish of the paddles reached my ears as the Indians plied their long and powerful strokes. The canoe would be round again in a few moments, and this time it was possible that the men might land. It was well to be prepared. I knew nothing of their intentions, and two to one (when the two are big Indians!) late at night on a lonely island was not exactly my idea of pleasant intercourse.

In a corner of the sitting-room, leaning up against the back wall, stood my Marlin rifle, with ten cartridges in the magazine and one lying snugly in the greased breech. There was just time to get up to the house and take up a position of defence in that corner. Without an instant's hesitation I ran up to the verandah, carefully picking my way among the trees, so as to avoid being seen in the light. Entering the room, I shut the door leading to the verandah, and as quickly as possible turned out every one

of the six lamps. To be in a room so brilliantly lighted, where my every movement could be observed from outside, while I could see nothing but impenetrable darkness at every window, was by all laws of warfare an unnecessary concession to the enemy. And this enemy, if enemy it was to be, was far too wily and dangerous to be granted any such advantages.

I stood in the corner of the room with my back against the wall, and my hand on the cold rifle-barrel. The table, covered with my books, lay between me and the door, but for the first few minutes after the lights were out the darkness was so intense that nothing could be discerned at all. Then, very gradually, the outline of the room became visible, and the framework of the windows began to shape itself dimly before my eyes.

After a few minutes the door (its upper half of glass), and the two windows that looked out upon the front verandah, became specially distinct; and I was glad that this was so, because if the Indians came up to the house I should be able to see their approach, and gather something of their plans. Nor was I mistaken, for there presently came to my ears the peculiar hollow sound of a canoe landing and being carefully dragged up over the rocks. The paddles I distinctly heard being placed underneath, and the silence that ensued thereupon I rightly interpreted to mean that the Indians were stealthily approaching the house. . . .

While it would be absurd to claim that I was not alarmed—even frightened—at the gravity of the situation and its possible outcome, I speak the whole truth when I say that I was not overwhelmingly afraid for myself. I was conscious that even at this stage of the night I was passing into a psychical condition in which my sensations seemed no longer normal. Physical fear at no time entered into the nature of my feelings; and though I kept my hand upon my rifle the greater part of the night, I was all the time conscious that its assistance could be of little avail against

the terrors that I had to face. More than once I seemed to feel most curiously that I was in no real sense a part of the proceedings, nor actually involved in them, but that I was playing the part of a spectator—a spectator, moreover, on a psychic rather than on a material plane. Many of my sensations that night were too vague for definite description and analysis, but the main feeling that will stay with me to the end of my days is the awful horror of it all, and the miserable sensation that if the strain had lasted a little longer than was actually the case my mind must inevitably have given way.

Meanwhile I stood still in my corner, and waited patiently for what was to come. The house was as still as the grave, but the inarticulate voices of the night sang in my ears, and I seemed to hear the blood running in my veins and dancing in my pulses.

If the Indians came to the back of the house, they would find the kitchen door and window securely fastened. They could not get in there without making considerable noise, which I was bound to hear. The only mode of getting in was by means of the door that faced me, and I kept my eyes glued on that door without taking them off for the smallest fraction of a second.

My sight adapted itself every minute better to the darkness. I saw the table that nearly filled the room, and left only a narrow passage on each side. I could also make out the straight backs of the wooden chairs pressed up against it, and could even distinguish my papers and inkstand lying on the white oilcloth covering. I thought of the gay faces that had gathered round that table during the summer, and I longed for the sunlight as I had never longed for it before.

Less than three feet to my left the passage-way led to the kitchen, and the stairs leading to the bedrooms above

commenced in this passage-way, but almost in the sitting-room itself. Through the windows I could see the dim motionless outlines of the trees: not a leaf stirred, not a branch moved.

A few moments of this awful silence, and then I was aware of a soft tread on the boards of the verandah, so stealthy that it seemed an impression directly on my brain rather than upon the nerves of hearing. Immediately afterwards a black figure darkened the glass door, and I perceived that a face was pressed against the upper panes. A shiver ran down my back, and my hair was conscious of a tendency to rise and stand at right angles to my head.

It was the figure of an Indian, broad-shouldered and immense; indeed, the largest figure of a man I have ever seen outside of a circus hall. By some power of light that seemed to generate itself in the brain, I saw the strong dark face with the aquiline nose and high cheek-bones flattened against the glass. The direction of the gaze I could not determine; but faint gleams of light as the big eyes rolled round and showed their whites, told me plainly that no corner of the room escaped their searching.

For what seemed fully five minutes the dark figure stood there, with the huge shoulders bent forward so as to bring the head down to the level of the glass; while behind him, though not nearly so large, the shadowy form of the other Indian swayed to and fro like a bent tree. While I waited in an agony of suspense and agitation for their next movement little currents of icy sensation ran up and down my spine and my heart seemed alternately to stop beating and then start off again with terrifying rapidity. They must have heard its thumping and the singing of the blood in my head! Moreover, I was conscious, as I felt a cold stream of perspiration trickle down my face, of a desire to scream, to shout, to bang the walls like a child, to make a noise, or do anything that would relieve the suspense and bring things to a speedy climax.

It was probably this inclination that led me to another discovery, for when I tried to bring my rifle from behind my back to raise it and have it pointed at the door ready to fire, I found that I was powerless to move. The muscles, paralysed by this strange fear, refused to obey the will. Here indeed was a terrifying complication!

~~~OOO~~~

There was a faint sound of rattling at the brass knob, and the door was pushed open a couple of inches. A pause of a few seconds, and it was pushed open still further. Without a sound of footsteps that was appreciable to my ears, the two figures glided into the room, and the man behind gently closed the door after him.

They were alone with me between the four walls. Could they see me standing there, so still and straight in my corner? Had they, perhaps, already seen me? My blood surged and sang like the roll of drums in an orchestra; and though I did my best to suppress my breathing, it sounded like the rushing of wind through a pneumatic tube.

My suspense as to the next move was soon at an end—only, however, to give place to a new and keener alarm. The men had hitherto exchanged no words and no signs, but there were general indications of a movement across the room, and whichever way they went they would have to pass round the table. If they came my way they would have to pass within six inches of my person. While I was considering this very disagreeable possibility, I perceived that the smaller Indian (smaller by comparison) suddenly raised his arm and pointed to the ceiling. The other fellow
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raised his head and followed the direction of his companion's arm. I began to understand at last. They were going upstairs, and the room directly overhead to which they pointed had been until this night my bedroom. It was the room in which I had experienced that very morning so strange a sensation of fear, and but for which I should then have been lying asleep in the narrow bed against the window.

The Indians then began to move silently around the room; they were going upstairs, and they were coming round my side of the table. So stealthy were their movements that, but for the abnormally sensitive state of the nerves, I should never have heard them. As it was, their cat-like tread was distinctly audible. Like two monstrous black cats they came round the table toward me, and for the first time I perceived that the smaller of the two dragged something along the floor behind him. As it trailed along over the floor with a soft, sweeping sound, I somehow got the impression that it was a large dead thing with outstretched wings, or a large, spreading cedar branch. Whatever it was, I was unable to see it even in outline, and I was too terrified, even had I possessed the power over my muscles, to move my neck forward in the effort to determine its nature.

Nearer and nearer they came. The leader rested a giant hand upon the table as he moved. My lips were glued together, and the air seemed to burn in my nostrils. I tried to close my eyes, so that I might not see as they passed me; but my eyelids had stiffened, and refused to obey. Would they never get by me? Sensation seemed also to have left my legs, and it was as if I were standing on mere supports of wood or stone. Worse still, I was conscious that I was losing the power of balance, the power to stand upright, or even to lean backwards against the wall. Some force was drawing me forward, and a dizzy terror seized me that I should lose my balance, and topple forward against the Indians just as they were in the act of passing me.

Even moments drawn out into hours must come to an end some time, and almost before I knew it the figures had passed me and had their feet upon the lower step of the stairs leading to the upper bedrooms. There could not have been six inches between us, and yet I was conscious only of a current of cold air that followed them. They had not touched me, and I was convinced that they had not seen me. Even the trailing thing on the floor behind them had not touched my feet, as I had dreaded it would, and on such an occasion as this I was grateful even for the smallest mercies.

The absence of the Indians from my immediate neighborhood brought little sense of relief. I stood shivering and shuddering in my corner, and, beyond being able to breathe more freely, I felt no whit less uncomfortable. Also, I was aware that a certain light, which, without apparent source or rays, had enabled me to follow their every gesture and movement, had gone out of the room with their departure. An unnatural darkness now filled the room, and pervaded its every corner so that I could barely make out the positions of the windows and the glass doors.

As I said before, my condition was evidently an abnormal one. The capacity for feeling surprise seemed, as in dreams, to be wholly absent. My senses recorded with unusual accuracy every smallest occurrence, but I was able to draw only the simplest deductions.

The Indians soon reached the top of the stairs, and there they halted for a moment. I had not the faintest clue as to their next movement. They appeared to hesitate. They were listening attentively. Then I heard one of them, who by the weight of his soft tread must have been the giant, cross the narrow corridor and enter the room directly overhead—my own little bedroom. But for the insistence of that unaccountable dread I had experienced there in the morning, I should at that very moment have been lying in

the bed with the big Indian in the room standing beside me.

For the space of a hundred seconds there was silence, such as might have existed before the birth of sound. It was followed by a long quivering shriek of terror, which rang out into the night, and ended in a short gulp before it had run its full course. At the same moment the other Indian left his place at the head of the stairs, and joined his companion in the bedroom. I heard the "thing" trailing behind him along the floor. A thud followed, as of something heavy falling, and then all became as still and silent as before.

It was at this point that the atmosphere, surcharged all day with the electricity of a fierce storm, found relief in a dancing flash of brilliant lightning simultaneously with a crash of loudest thunder. For five seconds every article in the room was visible to me with amazing distinctness, and through the windows I saw the tree trunks standing in solemn rows. The thunder pealed and echoed across the lake and among the distant islands, and the flood-gates of heaven then opened and let out their rain in streaming torrents.

The drops fell with a swift rushing sound upon the still waters of the lake, which leaped up to meet them, and pattered with the rattle of shot on the leaves of the maples and the roof of the cottage. A moment later, and another flash, even more brilliant and of longer duration than the first, lit up the sky from zenith to horizon, and bathed the room momentarily in dazzling whiteness. I could see the rain glistening on the leaves and branches outside. The wind rose suddenly, and in less than a minute the storm that had been gathering all day burst forth in its full fury.

Above all the noisy voices of the elements, the slightest sounds in the room overhead made themselves heard, and

in the few seconds of deep silence that followed the shriek of terror and pain I was aware that the movements had commenced again. The men were leaving the room and approaching the top of the stairs. A short pause, and they began to descend. Behind them, tumbling from step to step, I could hear that trailing "thing" being dragged along. It had become ponderous!

I awaited their approach with a degree of calmness, almost of apathy, which was only explicable on the ground that after a certain point Nature applies her own anæsthetic, and a merciful condition of numbness supervenes. On they came, step by step, nearer and nearer, with the shuffling sound of the burden behind growing louder as they approached.

They were already half-way down the stairs when I was galvanised afresh into a condition of terror by the consideration of a new and horrible possibility. It was the reflection that if another vivid flash of lightning were to come when the shadowy procession was in the room, perhaps when it was actually passing in front of me, I should see everything in detail, and worse, be seen myself! I could only hold my breath and wait—wait while the minutes lengthened into hours, and the procession made its slow progress round the room.

The Indians had reached the foot of the staircase. The form of the huge leader loomed in the doorway of the passage, and the burden with an ominous thud had dropped from the last step to the floor. There was a moment's pause while I saw the Indian turn and stoop to assist his companion. Then the procession moved forward again, entered the room close on my left, and began to move slowly round my side of the table. The leader was already beyond me, and his companion, dragging on the floor behind him the burden, whose confused outline I could dimly make out, was exactly in front of me, when the cavalcade came to a dead halt. At the same moment, with

the strange suddenness of thunderstorms, the splash of the rain ceased altogether, and the wind died away into utter silence.

For the space of five seconds my heart seemed to stop beating, and then the worst came. A double flash of lightning lit up the room and its contents with merciless vividness.

The huge Indian leader stood a few feet past me on my right. One leg was stretched forward in the act of taking a step. His immense shoulders were turned toward his companion, and in all their magnificent fierceness I saw the outline of his features. His gaze was directed upon the burden his companion was dragging along the floor; but his profile, with the big aquiline nose, high cheek-bone, straight black hair and bold chin, burnt itself in that brief instant into my brain, never again to fade.

Dwarfish, compared with this gigantic figure, appeared the proportions of the other Indian, who, within twelve inches of my face, was stooping over the thing he was dragging in a position that lent to his person the additional horror of deformity. And the burden, lying upon a sweeping cedar branch which he held and dragged by a long stem, was the body of a white man. The scalp had been neatly lifted, and blood lay in a broad smear upon the cheeks and forehead.

Then, for the first time that night, the terror that had paralysed my muscles and my will lifted its unholy spell from my soul. With a loud cry I stretched out my arms to seize the big Indian by the throat, and, grasping only air, tumbled forward unconscious upon the ground.

I had recognized the body, and *the face was my own!*. . . .

It was bright daylight when a man's voice recalled me to consciousness. I was lying where I had fallen, and the farmer was standing in the room with the loaves of bread in his hands. The horror of the night was still in my heart, and as the bluff settler helped me to my feet and picked up the rifle which had fallen with me, with many questions and expressions of condolence, I imagine my brief replies were neither self-explanatory nor even intelligible.

That day, after a thorough and fruitless search of the house, I left the island, and went over to spend my last ten days with the farmer; and when the time came for me to leave, the necessary reading had been accomplished, and my nerves had completely recovered their balance.

On the day of my departure the farmer started early in his big boat with my belongings to row to the point, twelve miles distant, where a little steamer ran twice a week for the accommodation of hunters. Late in the afternoon I went off in another direction in my canoe, wishing to see the island once again, where I had been the victim of so strange an experience.

In due course I arrived there, and made a tour of the island. I also made a search of the little house, and it was not without a curious sensation in my heart that I entered the little upstairs bedroom. There seemed nothing unusual.

Just after I re-embarked, I saw a canoe gliding ahead of me around the curve of the island. A canoe was an unusual sight at this time of the year, and this one seemed to have sprung from nowhere. Altering my course a little, I watched it disappear around the next projecting point of rock. It had high curving bows, and there were two Indians

in it. I lingered with some excitement, to see if it would appear again round the other side of the island; and in less than five minutes it came into view. There were less than two hundred yards between us, and the Indians, sitting on their haunches, were paddling swiftly in my direction.

I never paddled faster in my life than I did in those next few minutes. When I turned to look again, the Indians had altered their course, and were again circling the island.

The sun was sinking behind the forests on the mainland, and the crimson-colored clouds of sunset were reflected in the waters of the lake, when I looked round for the last time, and saw the big bark canoe and its two dusky occupants still going round the island. Then the shadows deepened rapidly; the lake grew black, and the night wind blew its first breath in my face as I turned a corner, and a projecting bluff of rock hid from my view both island and canoe.

Algernon Blackwood

A Case of Eavesdropping

Jim Shorthouse was the sort of fellow who always made a mess of things. Everything with which his hands or mind came into contact issued from such contact in an unqualified and irremediable state of mess. His college days were a mess: he was twice rusticated. His schooldays were a mess: he went to half a dozen, each passing him on to the next with a worse character and in a more developed state of mess. His early boyhood was the sort of mess that copy-books and dictionaries spell with a big "M," and his babyhood—ugh! was the embodiment of howling, yowling, screaming mess.

At the age of forty, however, there came a change in his troubled life, when he met a girl with half a million in her own right, who consented to marry him, and who very soon succeeded in reducing his most messy existence into a state of comparative order and system.

Certain incidents, important and otherwise, of Jim's life would never have come to be told here but for the fact that in getting into his "messes" and out of them again he succeeded in drawing himself into the atmosphere of peculiar circumstances and strange happenings. He attracted to his path the curious adventures of life as unfailingly as meat attracts flies, and jam wasps. It is to the meat and jam of his life, so to speak, that he owes his experiences; his after-life was all pudding, which attracts nothing but greedy children. With marriage the interest of his life ceased for all but one person, and his path became regular as the sun's instead of erratic as a comet's.

The first experience in order of time that he related to me shows that somewhere latent behind his disarranged nervous system there lay psychic perceptions of an uncommon order. About the age of twenty-two—I think after his second rustication—his father's purse and

patience had equally given out, and Jim found himself stranded high and dry in a large American city. High and dry! And the only clothes that had no holes in them safely in the keeping of his uncle's wardrobe.

Careful reflection on a bench in one of the city parks led him to the conclusion that the only thing to do was to persuade the city editor of one of the daily journals that he possessed an observant mind and a ready pen, and that he could "do good work for your paper, sir, as a reporter." This, then, he did, standing at a most unnatural angle between the editor and the window to conceal the whereabouts of the holes.

"Guess we'll have to give you a week's trial," said the editor, who, ever on the lookout for good chance material, took on shoals of men in that way and retained on the average one man per shoal. Anyhow it gave Jim Shorthouse the wherewithal to sew up the holes and relieve his uncle's wardrobe of its burden.

Then he went to find living quarters; and in this proceeding his unique characteristics already referred to—what theosophists would call his Karma—began unmistakably to assert themselves, for it was in the house he eventually selected that this sad tale took place.

There are no "diggings" in American cities. The alternatives for small incomes are grim enough—rooms in a boarding-house where meals are served, or in a room-house where no meals are served—not even breakfast. Rich people live in palaces, of course, but Jim had nothing to do with "sich-like." His horizon was bounded by boarding-houses and room-houses; and, owing to the necessary irregularity of his meals and hours, he took the latter.

It was a large, gaunt-looking place in a side street, with dirty windows and a creaking iron gate, but the rooms were large, and the one he selected and paid for in advance was on the top floor. The landlady looked gaunt and dusty as the house, and quite as old. Her eyes were green and faded, and her features large.

"Waal," she twanged, with her electrifying Western drawl, "that's the room, if you like it, and that's the price I said. Now, if you want it, why, just say so; and if you don't, why, it don't hurt me any."

Jim wanted to shake her, but he feared the clouds of long-accumulated dust in her clothes, and as the price and size of the room suited him, he decided to take it.

"Anyone else on this floor?" he asked.

She looked at him queerly out of her faded eyes before she answered.

"None of my guests ever put such questions to me before," she said; "but I guess you're different. Why, there's no one at all but an old gent that's stayed here every bit of five years. He's over thar," pointing to the end of the passage.

"Ah! I see," said Shorthouse feebly. "So I'm alone up here?"

"Reckon you are, pretty near," she twanged out, ending the conversation abruptly by turning her back on her new "guest," and going slowly and deliberately downstairs.

The newspaper work kept Shorthouse out most of the night. Three times a week he got home at 1 a.m., and three times at 3 a.m. The room proved comfortable enough, and he paid for a second week. His unusual hours had so far

prevented his meeting any inmates of the house, and not a sound had been heard from the "old gent" who shared the floor with him. It seemed a very quiet house.

One night, about the middle of the second week, he came home tired after a long day's work. The lamp that usually stood all night in the hall had burned itself out, and he had to stumble upstairs in the dark. He made considerable noise in doing so, but nobody seemed to be disturbed. The whole house was utterly quiet, and probably everybody was asleep. There were no lights under any of the doors. All was in darkness. It was after two o'clock.

After reading some English letters that had come during the day, and dipping for a few minutes into a book, he became drowsy and got ready for bed. Just as he was about to get in between the sheets, he stopped for a moment and listened. There rose in the night, as he did so, the sound of steps somewhere in the house below. Listening attentively, he heard that it was somebody coming upstairs—a heavy tread, and the owner taking no pains to step quietly. On it came up the stairs, tramp, tramp, tramp—evidently the tread of a big man, and one in something of a hurry.

At once thoughts connected somehow with fire and police flashed through Jim's brain, but there were no sounds of voices with the steps, and he reflected in the same moment that it could only be the old gentleman keeping late hours and tumbling upstairs in the darkness. He was in the act of turning out the gas and stepping into bed, when the house resumed its former stillness by the footsteps suddenly coming to a dead stop immediately outside his own room.

With his hand on the gas, Shorthouse paused a moment before turning it out to see if the steps would go on again, when he was startled by a loud knocking on his door. Instantly, in obedience to a curious and unexplained

instinct, he turned out the light, leaving himself and the room in total darkness.

He had scarcely taken a step across the room to open the door, when a voice from the other side of the wall, so close it almost sounded in his ear, exclaimed in German, "Is that you, father? Come in."

The speaker was a man in the next room, and the knocking, after all, had not been on his own door, but on that of the adjoining chamber, which he had supposed to be vacant.

Almost before the man in the passage had time to answer in German, "Let me in at once," Jim heard someone cross the floor and unlock the door. Then it was slammed to with a bang, and there was audible the sound of footsteps about the room, and of chairs being drawn up to a table and knocking against furniture on the way. The men seemed wholly regardless of their neighbor's comfort, for they made noise enough to waken the dead.

"Serves me right for taking a room in such a cheap hole," reflected Jim in the darkness. "I wonder whom she's let the room to!"

The two rooms, the landlady had told him, were originally one. She had put up a thin partition—just a row of boards—to increase her income. The doors were adjacent, and only separated by the massive upright beam between them. When one was opened or shut the other rattled.

With utter indifference to the comfort of the other sleepers in the house, the two Germans had meanwhile commenced to talk both at once and at the top of their voices. They talked emphatically, even angrily. The words "Father" and "Otto" were freely used. Shorthouse understood German,

but as he stood listening for the first minute or two, an eavesdropper in spite of himself, it was difficult to make head or tail of the talk, for neither would give way to the other, and the jumble of guttural sounds and unfinished sentences was wholly unintelligible. Then, very suddenly, both voices dropped together; and, after a moment's pause, the deep tones of one of them, who seemed to be the "father," said, with the utmost distinctness—

"You mean, Otto, that you refuse to get it?"

There was a sound of someone shuffling in the chair before the answer came. "I mean that I don't know how to get it. It is so much, father. It is *too* much. A part of it—"

"A part of it!" cried the other, with an angry oath, "a part of it, when ruin and disgrace are already in the house, is worse than useless. If you can get half you can get all, you wretched fool. Half-measures only damn all concerned."

"You told me last time—" began the other firmly, but was not allowed to finish. A succession of horrible oaths drowned his sentence, and the father went on, in a voice vibrating with anger—

"You know she will give you anything. You have only been married a few months. If you ask and give a plausible reason you can get all we want and more. You can ask it temporarily. All will be paid back. It will re-establish the firm, and she will never know what was done with it. With that amount, Otto, you know I can recoup all these terrible losses, and in less than a year all will be repaid. But without it. . . . You must get it, Otto. Hear me, you must. Am I to be arrested for the misuse of trust moneys? Is our honored name to be cursed and spat on?" The old man choked and stammered in his anger and desperation.

Shorthouse stood shivering in the darkness and listening in spite of himself. The conversation had carried him along with it, and he had been for some reason afraid to let his neighborhood be known. But at this point he realized that he had listened too long and that he must inform the two men that they could be overheard to every single syllable. So he coughed loudly, and at the same time rattled the handle of his door. It seemed to have no effect, for the voices continued just as loudly as before, the son protesting and the father growing more and more angry. He coughed again persistently, and also contrived purposely in the darkness to tumble against the partition, feeling the thin boards yield easily under his weight, and making a considerable noise in so doing. But the voices went on unconcernedly, and louder than ever. Could it be possible they had not heard?

By this time Jim was more concerned about his own sleep than the morality of overhearing the private scandals of his neighbors, and he went out into the passage and knocked smartly at their door. Instantly, as if by magic, the sounds ceased. Everything dropped into utter silence. There was no light under the door and not a whisper could be heard within. He knocked again, but received no answer.

"Gentlemen," he began at length, with his lips close to the keyhole and in German, "please do not talk so loud. I can overhear all you say in the next room. Besides, it is very late, and I wish to sleep."

He paused and listened, but no answer was forthcoming. He turned the handle and found the door was locked. Not a sound broke the stillness of the night except the faint swish of the wind over the skylight and the creaking of a board here and there in the house below. The cold air of a very early morning crept down the passage, and made him shiver. The silence of the house began to impress him disagreeably. He looked behind him and about him, hoping, and yet fearing, that something would break the

stillness. The voices still seemed to ring on in his ears; but that sudden silence, when he knocked at the door, affected him far more unpleasantly than the voices, and put strange thoughts in his brain—thoughts he did not like or approve.

Moving stealthily from the door, he peered over the banisters into the space below. It was like a deep vault that might conceal in its shadows anything that was not good. It was not difficult to fancy he saw an indistinct moving to-and-fro below him. Was that a figure sitting on the stairs peering up obliquely at him out of hideous eyes? Was that a sound of whispering and shuffling down there in the dark halls and forsaken landings? Was it something more than the inarticulate murmur of the night?

The wind made an effort overhead, singing over the skylight, and the door behind him rattled and made him start. He turned to go back to his room, and the draught closed the door slowly in his face as if there were someone pressing against it from the other side. When he pushed it open and went in, a hundred shadowy forms seemed to dart swiftly and silently back to their corners and hiding-places. But in the adjoining room the sounds had entirely ceased, and Shorthouse soon crept into bed, and left the house with its inmates, waking or sleeping, to take care of themselves, while he entered the region of dreams and silence.

Next day, strong in the common sense that the sunlight brings, he determined to lodge a complaint against the noisy occupants of the next room and make the landlady request them to modify their voices at such late hours of the night and morning. But it so happened that she was not to be seen that day, and when he returned from the office at midnight it was, of course, too late.

Looking under the door as he came up to bed he noticed that there was no light, and concluded that the Germans

were not in. So much the better. He went to sleep about one o'clock, fully decided that if they came up later and woke him with their horrible noises he would not rest till he had roused the landlady and made her reprove them with that authoritative twang, in which every word was like the lash of a metallic whip.

However, there proved to be no need for such drastic measures, for Shorthouse slumbered peacefully all night, and his dreams—chiefly of the fields of grain and flocks of sheep on the far-away farms of his father's estate—were permitted to run their fanciful course unbroken.

Two nights later, however, when he came home tired out, after a difficult day, and wet and blown about by one of the wickedest storms he had ever seen, his dreams—always of the fields and sheep—were not destined to be so undisturbed.

He had already dozed off in that delicious glow that follows the removal of wet clothes and the immediate snuggling under warm blankets, when his consciousness, hovering on the borderland between sleep and waking, was vaguely troubled by a sound that rose indistinctly from the depths of the house, and, between the gusts of wind and rain, reached his ears with an accompanying sense of uneasiness and discomfort. It rose on the night air with some pretence of regularity, dying away again in the roar of the wind to reassert itself distantly in the deep, brief hushes of the storm.

For a few minutes Jim's dreams were colored only—tinged, as it were, by this impression of fear approaching from somewhere insensibly upon him. His consciousness, at first, refused to be drawn back from that enchanted region where it had wandered, and he did not immediately awaken. But the nature of his dreams changed unpleasantly. He saw the sheep suddenly run huddled

together, as though frightened by the neighborhood of an enemy, while the fields of waving corn became agitated as though some monster were moving uncouthly among the crowded stalks. The sky grew dark, and in his dream an awful sound came somewhere from the clouds. It was in reality the sound downstairs growing more distinct.

Shorthouse shifted uneasily across the bed with something like a groan of distress. The next minute he awoke, and found himself sitting straight up in bed—listening. Was it a nightmare? Had he been dreaming evil dreams, that his flesh crawled and the hair stirred on his head?

The room was dark and silent, but outside the wind howled dismally and drove the rain with repeated assaults against the rattling windows. How nice it would be—the thought flashed through his mind—if all winds, like the west wind, went down with the sun! They made such fiendish noises at night, like the crying of angry voices. In the daytime they had such a different sound. If only——

Hark! It was no dream after all, for the sound was momentarily growing louder, and its *cause* was coming up the stairs. He found himself speculating feebly what this cause might be, but the sound was still too indistinct to enable him to arrive at any definite conclusion.

The voice of a church clock striking two made itself heard above the wind. It was just about the hour when the Germans had commenced their performance three nights before. Shorthouse made up his mind that if they began it again he would not put up with it for very long. Yet he was already horribly conscious of the difficulty he would have of getting out of bed. The clothes were so warm and comforting against his back. The sound, still steadily coming nearer, had by this time become differentiated from the confused clamour of the elements, and had resolved itself into the footsteps of one or more persons.

"The Germans, hang 'em!" thought Jim. "But what on earth is the matter with me? I never felt so queer in all my life."

He was trembling all over, and felt as cold as though he were in a freezing atmosphere. His nerves were steady enough, and he felt no diminution of physical courage, but he was conscious of a curious sense of malaise and trepidation, such as even the most vigorous men have been known to experience when in the first grip of some horrible and deadly disease. As the footsteps approached this feeling of weakness increased. He felt a strange lassitude creeping over him, a sort of exhaustion, accompanied by a growing numbness in the extremities, and a sensation of dreaminess in the head, as if perhaps the consciousness were leaving its accustomed seat in the brain and preparing to act on another plane. Yet, strange to say, as the vitality was slowly withdrawn from his body, his senses seemed to grow more acute.

Meanwhile the steps were already on the landing at the top of the stairs, and Shorthouse, still sitting upright in bed, heard a heavy body brush past his door and along the wall outside, almost immediately afterwards the loud knocking of someone's knuckles on the door of the adjoining room.

Instantly, though so far not a sound had proceeded from within, he heard, through the thin partition, a chair pushed back and a man quickly cross the floor and open the door.

"Ah! it's you," he heard in the son's voice. Had the fellow, then, been sitting silently in there all this time, waiting for his father's arrival? To Shorthouse it came not as a pleasant reflection by any means.

There was no answer to this dubious greeting, but the door was closed quickly, and then there was a sound as if a bag

or parcel had been thrown on a wooden table and had slid some distance across it before stopping.

"What's that?" asked the son, with anxiety in his tone.

"You may know before I go," returned the other gruffly. Indeed his voice was more than gruff: it betrayed ill-suppressed passion.

Shorthouse was conscious of a strong desire to stop the conversation before it proceeded any further, but somehow or other his will was not equal to the task, and he could not get out of bed. The conversation went on, every tone and inflexion distinctly audible above the noise of the storm.

In a low voice the father continued. Jim missed some of the words at the beginning of the sentence. It ended with: " . . . but now they've all left, and I've managed to get up to you. You know what I've come for." There was distinct menace in his tone.

"Yes," returned the other; "I have been waiting."

"And the money?" asked the father impatiently.

No answer.

"You've had three days to get it in, and I've contrived to stave off the worst so far—but to-morrow is the end."

No answer.

"Speak, Otto! What have you got for me? Speak, my son; for God's sake, tell me."

There was a moment's silence, during which the old man's vibrating accents seemed to echo through the rooms. Then came in a low voice the answer—

"I have nothing."

"Otto!" cried the other with passion, "nothing!"

"I can get nothing," came almost in a whisper.

"You lie!" cried the other, in a half-stifled voice. "I swear you lie. Give me the money."

A chair was heard scraping along the floor. Evidently the men had been sitting over the table, and one of them had risen. Shorthouse heard the bag or parcel drawn across the table, and then a step as if one of the men was crossing to the door.

"Father, what's in that? I must know," said Otto, with the first signs of determination in his voice. There must have been an effort on the son's part to gain possession of the parcel in question, and on the father's to retain it, for between them it fell to the ground. A curious rattle followed its contact with the floor. Instantly there were sounds of a scuffle. The men were struggling for the possession of the box. The elder man with oaths, and blasphemous imprecations, the other with short gasps that betokened the strength of his efforts. It was of short duration, and the younger man had evidently won, for a minute later was heard his angry exclamation.

"I knew it. Her jewels! You scoundrel, you shall never have them. It is a crime."

The elder man uttered a short, guttural laugh, which froze Jim's blood and made his skin creep. No word was spoken, and for the space of ten seconds there was a living silence. Then the air trembled with the sound of a thud, followed immediately by a groan and the crash of a heavy body falling over on to the table. A second later there was a lurching from the table on to the floor and against the partition that separated the rooms. The bed quivered an instant at the shock, but the unholy spell was lifted from his soul and Jim Shorthouse sprang out of bed and across the floor in a single bound. He knew that ghastly murder had been done—the murder by a father of his son.

With shaking fingers but a determined heart he lit the gas, and the first thing in which his eyes corroborated the evidence of his ears was the horrifying detail that the lower portion of the partition bulged unnaturally into his own room. The glaring paper with which it was covered had cracked under the tension and the boards beneath it bent inwards towards him. What hideous load was behind them, he shuddered to think.

All this he saw in less than a second. Since the final lurch against the wall not a sound had proceeded from the room, not even a groan or a foot-step. All was still but the howl of the wind, which to his ears had in it a note of triumphant horror.

Shorthouse was in the act of leaving the room to rouse the house and send for the police—in fact his hand was already on the door-knob—when something in the room arrested his attention. Out of the corner of his eyes he thought he caught sight of something moving. He was sure of it, and turning his eyes in the direction, he found he was not mistaken.

Something was creeping slowly towards him along the floor. It was something dark and serpentine in shape, and

it came from the place where the partition bulged. He stooped down to examine it with feelings of intense horror and repugnance, and he discovered that it was moving toward him from the *other side* of the wall. His eyes were fascinated, and for the moment he was unable to move. Silently, slowly, from side to side like a thick worm, it crawled forward into the room beneath his frightened eyes, until at length he could stand it no longer and stretched out his arm to touch it. But at the instant of contact he withdrew his hand with a suppressed scream. It was sluggish—and it was warm! and he saw that his fingers were stained with living crimson.

A second more, and Shorthouse was out in the passage with his hand on the door of the next room. It was locked. He plunged forward with all his weight against it, and, the lock giving way, he fell headlong into a room that was pitch dark and very cold. In a moment he was on his feet again and trying to penetrate the blackness. Not a sound, not a movement. Not even the sense of a presence. It was empty, miserably empty!

Across the room he could trace the outline of a window with rain streaming down the outside, and the blurred lights of the city beyond. But the room was empty, appallingly empty; and so still. He stood there, cold as ice, staring, shivering listening. Suddenly there was a step behind him and a light flashed into the room, and when he turned quickly with his arm up as if to ward off a terrific blow he found himself face to face with the landlady. Instantly the reaction began to set in.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning, and he was standing there with bare feet and striped pyjamas in a small room, which in the merciful light he perceived to be absolutely empty, carpetless, and without a stick of furniture, or even a window-blind. There he stood staring at the disagreeable landlady. And there she stood too, staring and silent, in a black wrapper, her head almost

bald, her face white as chalk, shading a sputtering candle with one bony hand and peering over it at him with her blinking green eyes. She looked positively hideous.

"Waal?" she drawled at length, "I heard yer right enough. Guess you couldn't sleep! Or just prowlin' round a bit—is that it?"

The empty room, the absence of all traces of the recent tragedy, the silence, the hour, his striped pyjamas and bare feet—everything together combined to deprive him momentarily of speech. He stared at her blankly without a word.

"Waal?" clanked the awful voice.

"My dear woman," he burst out finally, "there's been something awful—" So far his desperation took him, but no farther. He positively stuck at the substantive.

"Oh! there hasn't been nothin'," she said slowly still peering at him. "I reckon you've only seen and heard what the others did. I never can keep folks on this floor long. Most of 'em catch on sooner or later—that is, the ones that's kind of quick and sensitive. Only you being an Englishman I thought you wouldn't mind. Nothin' really happens; it's only thinkin' like."

Shorthouse was beside himself. He felt ready to pick her up and drop her over the banisters, candle and all.

"Look there," he said, pointing at her within an inch of her blinking eyes with the fingers that had touched the oozing blood; "look there, my good woman. Is that only thinking?"

She stared a minute, as if not knowing what he meant.

"I guess so," she said at length.

He followed her eyes, and to his amazement saw that his fingers were as white as usual, and quite free from the awful stain that had been there ten minutes before. There was no sign of blood. No amount of staring could bring it back. Had he gone out of his mind? Had his eyes and ears played such tricks with him? Had his senses become false and perverted? He dashed past the landlady, out into the passage, and gained his own room in a couple of strides. Whew! . . . the partition no longer bulged. The paper was not torn. There was no creeping, crawling thing on the faded old carpet.

"It's all over now," drawled the metallic voice behind him. "I'm going to bed again."

He turned and saw the landlady slowly going downstairs again, still shading the candle with her hand and peering up at him from time to time as she moved. A black, ugly, unwholesome object, he thought, as she disappeared into the darkness below, and the last flicker of her candle threw a queer-shaped shadow along the wall and over the ceiling.

Without hesitating a moment, Shorthouse threw himself into his clothes and went out of the house. He preferred the storm to the horrors of that top floor, and he walked the streets till daylight. In the evening he told the landlady he would leave next day, in spite of her assurances that nothing more would happen.

"It never comes back," she said—"that is, not after he's killed."

Shorthouse gasped.

"You gave me a lot for my money," he growled.

"Waal, it aren't my show," she drawled. "I'm no spirit medium. You take chances. Some'll sleep right along and never hear nothin'. Others, like yourself, are different and get the whole thing."

"Who's the old gentleman?—does he hear it?" asked Jim.

"There's no old gentleman at all," she answered coolly. "I just told you that to make you feel easy like in case you did hear anythin'. You were all alone on the floor."

"Say now," she went on, after a pause in which Shorthouse could think of nothing to say but unpublishable things, "say now, do tell, did you feel sort of cold when the show was on, sort of tired and weak, I mean, as if you might be going to die?"

"How can I say?" he answered savagely; "what I felt God only knows."

"Waal, but He won't tell," she drawled out. "Only I was wonderin' how you really did feel, because the man who had that room last was found one morning in bed—"

"In bed?"

"He was dead. He was the one before you. Oh! You don't need to get rattled so. You're all right. And it all really happened, they do say. This house used to be a private residence some twenty-five years ago, and a German family of the name of Steinhardt lived here. They had a big business in Wall Street, and stood 'way up in things."

"Ah!" said her listener.

"Oh yes, they did, right at the top, till one fine day it all bust and the old man skipped with the boodle—"

"Skipped with the boodle?"

"That's so," she said; "got clear away with all the money, and the son was found dead in his house, committed soocide it was thought. Though there was some as said he couldn't have stabbed himself and fallen in that position. They said he was murdered. The father died in prison. They tried to fasten the murder on him, but there was no motive, or no evidence, or no somethin'. I forget now."

"Very pretty," said Shorthouse.

"I'll show you somethin' mighty queer any-ways," she drawled, "if you'll come upstairs a minute. I've heard the steps and voices lots of times; they don't pheaze me any. I'd just as lief hear so many dogs barkin'. You'll find the whole story in the newspapers if you look it up—not what goes on here, but the story of the Germans. My house would be ruined if they told all, and I'd sue for damages."

They reached the bedroom, and the woman went in and pulled up the edge of the carpet where Shorthouse had seen the blood soaking in the previous night.

"Look thar, if you feel like it," said the old hag. Stooping down, he saw a dark, dull stain in the boards that corresponded exactly to the shape and position of the blood as he had seen it.

That night he slept in a hotel, and the following day sought new quarters. In the newspapers on file in his office after a

long search he found twenty years back the detailed story, substantially as the woman had said, of Steinhardt & Co.'s failure, the absconding and subsequent arrest of the senior partner, and the suicide, or murder, of his son Otto. The landlady's room-house had formerly been their private residence.

Algernon Blackwood

Keeping His Promise

It was eleven o'clock at night, and young Marriott was locked into his room, cramming as hard as he could cram. He was a "Fourth Year Man" at Edinburgh University and he had been ploughed for this particular examination so often that his parents had positively declared they could no longer supply the funds to keep him there.

His rooms were cheap and dingy, but it was the lecture fees that took the money. So Marriott pulled himself together at last and definitely made up his mind that he would pass or die in the attempt, and for some weeks now he had been reading as hard as mortal man can read. He was trying to make up for lost time and money in a way that showed conclusively he did not understand the value of either. For no ordinary man—and Marriott was in every sense an ordinary man—can afford to drive the mind as he had lately been driving his, without sooner or later paying the cost.

Among the students he had few friends or acquaintances, and these few had promised not to disturb him at night, knowing he was at last reading in earnest. It was, therefore, with feelings a good deal stronger than mere surprise that he heard his door-bell ring on this particular night and realized that he was to have a visitor. Some men would simply have muffled the bell and gone on quietly with their work. But Marriott was not this sort. He was nervous. It would have bothered and pecked at his mind all night long not to know who the visitor was and what he wanted. The only thing to do, therefore, was to let him in—and out again—as quickly as possible.

The landlady went to bed at ten o'clock punctually, after which hour nothing would induce her to pretend she heard the bell, so Marriott jumped up from his books with an

exclamation that augured ill for the reception of his caller, and prepared to let him in with his own hand.

The streets of Edinburgh town were very still at this late hour—it was late for Edinburgh—and in the quiet neighborhood of F—— Street, where Marriott lived on the third floor, scarcely a sound broke the silence. As he crossed the floor, the bell rang a second time, with unnecessary clamor, and he unlocked the door and passed into the little hallway with considerable wrath and annoyance in his heart at the insolence of the double interruption.

"The fellows all know I'm reading for this exam. Why in the world do they come to bother me at such an unearthly hour?"

The inhabitants of the building, with himself, were medical students, general students, poor Writers to the Signet, and some others whose vocations were perhaps not so obvious. The stone staircase, dimly lighted at each floor by a gas-jet that would not turn above a certain height, wound down to the level of the street with no presence at carpet or railing. At some levels it was cleaner than at others. It depended on the landlady of the particular level.

The acoustic properties of a spiral staircase seem to be peculiar. Marriott, standing by the open door, book in hand, thought every moment the owner of the footsteps would come into view. The sound of the boots was so close and so loud that they seemed to travel disproportionately in advance of their cause. Wondering who it could be, he stood ready with all manner of sharp greetings for the man who dared thus to disturb his work. But the man did not appear. The steps sounded almost under his nose, yet no one was visible.

A sudden queer sensation of fear passed over him—a faintness and a shiver down the back. It went, however, almost as soon as it came, and he was just debating whether he would call aloud to his invisible visitor, or slam the door and return to his books, when the cause of the disturbance turned the corner very slowly and came into view.

It was a stranger. He saw a youngish man short of figure and very broad. His face was the color of a piece of chalk and the eyes, which were very bright, had heavy lines underneath them. Though the cheeks and chin were unshaven and the general appearance unkempt, the man was evidently a gentleman, for he was well dressed and bore himself with a certain air. But, strangest of all, he wore no hat, and carried none in his hand; and although rain had been falling steadily all the evening, he appeared to have neither overcoat nor umbrella.

A hundred questions sprang up in Marriott's mind and rushed to his lips, chief among which was something like "Who in the world are you?" and "What in the name of heaven do you come to me for?" But none of these questions found time to express themselves in words, for almost at once the caller turned his head a little so that the gas light in the hall fell upon his features from a new angle. Then in a flash Marriott recognized him.

"Field! Man alive! Is it you?" he gasped.

The Fourth Year Man was not lacking in intuition, and he perceived at once that here was a case for delicate treatment. He divined, without any actual process of thought, that the catastrophe often predicted had come at last, and that this man's father had turned him out of the house. They had been at a private school together years before, and though they had hardly met once since, the news had not failed to reach him from time to time with

considerable detail, for the family lived near his own and between certain of the sisters there was great intimacy. Young Field had gone wild later, he remembered hearing about it all—drink, a woman, opium, or something of the sort—he could not exactly call to mind.

"Come in," he said at once, his anger vanishing. "There's been something wrong, I can see. Come in, and tell me all about it and perhaps I can help—" He hardly knew what to say, and stammered a lot more besides. The dark side of life, and the horror of it, belonged to a world that lay remote from his own select little atmosphere of books and dreamings. But he had a man's heart for all that.

He led the way across the hall, shutting the front door carefully behind him, and noticed as he did so that the other, though certainly sober, was unsteady on his legs, and evidently much exhausted. Marriott might not be able to pass his examinations, but he at least knew the symptoms of starvation—acute starvation, unless he was much mistaken—when they stared him in the face.

"Come along," he said cheerfully, and with genuine sympathy in his voice. "I'm glad to see you. I was going to have a bite of something to eat, and you're just in time to join me."

The other made no audible reply, and shuffled so feebly with his feet that Marriott took his arm by way of support. He noticed for the first time that the clothes hung on him with pitiful looseness. The broad frame was literally hardly more than a frame. He was as thin as a skeleton. But, as he touched him, the sensation of faintness and dread returned. It only lasted a moment, and then passed off, and he ascribed it not unnaturally to the distress and shock of seeing a former friend in such a pitiful plight.

"Better let me guide you. It's shamefully dark—this hall. I'm always complaining," he said lightly, recognising by the weight upon his arm that the guidance was sorely needed, "but the old cat never does anything except promise." He led him to the sofa, wondering all the time where he had come from and how he had found out the address. It must be at least seven years since those days at the private school when they used to be such close friends.

"Now, if you'll forgive me for a minute," he said, "I'll get supper ready—such as it is. And don't bother to talk. Just take it easy on the sofa. I see you're dead tired. You can tell me about it afterwards, and we'll make plans."

The other sat down on the edge of the sofa and stared in silence, while Marriott got out the brown loaf, scones, and huge pot of marmalade that Edinburgh students always keep in their cupboards. His eyes shone with a brightness that suggested drugs, Marriott thought, stealing a glance at him from behind the cupboard door. He did not like yet to take a full square look. The fellow was in a bad way, and it would have been so like an examination to stare and wait for explanations. Besides, he was evidently almost too exhausted to speak. So, for reasons of delicacy—and for another reason as well which he could not exactly formulate to himself—he let his visitor rest apparently unnoticed, while he busied himself with the supper. He lit the spirit lamp to make cocoa, and when the water was boiling he drew up the table with the good things to the sofa, so that Field need not have even the trouble of moving to a chair.

"Now, let's tuck in," he said, "and afterwards we'll have a pipe and a chat. I'm reading for an exam, you know, and I always have something about this time. It's jolly to have a companion."

He looked up and caught his guest's eyes directed straight upon his own. An involuntary shudder ran through him from head to foot. The face opposite him was deadly white and wore a dreadful expression of pain and mental suffering.

"By Gad!" he said, jumping up, "I quite forgot. I've got some whisky somewhere. What an ass I am. I never touch it myself when I'm working like this."

He went to the cupboard and poured out a stiff glass which the other swallowed at a single gulp and without any water. Marriott watched him while he drank it, and at the same time noticed something else as well—Field's coat was all over dust, and on one shoulder was a bit of cobweb. It was perfectly dry; Field arrived on a soaking wet night without hat, umbrella, or overcoat, and yet perfectly dry, even dusty. Therefore he had been under cover. What did it all mean? Had he been hiding in the building? . . .

It was very strange. Yet he volunteered nothing; and Marriott had pretty well made up his mind by this time that he would not ask any questions until he had eaten and slept. Food and sleep were obviously what the poor devil needed most and first—he was pleased with his powers of ready diagnosis—and it would not be fair to press him till he had recovered a bit.

They ate their supper together while the host carried on a running one-sided conversation, chiefly about himself and his exams and his "old cat" of a landlady, so that the guest need not utter a single word unless he really wished to—which he evidently did not! But, while he toyed with his food, feeling no desire to eat, the other ate voraciously. To see a hungry man devour cold scones, stale oatcake, and brown bread laden with marmalade was a revelation to this inexperienced student who had never known what it was to be without at least three meals a day. He watched in

spite of himself, wondering why the fellow did not choke in the process.

But Field seemed to be as sleepy as he was hungry. More than once his head dropped and he ceased to masticate the food in his mouth. Marriott had positively to shake him before he would go on with his meal. A stronger emotion will overcome a weaker, but this struggle between the sting of real hunger and the magical opiate of overpowering sleep was a curious sight to the student, who watched it with mingled astonishment and alarm. He had heard of the pleasure it was to feed hungry men, and watch them eat, but he had never actually witnessed it, and he had no idea it was like this. Field ate like an animal—gobbled, stuffed, gorged. Marriott forgot his reading, and began to feel something very much like a lump in his throat.

"Afraid there's been awfully little to offer you, old man," he managed to blurt out when at length the last scone had disappeared, and the rapid, one-sided meal was at an end. Field still made no reply, for he was almost asleep in his seat. He merely looked up wearily and gratefully.

"Now you must have some sleep, you know," he continued, "or you'll go to pieces. I shall be up all night reading for this blessed exam. You're more than welcome to my bed. To-morrow we'll have a late breakfast and—and see what can be done—and make plans—I'm awfully good at making plans, you know," he added with an attempt at lightness.

Field maintained his "dead sleepy" silence, but appeared to acquiesce, and the other led the way into the bedroom, apologising as he did so to this half-starved son of a baronet—whose own home was almost a palace—for the size of the room. The weary guest, however, made no pretence of thanks or politeness. He merely steadied himself on his friend's arm as he staggered across the room, and then, with all his clothes on, dropped his

exhausted body on the bed. In less than a minute he was to all appearances sound asleep.

For several minutes Marriott stood in the open door and watched him; praying devoutly that he might never find himself in a like predicament, and then fell to wondering what he would do with his unbidden guest on the morrow. But he did not stop long to think, for the call of his books was imperative, and happen what might, he must see to it that he passed that examination.

Having again locked the door into the hall, he sat down to his books and resumed his notes on *materia medica* where he had left off when the bell rang. But it was difficult for some time to concentrate his mind on the subject. His thoughts kept wandering to the picture of that white-faced, strange-eyed fellow, starved and dirty, lying in his clothes and boots on the bed. He recalled their schooldays together before they had drifted apart, and how they had vowed eternal friendship—and all the rest of it. And now! What horrible straits to be in. How could any man let the love of dissipation take such hold upon him?

But one of their vows together Marriott, it seemed, had completely forgotten. Just now, at any rate, it lay too far in the background of his memory to be recalled.

Through the half-open door—the bedroom led out of the sitting-room and had no other door—came the sound of deep, long-drawn breathing, the regular, steady breathing of a tired man, so tired that, even to listen to it made Marriott almost want to go to sleep himself.

"He needed it," reflected the student, "and perhaps it came only just in time!"

Perhaps so; for outside the bitter wind from across the Forth howled cruelly and drove the rain in cold streams against the window-panes, and down the deserted streets. Long before Marriott settled down again properly to his reading, he heard distantly, as it were, through the sentences of the book, the heavy, deep breathing of the sleeper in the next room.

A couple of hours later, when he yawned and changed his books, he still heard the breathing, and went cautiously up to the door to look round.

At first the darkness of the room must have deceived him, or else his eyes were confused and dazzled by the recent glare of the reading lamp. For a minute or two he could make out nothing at all but dark lumps of furniture, the mass of the chest of drawers by the wall, and the white patch where his bath stood in the centre of the floor.

Then the bed came slowly into view. And on it he saw the outline of the sleeping body gradually take shape before his eyes, growing up strangely into the darkness, till it stood out in marked relief—the long black form against the white counterpane.

He could hardly help smiling. Field had not moved an inch. He watched him a moment or two and then returned to his books. The night was full of the singing voices of the wind and rain. There was no sound of traffic; no hansoms clattered over the cobbles, and it was still too early for the milk carts. He worked on steadily and conscientiously, only stopping now and again to change a book, or to sip some of the poisonous stuff that kept him awake and made his brain so active, and on these occasions Field's breathing was always distinctly audible in the room. Outside, the storm continued to howl, but inside the house all was stillness. The shade of the reading lamp threw all the light upon the littered table, leaving the other end of

the room in comparative darkness. The bedroom door was exactly opposite him where he sat. There was nothing to disturb the worker, nothing but an occasional rush of wind against the windows, and a slight pain in his arm.

This pain, however, which he was unable to account for, grew once or twice very acute. It bothered him; and he tried to remember how, and when, he could have bruised himself so severely, but without success.

At length the page before him turned from yellow to grey, and there were sounds of wheels in the street below. It was four o'clock. Marriott leaned back and yawned prodigiously. Then he drew back the curtains. The storm had subsided and the Castle Rock was shrouded in mist. With another yawn he turned away from the dreary outlook and prepared to sleep the remaining four hours till breakfast on the sofa. Field was still breathing heavily in the next room, and he first tip-toed across the floor to take another look at him.

Peering cautiously round the half-opened door his first glance fell upon the bed now plainly discernible in the grey light of morning. He stared hard. Then he rubbed his eyes. Then he rubbed his eyes again and thrust his head farther round the edge of the door. With fixed eyes he stared harder still, and harder.

But it made no difference at all. He was staring into an empty room.

The sensation of fear he had felt when Field first appeared upon the scene returned suddenly, but with much greater force. He became conscious, too, that his left arm was throbbing violently and causing him great pain. He stood wondering, and staring, and trying to collect his thoughts. He was trembling from head to foot.

By a great effort of the will he left the support of the door and walked forward boldly into the room.

There, upon the bed, was the impress of a body, where Field had lain and slept. There was the mark of the head on the pillow, and the slight indentation at the foot of the bed where the boots had rested on the counterpane. And there, plainer than ever—for he was closer to it—was *the breathing*!

Marriott tried to pull himself together. With a great effort he found his voice and called his friend aloud by name!

"Field! Is that you? Where are you?"

There was no reply; but the breathing continued without interruption, coming directly from the bed. His voice had such an unfamiliar sound that Marriott did not care to repeat his questions, but he went down on his knees and examined the bed above and below, pulling the mattress off finally, and taking the coverings away separately one by one. But though the sounds continued there was no visible sign of Field, nor was there any space in which a human being, however small, could have concealed itself. He pulled the bed out from the wall, but the sound *stayed where it was*. It did not move with the bed.

Marriott, finding self-control a little difficult in his weary condition, at once set about a thorough search of the room. He went through the cupboard, the chest of drawers, the little alcove where the clothes hung—everything. But there was no sign of anyone. The small window near the ceiling was closed; and, anyhow, was not large enough to let a cat pass. The sitting-room door was locked on the inside; he could not have got out that way. Curious thoughts began to trouble Marriott's mind, bringing in their train unwelcome sensations. He grew more and more excited; he searched

the bed again till it resembled the scene of a pillow fight; he searched both rooms, knowing all the time it was useless,—and then he searched again. A cold perspiration broke out all over his body; and the sound of heavy breathing, all this time, never ceased to come from the corner where Field had lain down to sleep.

Then he tried something else. He pushed the bed back exactly into its original position—and himself lay down upon it just where his guest had lain. But the same instant he sprang up again in a single bound. The breathing was close beside him, almost on his cheek, and between him and the wall! Not even a child could have squeezed into the space.

He went back into his sitting-room, opened the windows, welcoming all the light and air possible, and tried to think the whole matter over quietly and clearly. Men who read too hard, and slept too little, he knew were sometimes troubled with very vivid hallucinations. Again he calmly reviewed every incident of the night; his accurate sensations; the vivid details; the emotions stirred in him; the dreadful feast—no single hallucination could ever combine all these and cover so long a period of time. But with less satisfaction he thought of the recurring faintness, and curious sense of horror that had once or twice come over him, and then of the violent pains in his arm. These were quite unaccountable.

Moreover, now that he began to analyse and examine, there was one other thing that fell upon him like a sudden revelation: *During the whole time Field had not actually uttered a single word!* Yet, as though in mockery upon his reflections, there came ever from that inner room the sound of the breathing, long-drawn, deep, and regular. The thing was incredible. It was absurd.

Haunted by visions of brain fever and insanity, Marriott put on his cap and macintosh and left the house. The morning air on Arthur's Seat would blow the cobwebs from his brain; the scent of the heather, and above all, the sight of the sea. He roamed over the wet slopes above Holyrood for a couple of hours, and did not return until the exercise had shaken some of the horror out of his bones, and given him a ravening appetite into the bargain.

As he entered he saw that there was another man in the room, standing against the window with his back to the light. He recognized his fellow-student Greene, who was reading for the same examination.

"Read hard all night, Marriott," he said, "and thought I'd drop in here to compare notes and have some breakfast. You're out early?" he added, by way of a question. Marriott said he had a headache and a walk had helped it, and Greene nodded and said "Ah!" But when the girl had set the steaming porridge on the table and gone out again, he went on with rather a forced tone, "Didn't know you had any friends who drank, Marriott?"

This was obviously tentative, and Marriott replied drily that he did not know it either.

"Sounds just as if some chap were 'sleeping it off' in there, doesn't it, though?" persisted the other, with a nod in the direction of the bedroom, and looking curiously at his friend. The two men stared steadily at each other for several seconds, and then Marriott said earnestly—

"Then you hear it too, thank God!"

"Of course I hear it. The door's open. Sorry if I wasn't meant to."

"Oh, I don't mean that," said Marriott, lowering his voice. "But I'm awfully relieved. Let me explain. Of course, if you hear it too, then it's all right; but really it frightened me more than I can tell you. I thought I was going to have brain fever, or something, and you know what a lot depends on this exam. It always begins with sounds, or visions, or some sort of beastly hallucination, and I—"

"Rot!" ejaculated the other impatiently. "What *are* you talking about?"

"Now, listen to me, Greene," said Marriott, as calmly as he could, for the breathing was still plainly audible, "and I'll tell you what I mean, only don't interrupt." And thereupon he related exactly what had happened during the night, telling everything, even down to the pain in his arm. When it was over he got up from the table and crossed the room.

"You hear the breathing now plainly, don't you?" he said. Greene said he did. "Well, come with me, and we'll search the room together." The other, however, did not move from his chair.

"I've been in already," he said sheepishly; "I heard the sounds and thought it was you. The door was ajar—so I went in."

Marriott made no comment, but pushed the door open as wide as it would go. As it opened, the sound of breathing grew more and more distinct.

"*Someone* must be in there," said Greene under his breath.

"*Someone* is in there, but *where*?" said Marriott. Again he urged his friend to go in with him. But Greene refused point-blank; said he had been in once and had searched

the room and there was nothing there. He would not go in again for a good deal.

They shut the door and retired into the other room to talk it all over with many pipes. Greene questioned his friend very closely, but without illuminating result, since questions cannot alter facts.

"The only thing that ought to have a proper, a logical, explanation is the pain in my arm," said Marriott, rubbing that member with an attempt at a smile. "It hurts so infernally and aches all the way up. I can't remember bruising it, though."

"Let me examine it for you," said Greene. "I'm awfully good at bones in spite of the examiners' opinion to the contrary." It was a relief to play the fool a bit, and Marriott took his coat off and rolled up his sleeve.

"By George, though, I'm bleeding!" he exclaimed. "Look here! What on earth's this?"

On the forearm, quite close to the wrist, was a thin red line. There was a tiny drop of apparently fresh blood on it. Greene came over and looked closely at it for some minutes. Then he sat back in his chair, looking curiously at his friend's face.

"You've scratched yourself without knowing it," he said presently.

"There's no sign of a bruise. It must be something else that made the arm ache."

Marriott sat very still, staring silently at his arm as though the solution of the whole mystery lay there actually written upon the skin.

"What's the matter? I see nothing very strange about a scratch," said Greene, in an unconvincing sort of voice. "It was your cuff links probably. Last night in your excitement—"

But Marriott, white to the very lips, was trying to speak. The sweat stood in great beads on his forehead. At last he leaned forward close to his friend's face.

"Look," he said, in a low voice that shook a little. "Do you see that red mark? I mean *underneath* what you call the scratch?"

Greene admitted he saw something or other, and Marriott wiped the place clean with his handkerchief and told him to look again more closely.

"Yes, I see," returned the other, lifting his head after a moment's careful inspection. "It looks like an old scar."

"It *is* an old scar," whispered Marriott, his lips trembling. "*Now* it all comes back to me."

"All what?" Greene fidgeted on his chair. He tried to laugh, but without success. His friend seemed bordering on collapse.

"Hush! Be quiet, and—I'll tell you," he said. "*Field made that scar*."

For a whole minute the two men looked each other full in the face without speaking.

"Field made that scar!" repeated Marriott at length in a louder voice.

"Field! You mean—last night?"

"No, not last night. Years ago—at school, with his knife. And I made a scar in his arm with mine." Marriott was talking rapidly now.

"We exchanged drops of blood in each other's cuts. He put a drop into my arm and I put one into his—"

"In the name of heaven, what for?"

"It was a boys' compact. We made a sacred pledge, a bargain. I remember it all perfectly now. We had been reading some dreadful book and we swore to appear to one another—I mean, whoever died first swore to show himself to the other. And we sealed the compact with each other's blood. I remember it all so well—the hot summer afternoon in the playground, seven years ago—and one of the masters caught us and confiscated the knives—and I have never thought of it again to this day—"

"And you mean—" stammered Greene.

But Marriott made no answer. He got up and crossed the room and lay down wearily upon the sofa, hiding his face in his hands.

Greene himself was a bit non-plussed. He left his friend alone for a little while, thinking it all over again. Suddenly

an idea seemed to strike him. He went over to where Marriott still lay motionless on the sofa and roused him. In any case it was better to face the matter, whether there was an explanation or not. Giving in was always the silly exit.

"I say, Marriott," he began, as the other turned his white face up to him. "There's no good being so upset about it. I mean—if it's all an hallucination we know what to do. And if it isn't—well, we know what to think, don't we?"

"I suppose so. But it frightens me horribly for some reason," returned his friend in a hushed voice. "And that poor devil—"

"But, after all, if the worst is true and—and that chap *has* kept his promise—well, he has, that's all, isn't it?"

Marriott nodded.

"There's only one thing that occurs to me," Greene went on, "and that is, are you quite sure that—that he really ate like that—I mean that he actually *ate anything at all*?" he finished, blurting out all his thought.

Marriott stared at him for a moment and then said he could easily make certain. He spoke quietly. After the main shock no lesser surprise could affect him.

"I put the things away myself," he said, "after we had finished. They are on the third shelf in that cupboard. No one's touched 'em since."

He pointed without getting up, and Greene took the hint and went over to look.

"Exactly," he said, after a brief examination; "just as I thought. It was partly hallucination, at any rate. The things haven't been touched. Come and see for yourself."

Together they examined the shelf. There was the brown loaf, the plate of stale scones, the oatcake, all untouched. Even the glass of whisky Marriott had poured out stood there with the whisky still in it.

"You were feeding—no one," said Greene "Field ate and drank nothing. He was not there at all!"

"But the breathing?" urged the other in a low voice, staring with a dazed expression on his face.

Greene did not answer. He walked over to the bedroom, while Marriott followed him with his eyes. He opened the door, and listened. There was no need for words. The sound of deep, regular breathing came floating through the air. There was no hallucination about that, at any rate. Marriott could hear it where he stood on the other side of the room.

Greene closed the door and came back. "There's only one thing to do," he declared with decision. "Write home and find out about him, and meanwhile come and finish your reading in my rooms. I've got an extra bed."

"Agreed," returned the Fourth Year Man; "there's no hallucination about that exam; I must pass that whatever happens."

And this was what they did.

It was about a week later when Marriott got the answer from his sister. Part of it he read out to Greene—

"It is curious," she wrote, "that in your letter you should have enquired after Field. It seems a terrible thing, but you know only a short while ago Sir John's patience became exhausted, and he turned him out of the house, they say without a penny. Well, what do you think? He has killed himself. At least, it looks like suicide. Instead of leaving the house, he went down into the cellar and simply starved himself to death. . . . They're trying to suppress it, of course, but I heard it all from my maid, who got it from their footman. . . . They found the body on the 14th and the doctor said he had died about twelve hours before. . . . He was dreadfully thin. . . ."

"Then he died on the 13th," said Greene.

Marriott nodded.

"That's the very night he came to see you."

Marriott nodded again.

Algernon Blackwood

To sleep in a lonely barn when the best bedrooms in the house were at our disposal, seemed, to say the least, unnecessary, and I felt that some explanation was due to our host.

But Shorthouse, I soon discovered, had seen to all that; our enterprise would be tolerated, not welcomed, for the master kept this sort of thing down with a firm hand. And then, how little I could get this man, Shorthouse, to tell me. There was much I wanted to ask and hear, but he surrounded himself with impossible barriers. It was ludicrous; he was surely asking a good deal of me, and yet he would give so little in return, and his reason—that it was for my good—may have been perfectly true, but did not bring me any comfort in its train. He gave me sops now and then, however, to keep up my curiosity, till I soon was aware that there were growing up side by side within me a genuine interest and an equally genuine fear; and something of both these is probably necessary to all real excitement.

The barn in question was some distance from the house, on the side of the stables, and I had passed it on several of my journeyings to and fro wondering at its forlorn and untarred appearance under a régime where everything was so spick and span; but it had never once occurred to me as possible that I should come to spend a night under its roof with a comparative stranger, and undergo there an experience belonging to an order of things I had always rather ridiculed and despised.

At the moment I can only partially recall the process by which Shorthouse persuaded me to lend him my company. Like myself, he was a guest in this autumn house-party, and where there were so many to chatter and to chaff, I think his taciturnity of manner had appealed to me by

contrast, and that I wished to repay something of what I owed. There was, no doubt, flattery in it as well, for he was more than twice my age, a man of amazingly wide experience, an explorer of all the world's corners where danger lurked, and—most subtle flattery of all—by far the best shot in the whole party, our host included.

At first, however, I held out a bit.

"But surely this story you tell," I said, "has the parentage common to all such tales—a superstitious heart and an imaginative brain—and has grown now by frequent repetition into an authentic ghost story? Besides, this head gardener of half a century ago," I added, seeing that he still went on cleaning his gun in silence, "who was he, and what positive information have you about him beyond the fact that he was found hanging from the rafters, dead?"

"He was no mere head gardener, this man who passed as such," he replied without looking up, "but a fellow of splendid education who used this curious disguise for his own purposes. Part of this very barn, of which he always kept the key, was found to have been fitted up as a complete laboratory, with athanor, alembic, cucurbite, and other appliances, some of which the master destroyed at once—perhaps for the best—and which I have only been able to guess at—"

"Black Arts," I laughed.

"Who knows?" he rejoined quietly. "The man undoubtedly possessed knowledge—dark knowledge—that was most unusual and dangerous, and I can discover no means by which he came to it—no ordinary means, that is. But I *have* found many facts in the case which point to the exercise of a most desperate and unscrupulous will; and the strange disappearances in the neighborhood, as well as

the bones found buried in the kitchen garden, though never actually traced to him, seem to me full of dreadful suggestion."

I laughed again, a little uncomfortably perhaps, and said it reminded one of the story of Giles de Rays, maréchal of France, who was said to have killed and tortured to death in a few years no less than one hundred and sixty women and children for the purposes of necromancy, and who was executed for his crimes at Nantes. But Shorthouse would not "rise," and only returned to his subject.

"His suicide seems to have been only just in time to escape arrest," he said.

"A magician of no high order then," I observed sceptically, "if suicide was his only way of evading the country police."

"The police of London and St. Petersburg rather," returned Shorthouse; "for the headquarters of this pretty company was somewhere in Russia, and his apparatus all bore the marks of the most skilful foreign make. A Russian woman then employed in the household—governess, or something—vanished, too, about the same time and was never caught. She was no doubt the cleverest of the lot. And, remember, the object of this appalling group was not mere vulgar gain, but a kind of knowledge that called for the highest qualities of courage and intellect in the seekers."

I admit I was impressed by the man's conviction of voice and manner, for there is something very compelling in the force of an earnest man's belief, though I still affected to sneer politely.

"But, like most Black Magicians, the fellow only succeeded in compassing his own destruction—that of his tools, rather, and of escaping himself."

"So that he might better accomplish his objects *elsewhere and otherwise*," said Shorthouse, giving, as he spoke, the most minute attention to the cleaning of the lock.

"Elsewhere and otherwise," I gasped.

"As if the shell he left hanging from the rafter in the barn in no way impeded the man's spirit from continuing his dreadful work under new conditions," he added quietly, without noticing my interruption. "The idea being that he sometimes revisits the garden and the barn, chiefly the barn—"

"The barn!" I exclaimed; "for what purpose?"

"Chiefly the barn," he finished, as if he had not heard me, "that is, when there is anybody in it."

I stared at him without speaking, for there was a wonder in me how he would add to this.

"When he wants fresh material, that is—he comes to steal from the living."

"Fresh material!" I repeated aghast. "To steal from the living!" Even then, in broad daylight, I was foolishly conscious of a creeping sensation at the roots of my hair, as if a cold breeze were passing over my skull.

"The strong vitality of the living is what this sort of creature is supposed to need most," he went on

imperturbably, "and where he has worked and thought and struggled before is the easiest place for him to get it in. The former conditions are in some way more easily reconstructed—" He stopped suddenly, and devoted all his attention to the gun. "It's difficult to explain, you know, rather," he added presently, "and, besides, it's much better that you should not know till afterwards."

I made a noise that was the beginning of a score of questions and of as many sentences, but it got no further than a mere noise, and Shorthouse, of course, stepped in again.

"Your scepticism," he added, "is one of the qualities that induce me to ask you to spend the night there with me."

"In those days," he went on, in response to my urging for more information, "the family were much abroad, and often travelled for years at a time. This man was invaluable in their absence. His wonderful knowledge of horticulture kept the gardens—French, Italian, English—in perfect order. He had carte blanche in the matter of expense, and of course selected all his own underlings. It was the sudden, unexpected return of the master that surprised the amazing stories of the countryside before the fellow, with all his cleverness, had time to prepare or conceal."

"But is there no evidence, no more recent evidence, to show that something is likely to happen if we sit up there?" I asked, pressing him yet further, and I think to his liking, for it showed at least that I was interested. "Has anything happened there lately, for instance?"

Shorthouse glanced up from the gun he was cleaning so assiduously, and the smoke from his pipe curled up into an odd twist between me and the black beard and oriental, sun-tanned face. The magnetism of his look and

expression brought more sense of conviction to me than I had felt hitherto, and I realized that there had been a sudden little change in my attitude and that I was now much more inclined to go in for the adventure with him. At least, I thought, with such a man, one would be safe in any emergency; for he is determined, resourceful, and to be depended upon.

"There's the point," he answered slowly; "for there has apparently been a fresh outburst—an attack almost, it seems,—quite recently. There is evidence, of course, plenty of it, or I should not feel the interest I do feel, but—" he hesitated a moment, as though considering how much he ought to let me know, "but the fact is that three men this summer, on separate occasions, who have gone into that barn after nightfall, have been *accosted*—"

"Accosted?" I repeated, betrayed into the interruption by his choice of so singular a word.

"And one of the stablemen—a recent arrival and quite ignorant of the story—who had to go in there late one night, saw a dark substance hanging down from one of the rafters, and when he climbed up, shaking all over, to cut it down—for he said he felt sure it was a corpse—the knife passed through nothing but air, and he heard a sound up under the eaves as if someone were laughing. Yet, while he slashed away, and afterwards too, the thing went on swinging there before his eyes and turning slowly with its own weight, like a huge joint on a spit. The man declares, too, that it had a large bearded face, and that the mouth was open and drawn down like the mouth of a hanged man."

"Can we question this fellow?"

"He's gone—gave notice at once, but not before I had questioned him myself very closely."

"Then this was quite recent?" I said, for I knew Shorthouse had not been in the house more than a week.

"Four days ago," he replied. "But, more than that, only three days ago a couple of men were in there together in full daylight when one of them suddenly turned deadly faint. He said that he felt an overmastering impulse to hang himself; and he looked about for a rope and was furious when his companion tried to prevent him—"

"But he did prevent him?"

"Just in time, but not before he had clambered on to a beam. He was very violent."

I had so much to say and ask that I could get nothing out in time, and Shorthouse went on again.

"I've had a sort of watching brief for this case," he said with a smile, whose real significance, however, completely escaped me at the time, "and one of the most disagreeable features about it is the deliberate way the servants have invented excuses to go out to the place, and always after dark; some of them who have no right to go there, and no real occasion at all—have never been there in their lives before probably—and now all of a sudden have shown the keenest desire and determination to go out there about dusk, or soon after, and with the most paltry and foolish excuses in the world. Of course," he added, "they have been prevented, but the desire, stronger than their superstitious dread, and which they cannot explain, is very curious."

"Very," I admitted, feeling that my hair was beginning to stand up again.

"You see," he went on presently, "it all points to volition—in fact to deliberate arrangement. It is no mere family ghost that goes with every ivied house in England of a certain age; it is something real, and something very malignant."

He raised his face from the gun barrel, and for the first time his eye caught mine in the full. Yes, he was very much in earnest. Also, he knew a great deal more than he meant to tell.

"It's worth tempting—and fighting, *I* think," he said; "but I want a companion with me. Are you game?" His enthusiasm undoubtedly caught me, but I still wanted to hedge a bit.

"I'm very sceptical," I pleaded.

"All the better," he said, almost as if to himself. "You have the pluck; I have the knowledge—"

"The knowledge?"

He looked round cautiously as if to make sure that there was no one within earshot.

"I've been in the place myself," he said in a lowered voice, "quite lately—in fact only three nights ago—the day the man turned queer."

I stared.

"But—I was obliged to come out—"

Still I stared.

"Quickly," he added significantly.

"You've gone into the thing pretty thoroughly," was all I could find to say, for I had almost made up my mind to go with him, and was not sure that I wanted to hear too much beforehand.

He nodded. "It's a bore, of course, but I must do everything thoroughly—or not at all."

"That's why you clean your own gun, I suppose?"

"That's why, when there's any danger, I take as few chances as possible," he said, with the same enigmatical smile I had noticed before; and then he added with emphasis, "And that is also why I ask you to keep me company now."

Of course, the shaft went straight home, and I gave my promise without further ado.

Our preparations for the night—a couple of rugs and a flask of black coffee—were not elaborate, and we found no difficulty, about ten o'clock, in absenting ourselves from the billiard-room without attracting curiosity. Shorthouse met me by arrangement under the cedar on the back lawn, and I at once realized with vividness what a difference there is between making plans in the daytime and carrying them out in the dark. One's common-sense—at least in matters of this sort—is reduced to a minimum, and imagination with all her attendant sprites usurps the place of judgment. Two and two no longer make four—they

make a mystery, and the mystery loses no time in growing into a menace. In this particular case, however, my imagination did not find wings very readily, for I knew that my companion was the most *unmovable* of men—an unemotional, solid block of a man who would never lose his head, and in any conceivable state of affairs would always take the right as well as the strong course. So my faith in the man gave me a false courage that was nevertheless very consoling, and I looked forward to the night's adventure with a genuine appetite.

Side by side, and in silence, we followed the path that skirted the East Woods, as they were called, and then led across two hay fields, and through another wood, to the barn, which thus lay about half a mile from the Lower Farm. To the Lower Farm, indeed, it properly belonged; and this made us realise more clearly how very ingenious must have been the excuses of the Hall servants who felt the desire to visit it.

It had been raining during the late afternoon, and the trees were still dripping heavily on all sides, but the moment we left the second wood and came out into the open, we saw a clearing with the stars overhead, against which the barn outlined itself in a black, lugubrious shadow. Shorthouse led the way—still without a word—and we crawled in through a low door and seated ourselves in a soft heap of hay in the extreme corner.

"Now," he said, speaking for the first time, "I'll show you the inside of the barn, so that you may know where you are, and what to do, in case anything happens."

A match flared in the darkness, and with the help of two more that followed I saw the interior of a lofty and somewhat rickety-looking barn, erected upon a wall of grey stones that ran all round and extended to a height of perhaps four feet. Above this masonry rose the wooden

sides, running up into the usual vaulted roof, and supported by a double tier of massive oak rafters, which stretched across from wall to wall and were intersected by occasional uprights. I felt as if we were inside the skeleton of some antediluvian monster whose huge black ribs completely enfolded us. Most of this, of course, only sketched itself to my eye in the uncertain light of the flickering matches, and when I said I had seen enough, and the matches went out, we were at once enveloped in an atmosphere as densely black as anything that I have ever known. And the silence equalled the darkness.

We made ourselves comfortable and talked in low voices. The rugs, which were very large, covered our legs; and our shoulders sank into a really luxurious bed of softness. Yet neither of us apparently felt sleepy. I certainly didn't, and Shorthouse, dropping his customary brevity that fell little short of gruffness, plunged into an easy run of talking that took the form after a time of personal reminiscences. This rapidly became a vivid narration of adventure and travel in far countries, and at any other time I should have allowed myself to become completely absorbed in what he told. But, unfortunately, I was never able for a single instant to forget the real purpose of our enterprise, and consequently I felt all my senses more keenly on the alert than usual, and my attention accordingly more or less distracted. It was, indeed, a revelation to hear Shorthouse unbosom himself in this fashion, and to a young man it was of course doubly fascinating; but the little sounds that always punctuate even the deepest silence out of doors claimed some portion of my attention, and as the night grew on I soon became aware that his tales seemed somewhat disconnected and abrupt—and that, in fact, I heard really only part of them.

It was not so much that I actually heard other sounds, but that I *expected* to hear them; this was what stole the other half of my listening. There was neither wind nor rain to break the stillness, and certainly there were no physical

presences in our neighborhood, for we were half a mile even from the Lower Farm; and from the Hall and stables, at least a mile. Yet the stillness was being continually broken—perhaps *disturbed* is a better word—and it was to these very remote and tiny disturbances that I felt compelled to devote at least half my listening faculties.

From time to time, however, I made a remark or asked a question, to show that I was listening and interested; but, in a sense, my questions always seemed to bear in one direction and to make for one issue, namely, my companion's previous experience in the barn when he had been obliged to come out "quickly."

Apparently I could not help myself in the matter, for this was really the one consuming curiosity I had; and the fact that it was better for me not to know it made me the keener to know it all, even the worst.

Shorthouse realized this even better than I did. I could tell it by the way he dodged, or wholly ignored, my questions, and this subtle sympathy between us showed plainly enough, had I been able at the time to reflect upon its meaning, that the nerves of both of us were in a very sensitive and highly-strung condition. Probably, the complete confidence I felt in his ability to face whatever might happen, and the extent to which also I relied upon him for my own courage, prevented the exercise of my ordinary powers of reflection, while it left my senses free to a more than usual degree of activity.

Things must have gone on in this way for a good hour or more, when I made the sudden discovery that there was something unusual in the conditions of our environment. This sounds a roundabout mode of expression, but I really know not how else to put it. The discovery almost rushed upon me. By rights, we were two men waiting in an alleged haunted barn for something to happen; and, as two men

who trusted one another implicitly (though for very different reasons), there should have been two minds keenly alert, with the ordinary senses in active co-operation. Some slight degree of nervousness, too, there might also have been, but beyond this, nothing. It was therefore with something of dismay that I made the sudden discovery that there *was* something more, and something that I ought to have noticed very much sooner than I actually did notice it.

The fact was—Shorthouse's stream of talk was wholly unnatural. He was talking with a purpose. He did not wish to be cornered by my questions, true, but he had another and a deeper purpose still, and it grew upon me, as an unpleasant deduction from my discovery, that this strong, cynical, unemotional man by my side was talking—and had been talking all this time—to gain a particular end. And this end, I soon felt clearly, was to *convince himself*. But, of what?

For myself, as the hours wore on towards midnight, I was not anxious to find the answer; but in the end it became impossible to avoid it, and I knew as I listened, that he was pouring forth this steady stream of vivid reminiscences of travel—South Seas, big game, Russian exploration, women, adventures of all sorts—*because he wished the past to reassert itself to the complete exclusion of the present*. He was taking his precautions. He was afraid.

I felt a hundred things, once this was clear to me, but none of them more than the wish to get up at once and leave the barn. If Shorthouse was afraid already, what in the world was to happen to me in the long hours that lay ahead? . . . I only know that, in my fierce efforts to deny to myself the evidence of his partial collapse, the strength came that enabled me to play my part properly, and I even found myself helping him by means of animated remarks upon his stories, and by more or less judicious questions. I also helped him by dismissing from my mind any desire to

enquire into the truth of his former experience; and it was good I did so, for had he turned it loose on me, with those great powers of convincing description that he had at his command, I verily believe that I should never have crawled from that barn alive. So, at least, I felt at the moment. It was the instinct of self-preservation, and it brought sound judgment.

Here, then, at least, with different motives, reached, too, by opposite ways, we were both agreed upon one thing, namely, that temporarily we would forget. Fools we were, for a dominant emotion is not so easily banished, and we were forever recurring to it in a hundred ways direct and indirect. A real fear cannot be so easily trifled with, and while we toyed on the surface with thousands and thousands of words—mere words—our sub-conscious activities were steadily gaining force, and would before very long have to be properly acknowledged. We could not get away from it. At last, when he had finished the recital of an adventure which brought him near enough to a horrible death, I admitted that in my uneventful life I had never yet been face to face with a real fear. It slipped out inadvertently, and, of course, without intention, but the tendency in him at the time was too strong to be resisted. He saw the loophole, and made for it full tilt.

"It is the same with all the emotions," he said. "The experiences of others never give a complete account. Until a man has deliberately turned and faced for himself the fiends that chase him down the years, he has no knowledge of what they really are, or of what they can do. Imaginative authors may write, moralists may preach, and scholars may criticise, but they are dealing all the time in a coinage of which they know not the actual value. Their listener gets a sensation—but not the true one. Until you have faced these emotions," he went on, with the same race of words that had come from him the whole evening, "and made them your own, your slaves, you have no idea of the power that is in them—hunger, that shows lights beckoning

beyond the grave; thirst, that fills with mingled ice and fire; passion, love, loneliness, revenge, and—" He paused for a minute, and though I knew we were on the brink I was powerless to hold him. " . . . *and fear*," he went on—"fear . . . I think that death from fear, or madness from fear, must sum up in a second of time the total of all the most awful sensations it is possible for a man to know."

"Then you have yourself felt something of this fear," I interrupted; "for you said just now—"

"I do not mean physical fear," he replied; "for that is more or less a question of nerves and will, and it is imagination that makes men cowards. I mean an *absolute* fear, a physical fear one might call it, that reaches the soul and withers every power one possesses."

He said a lot more, for he, too, was wholly unable to stem the torrent once it broke loose; but I have forgotten it; or, rather, mercifully I did not hear it, for I stopped my ears and only heard the occasional words when I took my fingers out to find if he had come to an end. In due course he did come to an end, and there we left it, for I then knew positively what he already knew: that somewhere here in the night, and within the walls of this very barn where we were sitting, there was waiting Something of dreadful malignancy and of great power. Something that we might both have to face ere morning, and Something that he had already tried to face once and failed in the attempt.

The night wore slowly on; and it gradually became more and more clear to me that I could not dare to rely as at first upon my companion, and that our positions were undergoing a slow process of reversal. I thank Heaven this was not borne in upon me too suddenly; and that I had at least the time to readjust myself somewhat to the new conditions. Preparation was possible, even if it was not much, and I sought by every means in my power to gather

up all the shreds of my courage, so that they might together make a decent rope that would stand the strain when it came. The strain would come, that was certain, and I was thoroughly well aware—though for my life I cannot put into words the reasons for my knowledge—that the massing of the material against us was proceeding somewhere in the darkness with determination and a horrible skill besides.

Shorthouse meanwhile talked without ceasing. The great quantity of hay opposite—or straw, I believe it actually was—seemed to deaden the sound of his voice, but the silence, too, had become so oppressive that I welcomed his torrent and even dreaded the moment when it would stop. I heard, too, the gentle ticking of my watch. Each second uttered its voice and dropped away into a gulf, as if starting on a journey whence there was no return. Once a dog barked somewhere in the distance, probably on the Lower Farm; and once an owl hooted close outside and I could hear the swishing of its wings as it passed overhead. Above me, in the darkness, I could just make out the outline of the barn, sinister and black, the rows of rafters stretching across from wall to wall like wicked arms that pressed upon the hay. Shorthouse, deep in some involved yarn of the South Seas that was meant to be full of cheer and sunshine, and yet only succeeded in making a ghastly mixture of unnatural coloring, seemed to care little whether I listened or not. He made no appeal to me, and I made one or two quite irrelevant remarks which passed him by and proved that he was merely uttering sounds. He, too, was afraid of the silence.

I fell to wondering how long a man could talk without stopping. . . . Then it seemed to me that these words of his went falling into the same gulf where the seconds dropped, only they were heavier and fell faster. I began to chase them. Presently one of them fell much faster than the rest, and I pursued it and found myself almost immediately in a land of clouds and shadows. They rose up and enveloped

me, pressing on the eyelids. . . . It must have been just here that I actually fell asleep, somewhere between twelve and one o'clock, because, as I chased this word at tremendous speed through space, I knew that I had left the other words far, very far behind me, till, at last, I could no longer hear them at all. The voice of the story-teller was beyond the reach of hearing; and I was falling with ever increasing rapidity through an immense void.

A sound of whispering roused me. Two persons were talking under their breath close beside me. The words in the main escaped me, but I caught every now and then bitten-off phrases and half sentences, to which, however, I could attach no intelligible meaning. The words were quite close—at my very side in fact—and one of the voices sounded so familiar, that curiosity overcame dread, and I turned to look. I was not mistaken; *it was Shorthouse whispering*. But the other person, who must have been just a little beyond him, was lost in the darkness and invisible to me. It seemed then that Shorthouse at once turned up his face and looked at me and, by some means or other that caused me no surprise at the time, I easily made out the features in the darkness. They wore an expression I had never seen there before; he seemed distressed, exhausted, worn out, and as though he were about to give in after a long mental struggle. He looked at me, almost beseechingly, and the whispering of the other person died away.

"They're at me," he said.

I found it quite impossible to answer; the words stuck in my throat. His voice was thin, plaintive, almost like a child's.

"I shall have to go. I'm not as strong as I thought. They'll call it suicide, but, of course, it's really murder." There was real anguish in his voice, and it terrified me.

A deep silence followed these extraordinary words, and I somehow understood that the Other Person was just going to carry on the conversation—I even fancied I saw lips shaping themselves just over my friend's shoulder—when I felt a sharp blow in the ribs and a voice, this time a deep voice, sounded in my ear. I opened my eyes, and the wretched dream vanished. Yet it left behind it an impression of a strong and quite unusual reality.

"*Do* try not to go to sleep again," he said sternly. "You seem exhausted. Do you feel so?" There was a note in his voice I did not welcome,—less than alarm, but certainly more than mere solicitude.

"I do feel terribly sleepy all of a sudden," I admitted, ashamed.

"So you may," he added very earnestly; "but I rely on you to keep awake, if only to watch. You have been asleep for half an hour at least—and you were so still—I thought I'd wake you—"

"Why?" I asked, for my curiosity and nervousness were altogether too strong to be resisted. "Do you think we are in danger?"

"I think *they* are about here now. I feel my vitality going rapidly—that's always the first sign. You'll last longer than I, remember. Watch carefully."

The conversation dropped. I was afraid to say all I wanted to say. It would have been too unmistakably a confession; and intuitively I realized the danger of admitting the existence of certain emotions until positively forced to. But presently Shorthouse began again. His voice sounded odd, and as if it had lost power. It was more like a woman's or a

boy's voice than a man's, and recalled the voice in my dream.

"I suppose you've got a knife?" he asked.

"Yes—a big clasp knife; but why?" He made no answer. "You don't think a practical joke likely? No one suspects we're here," I went on. Nothing was more significant of our real feelings this night than the way we toyed with words, and never dared more than to skirt the things in our mind.

"It's just as well to be prepared," he answered evasively. "Better be quite sure. See which pocket it's in—so as to be ready."

I obeyed mechanically, and told him. But even this scrap of talk proved to me that he was getting further from me all the time in his mind. He was following a line that was strange to me, and, as he distanced me, I felt that the sympathy between us grew more and more strained. *He knew more*; it was not that I minded so much—but that he was willing to *communicate less*. And in proportion as I lost his support, I dreaded his increasing silence. Not of words—for he talked more volubly than ever, and with a fiercer purpose—but his silence in giving no hint of what he must have known to be really going on the whole time.

The night was perfectly still. Shorthouse continued steadily talking, and I jogged him now and again with remarks or questions in order to keep awake. He paid no attention, however, to either.

About two in the morning a short shower fell, and the drops rattled sharply on the roof like shot. I was glad when it stopped, for it completely drowned all other sounds and made it impossible to hear anything else that might be going on. Something *was* going on, too, all the time, though

for the life of me I could not say what. The outer world had grown quite dim—the house-party, the shooters, the billiard-room, and the ordinary daily incidents of my visit. All my energies were concentrated on the present, and the constant strain of watching, waiting, listening, was excessively telling.

Shorthouse still talked of his adventures, in some Eastern country now, and less connectedly. These adventures, real or imaginary, had quite a savour of the Arabian Nights, and did not by any means make it easier for me to keep my hold on reality. The lightest weight will affect the balance under such circumstances, and in this case the weight of his talk was on the wrong scale. His words were very rapid, and I found it overwhelmingly difficult not to follow them into that great gulf of darkness where they all rushed and vanished. But that, I knew, meant sleep again. Yet, it was strange I should feel sleepy when at the same time all my nerves were fairly tingling. Every time I heard what seemed like a step outside, or a movement in the hay opposite, the blood stood still for a moment in my veins. Doubtless, the unremitting strain told upon me more than I realized, and this was doubly great now that I knew Shorthouse was a source of weakness instead of strength, as I had counted. Certainly, a curious sense of languor grew upon me more and more, and I was sure that the man beside me was engaged in the same struggle. The feverishness of his talk proved this, if nothing else. It was dreadfully hard to keep awake.

But this time, instead of dropping into the gulf, I saw something come up out of it! It reached our world by a door in the side of the barn furthest from me, and it came in cautiously and silently and moved into the mass of hay opposite. There, for a moment, I lost it, but presently I caught it again higher up. It was clinging, like a great bat, to the side of the barn. Something trailed behind it, I could not make out what. . . . It crawled up the wooden wall and began to move out along one of the rafters. A numb terror

settled down all over me as I watched it. The thing trailing behind it was apparently a rope.

The whispering began again just then, but the only words I could catch seemed without meaning; it was almost like another language. The voices were above me, under the roof. Suddenly I saw signs of active movement going on just beyond the place where the thing lay upon the rafter. There was something else up there with it! Then followed panting, like the quick breathing that accompanies effort, and the next minute a black mass dropped through the air and dangled at the end of the rope.

Instantly, it all flashed upon me. I sprang to my feet and rushed headlong across the floor of the barn. How I moved so quickly in the darkness I do not know; but, even as I ran, it flashed into my mind that I should never get at my knife in time to cut the thing down, or else that I should find it had been taken from me. Somehow or other—the Goddess of Dreams knows how—I climbed up by the hay bales and swung out along the rafter. I was hanging, of course, by my arms, and the knife was already between my teeth, though I had no recollection of how it got there. It was open. The mass, hanging like a side of bacon, was only a few feet in front of me, and I could plainly see the dark line of rope that fastened it to the beam. I then noticed for the first time that it was swinging and turning in the air, and that as I approached it seemed to move along the beam, so that the same distance was always maintained between us. The only thing I could do—for there was no time to hesitate—was to jump at it through the air and slash at the rope as I dropped.

I seized the knife with my right hand, gave a great swing of my body with my legs and leaped forward at it through the air. Horrors! It was closer to me than I knew, and I plunged full into it, and the arm with the knife missed the rope and cut deeply into some substance that was soft and yielding. But, as I dropped past it, the thing had time to

turn half its width so that it swung round and faced me—and I could have sworn as I rushed past it through the air, that it had the features of Shorthouse.

The shock of this brought the vile nightmare to an abrupt end, and I woke up a second time on the soft hay-bed to find that the grey dawn was stealing in, and that I was exceedingly cold. After all I had failed to keep awake, and my sleep, since it was growing light, must have lasted at least an hour. A whole hour off my guard!

There was no sound from Shorthouse, to whom, of course, my first thoughts turned; probably his flow of words had ceased long ago, and he too had yielded to the persuasions of the seductive god. I turned to wake him and get the comfort of companionship for the horror of my dream, when to my utter dismay I saw that the place where he had been was vacant. He was no longer beside me.

It had been no little shock before to discover that the ally in whom lay all my faith and dependence was really frightened, but it is quite impossible to describe the sensations I experienced when I realized he had gone altogether and that I was alone in the barn. For a minute or two my head swam and I felt a prey to a helpless terror. The dream, too, still seemed half real, so vivid had it been! I was thoroughly frightened—hot and cold by turns—and I clutched the hay at my side in handfuls, and for some moments had no idea in the world what I should do.

This time, at least, I was unmistakably awake, and I made a great effort to collect myself and face the meaning of the disappearance of my companion. In this I succeeded so far that I decided upon a thorough search of the barn, inside and outside. It was a dreadful undertaking, and I did not feel at all sure of being able to bring it to a conclusion, but I knew pretty well that unless something was done at once, I should simply collapse.

But, when I tried to move, I found that the cold, and fear, and I know not what else unholy besides, combined to make it almost impossible. I suddenly realized that a tour of inspection, during the whole of which my back would be open to attack, was not to be thought of. My will was not equal to it. Anything might spring upon me any moment from the dark corners, and the growing light was just enough to reveal every movement I made to any who might be watching. For, even then, and while I was still half dazed and stupid, I knew perfectly well that someone was watching me all the time with the utmost intentness. I had not merely awakened; I had *been* awakened.

I decided to try another plan; I called to him. My voice had a thin weak sound, far away and quite unreal, and there was no answer to it. Hark, though! There was something that might have been a very faint voice near me!

I called again, this time with greater distinctness, "Shorthouse, where are you? can you hear me?"

There certainly was a sound, but it was not a voice. Something was moving. It was someone shuffling along, and it seemed to be outside the barn. I was afraid to call again, and the sound continued. It was an ordinary sound enough, no doubt, but it came to me just then as something unusual and unpleasant. Ordinary sounds remain ordinary only so long as one is not listening to them; under the influence of intense listening they become unusual, portentous, and therefore extraordinary. So, this common sound came to me as something uncommon, disagreeable. It conveyed, too, an impression of stealth. And with it there was another, a slighter sound.

Just at this minute the wind bore faintly over the field the sound of the stable clock, a mile away. It was three o'clock; the hour when life's pulses beat lowest; when poor souls lying between life and death find it hardest to resist.

Vividly I remember this thought crashing through my brain with a sound of thunder, and I realized that the strain on my nerves was nearing the limit, and that something would have to be done at once if I was to reclaim my self-control at all.

When thinking over afterwards the events of this dreadful night, it has always seemed strange to me that my second nightmare, so vivid in its terror and its nearness, should have furnished me with no inkling of what was really going on all this while; and that I should not have been able to put two and two together, or have discovered sooner than I did *what* this sound was and *where* it came from. I can well believe that the vile scheming which lay behind the whole experience found it an easy trifle to direct my hearing amiss; though, of course, it may equally well have been due to the confused condition of my mind at the time and to the general nervous tension under which I was undoubtedly suffering.

But, whatever the cause for my stupidity at first in failing to trace the sound to its proper source, I can only say here that it was with a shock of unexampled horror that my eye suddenly glanced upwards and caught sight of the figure moving in the shadows above my head among the rafters. Up to this moment I had thought that it was somebody outside the barn, crawling round the walls till it came to a door; and the rush of horror that froze my heart when I looked up and saw that it was Shorthouse creeping stealthily along a beam, is something altogether beyond the power of words to describe.

He was staring intently down upon me, and I knew at once that it was he who had been watching me.

This point was, I think, for me the climax of feeling in the whole experience; I was incapable of any further sensation—that is any further sensation in the same

direction. But here the abominable character of the affair showed itself most plainly, for it suddenly presented an entirely new aspect to me. The light fell on the picture from a new angle, and galvanised me into a fresh ability to feel when I thought a merciful numbness had supervened. It may not sound a great deal in the printed letter, but it came to me almost as if it had been an extension of consciousness, for the Hand that held the pencil suddenly touched in with ghastly effect of contrast the element of the ludicrous. Nothing could have been worse just then. Shorthouse, the masterful spirit, so intrepid in the affairs of ordinary life, whose power increased rather than lessened in the face of danger—this man, creeping on hands and knees along a rafter in a barn at three o'clock in the morning, watching me all the time as a cat watches a mouse! Yes, it was distinctly ludicrous, and while it gave me a measure with which to gauge the dread emotion that caused his aberration, it stirred somewhere deep in my interior the strings of an empty laughter.

One of those moments then came to me that are said to come sometimes under the stress of great emotion, when in an instant the mind grows dazzlingly clear. An abnormal lucidity took the place of my confusion of thought, and I suddenly understood that the two dreams which I had taken for nightmares must really have been sent me, and that I had been allowed for one moment to look over the edge of what was to come; the Good was helping, even when the Evil was most determined to destroy.

I saw it all clearly now. Shorthouse had overrated his strength. The terror inspired by his first visit to the barn (when he had failed) had roused the man's whole nature to win, and he had brought me to divert the deadly stream of evil. That he had again underrated the power against him was apparent as soon as he entered the barn, and his wild talk, and refusal to admit what he felt, were due to this desire not to acknowledge the insidious fear that was growing in his heart. But, at length, it had become too

strong. He had left my side in my sleep—had been overcome himself, perhaps, first in *his* sleep, by the dreadful impulse. He knew that I should interfere, and with every movement he made, he watched me steadily, for the mania was upon him and he was *determined to hang himself*. He pretended not to hear me calling, and I knew that anything coming between him and his purpose would meet the full force of his fury—the fury of a maniac, of one, for the time being, truly possessed.

For a minute or two I sat there and stared. I saw then for the first time that there was a bit of rope trailing after him, and that this was what made the rustling sound I had noticed. Shorthouse, too, had come to a stop. His body lay along the rafter like a crouching animal. He was looking hard at me. That whitish patch was his face.

I can lay claim to no courage in the matter, for I must confess that in one sense I was frightened almost beyond control. But at the same time the necessity for decided action, if I was to save his life, came to me with an intense relief. No matter what animated him for the moment, Shorthouse was only a *man*; it was flesh and blood I had to contend with and not the intangible powers. Only a few hours before I had seen him cleaning his gun, smoking his pipe, knocking the billiard balls about with very human clumsiness, and the picture flashed across my mind with the most wholesome effect.

Then I dashed across the floor of the barn and leaped upon the hay bales as a preliminary to climbing up the sides to the first rafter. It was far more difficult than in my dream. Twice I slipped back into the hay, and as I scrambled up for the third time I saw that Shorthouse, who thus far had made no sound or movement, was now busily doing something with his hands upon the beam. He was at its further end, and there must have been fully fifteen feet between us. Yet I saw plainly what he was doing; he was

fastening the rope to the rafter. *The other end, I saw, was already round his neck!*

This gave me at once the necessary strength, and in a second I had swung myself on to a beam, crying aloud with all the authority I could put into my voice—

"You fool, man! What in the world are you trying to do? Come down at once!"

My energetic actions and words combined had an immediate effect upon him for which I blessed Heaven; for he looked up from his horrid task, stared hard at me for a second or two, and then came wriggling along like a great cat to intercept me. He came by a series of leaps and bounds and at an astonishing pace, and the way he moved somehow inspired me with a fresh horror, for it did not seem the natural movement of a human being at all, but more, as I have said, like that of some lithe wild animal.

He was close upon me. I had no clear idea of what exactly I meant to do. I could see his face plainly now; he was grinning cruelly; the eyes were positively luminous, and the menacing expression of the mouth was most distressing to look upon. Otherwise it was the face of a chalk man, white and dead, with all the semblance of the living human drawn out of it. Between his teeth he held my clasp knife, which he must have taken from me in my sleep, and with a flash I recalled his anxiety to know exactly which pocket it was in.

"Drop that knife!" I shouted at him, "and drop after it yourself—"

"Don't you dare to stop me!" he hissed, the breath coming between his lips across the knife that he held in his teeth.

"Nothing in the world can stop me now—I have promised—and I must do it. I can't hold out any longer."

"Then drop the knife and I'll help you," I shouted back in his face. "I promise—"

"No use," he cried, laughing a little, "I must do it and you can't stop me."

I heard a sound of laughter, too, somewhere in the air behind me. The next second Shorthouse came at me with a single bound.

To this day I cannot quite tell how it happened. It is still a wild confusion and a fever of horror in my mind, but from somewhere I drew more than my usual allowance of strength, and before he could well have realized what I meant to do, I had his throat between my fingers. He opened his teeth and the knife dropped at once, for I gave him a squeeze he need never forget. Before, my muscles had felt like so much soaked paper; now they recovered their natural strength, and more besides. I managed to work ourselves along the rafter until the hay was beneath us, and then, completely exhausted, I let go my hold and we swung round together and dropped on to the hay, he clawing at me in the air even as we fell.

The struggle that began by my fighting for his life ended in a wild effort to save my own, for Shorthouse was quite beside himself, and had no idea what he was doing. Indeed, he has always averred that he remembers nothing of the entire night's experiences after the time when he first woke me from sleep. A sort of deadly mist settled over him, he declares, and he lost all sense of his own identity. The rest was a blank until he came to his senses under a mass of hay with me on the top of him.

It was the hay that saved us, first by breaking the fall and then by impeding his movements so that I was able to prevent his choking me to death.

Algernon Blackwood

The Wood of The Dead

One summer, in my wanderings with a knapsack, I was at luncheon in the room of a wayside inn in the western country, when the door opened and there entered an old rustic, who crossed close to my end of the table and sat himself down very quietly in the seat by the bow window. We exchanged glances, or, properly speaking, nods, for at the moment I did not actually raise my eyes to his face, so concerned was I with the important business of satisfying an appetite gained by tramping twelve miles over a difficult country.

The fine warm rain of seven o'clock, which had since risen in a kind of luminous mist about the tree tops, now floated far overhead in a deep blue sky, and the day was settling down into a blaze of golden light. It was one of those days peculiar to Somerset and North Devon, when the orchards shine and the meadows seem to add a radiance of their own, so brilliantly soft are the colorings of grass and foliage.

The inn-keeper's daughter, a little maiden with a simple country loveliness, presently entered with a foaming pewter mug, enquired after my welfare, and went out again. Apparently she had not noticed the old man sitting in the settle by the bow window, nor had he, for his part, so much as once turned his head in our direction.

Under ordinary circumstances I should probably have given no thought to this other occupant of the room; but the fact that it was supposed to be reserved for my private use, and the singular thing that he sat looking aimlessly out of the window, with no attempt to engage me in conversation, drew my eyes more than once somewhat curiously upon him, and I soon caught myself wondering why he sat there so silently, and always with averted head.

He was, I saw, a rather bent old man in rustic dress, and the skin of his face was wrinkled like that of an apple; corduroy trousers were caught up with a string below the knee, and he wore a sort of brown fustian jacket that was very much faded. His thin hand rested upon a stoutish stick. He wore no hat and carried none, and I noticed that his head, covered with silvery hair, was finely shaped and gave the impression of something noble.

Though rather piqued by his studied disregard of my presence, I came to the conclusion that he probably had something to do with the little hostel and had a perfect right to use this room with freedom, and I finished my luncheon without breaking the silence and then took the settle opposite to smoke a pipe before going on my way.

Through the open window came the scents of the blossoming fruit trees; the orchard was drenched in sunshine and the branches danced lazily in the breeze; the grass below fairly shone with white and yellow daisies, and the red roses climbing in profusion over the casement mingled their perfume with the sweetly penetrating odor of the sea.

It was a place to dawdle in, to lie and dream away a whole afternoon, watching the sleepy butterflies and listening to the chorus of birds which seemed to fill every corner of the sky. Indeed, I was already debating in my mind whether to linger and enjoy it all instead of taking the strenuous pathway over the hills, when the old rustic in the settle opposite suddenly turned his face towards me for the first time and began to speak.

His voice had a quiet dreamy note in it that was quite in harmony with the day and the scene, but it sounded far away, I thought, almost as though it came to me from outside where the shadows were weaving their eternal tissue of dreams upon the garden floor. Moreover, there

was no trace in it of the rough quality one might naturally have expected, and, now that I saw the full face of the speaker for the first time, I noted with something like a start that the deep, gentle eyes seemed far more in keeping with the timbre of the voice than with the rough and very countrified appearance of the clothes and manner. His voice set pleasant waves of sound in motion towards me, and the actual words, if I remember rightly, were—

"You are a stranger in these parts?" or "Is not this part of the country strange to you?"

There was no "sir," nor any outward and visible sign of the deference usually paid by real country folk to the town-bred visitor, but in its place a gentleness, almost a sweetness, of polite sympathy that was far more of a compliment than either.

I answered that I was wandering on foot through a part of the country that was wholly new to me, and that I was surprised not to find a place of such idyllic loveliness marked upon my map.

"I have lived here all my life," he said, with a sigh, "and am never tired of coming back to it again."

"Then you no longer live in the immediate neighborhood?"

"I have moved," he answered briefly, adding after a pause in which his eyes seemed to wander wistfully to the wealth of blossoms beyond the window; "but I am almost sorry, for nowhere else have I found the sunshine lie so warmly, the flowers smell so sweetly, or the winds and streams make such tender music. . . ."

His voice died away into a thin stream of sound that lost itself in the rustle of the rose-leaves climbing in at the window, for he turned his head away from me as he spoke and looked out into the garden. But it was impossible to conceal my surprise, and I raised my eyes in frank astonishment on hearing so poetic an utterance from such a figure of a man, though at the same time realizing that it was not in the least inappropriate, and that, in fact, no other sort of expression could have properly been expected from him.

"I am sure you are right," I answered at length, when it was clear he had ceased speaking; "or there is something of enchantment here—of real fairy-like enchantment—that makes me think of the visions of childhood days, before one knew anything of—of—"

I had been oddly drawn into his vein of speech, some inner force compelling me. But here the spell passed and I could not catch the thoughts that had a moment before opened a long vista before my inner vision.

"To tell you the truth," I concluded lamely, "the place fascinates me and I am in two minds about going further—"

Even at this stage I remember thinking it odd that I should be talking like this with a stranger whom I met in a country inn, for it has always been one of my failings that to strangers my manner is brief to surliness. It was as though we were figures meeting in a dream, speaking without sound, obeying laws not operative in the everyday working world, and about to play with a new scale of space and time perhaps. But my astonishment passed quickly into an entirely different feeling when I became aware that the old man opposite had turned his head from the window again, and was regarding me with eyes so bright they seemed almost to shine with an inner flame. His gaze was fixed

upon my face with an intense ardour, and his whole manner had suddenly become alert and concentrated. There was something about him I now felt for the first time that made little thrills of excitement run up and down my back. I met his look squarely, but with an inward tremor.

"Stay, then, a little while longer," he said in a much lower and deeper voice than before; "stay, and I will teach you something of the purpose of my coming."

He stopped abruptly. I was conscious of a decided shiver.

"You have a special purpose then—in coming back?" I asked, hardly knowing what I was saying.

"To call away someone," he went on in the same thrilling voice, "someone who is not quite ready to come, but who is needed elsewhere for a worthier purpose." There was a sadness in his manner that mystified me more than ever.

"You mean—?" I began, with an unaccountable access of trembling.

"I have come for someone who must soon move, even as I have moved."

He looked me through and through with a dreadfully piercing gaze, but I met his eyes with a full straight stare, trembling though I was, and I was aware that something stirred within me that had never stirred before, though for the life of me I could not have put a name to it, or have analysed its nature. Something lifted and rolled away. For one single second I understood clearly that the past and the future exist actually side by side in one immense Present; that it was *I* who moved to and fro among shifting, protean appearances.

The old man dropped his eyes from my face, and the momentary glimpse of a mightier universe passed utterly away. Reason regained its sway over a dull, limited kingdom.

"Come to-night," I heard the old man say, "come to me to-night into the Wood of the Dead. Come at midnight—"

Involuntarily I clutched the arm of the settle for support, for I then felt that I was speaking with someone who knew more of the real things that are and will be, than I could ever know while in the body, working through the ordinary channels of sense—and this curious half-promise of a partial lifting of the veil had its undeniable effect upon me.

The breeze from the sea had died away outside, and the blossoms were still. A yellow butterfly floated lazily past the window. The song of the birds hushed—I smelt the sea—I smelt the perfume of heated summer air rising from fields and flowers, the ineffable scents of June and of the long days of the year—and with it, from countless green meadows beyond, came the hum of myriad summer life, children's voices, sweet pipings, and the sound of water falling.

I knew myself to be on the threshold of a new order of experience—of an ecstasy. Something drew me forth with a sense of inexpressible yearning towards the being of this strange old man in the window seat, and for a moment I knew what it was to taste a mighty and wonderful sensation, and to touch the highest pinnacle of joy I have ever known. It lasted for less than a second, and was gone; but in that brief instant of time the same terrible lucidity came to me that had already shown me how the past and future exist in the present, and I realized and understood that pleasure and pain are one and the same force, for the joy I had just experienced included also all the pain I ever had felt, or ever could feel. . . .

The sunshine grew to dazzling radiance, faded, passed away. The shadows paused in their dance upon the grass, deepened a moment, and then melted into air. The flowers of the fruit trees laughed with their little silvery laughter as the wind sighed over their radiant eyes the old, old tale of its personal love. Once or twice a voice called my name. A wonderful sensation of lightness and power began to steal over me.

Suddenly the door opened and the inn-keeper's daughter came in. By all ordinary standards, her's was a charming country loveliness, born of the stars and wild-flowers, of moonlight shining through autumn mists upon the river and the fields; yet, by contrast with the higher order of beauty I had just momentarily been in touch with, she seemed almost ugly. How dull her eyes, how thin her voice, how vapid her smile, and insipid her whole presentment.

For a moment she stood between me and the occupant of the window seat while I counted out the small change for my meal and for her services; but when, an instant later, she moved aside, I saw that the settle was empty and that there was no longer anyone in the room but our two selves.

This discovery was no shock to me; indeed, I had almost expected it, and the man had gone just as a figure goes out of a dream, causing no surprise and leaving me as part and parcel of the same dream without breaking of continuity. But, as soon as I had paid my bill and thus resumed in very practical fashion the thread of my normal consciousness, I turned to the girl and asked her if she knew the old man who had been sitting in the window seat, and what he had meant by the Wood of the Dead.

The maiden started visibly, glancing quickly round the empty room, but answering simply that she had seen no one. I described him in great detail, and then, as the description grew clearer, she turned a little pale under her

pretty sunborn and said very gravely that it must have been the ghost.

"Ghost! What ghost?"

"Oh, the village ghost," she said quietly, coming closer to my chair with a little nervous movement of genuine alarm, and adding in a lower voice, "He comes before a death, they say!"

It was not difficult to induce the girl to talk, and the story she told me, shorn of the superstition that had obviously gathered with the years round the memory of a strangely picturesque figure, was an interesting and peculiar one.

The inn, she said, was originally a farmhouse, occupied by a yeoman farmer, evidently of a superior, if rather eccentric, character, who had been very poor until he reached old age, when a son died suddenly in the Colonies and left him an unexpected amount of money, almost a fortune.

The old man thereupon altered no whit his simple manner of living, but devoted his income entirely to the improvement of the village and to the assistance of its inhabitants; he did this quite regardless of his personal likes and dislikes, as if one and all were absolutely alike to him, objects of a genuine and impersonal benevolence. People had always been a little afraid of the man, not understanding his eccentricities, but the simple force of this love for humanity changed all that in a very short space of time; and before he died he came to be known as the Father of the Village and was held in great love and veneration by all.

A short time before his end, however, he began to act queerly. He spent his money just as usefully and wisely,

but the shock of sudden wealth after a life of poverty, people said, had unsettled his mind. He claimed to see things that others did not see, to hear voices, and to have visions. Evidently, he was not of the harmless, foolish, visionary order, but a man of character and of great personal force, for the people became divided in their opinions, and the vicar, good man, regarded and treated him as a "special case." For many, his name and atmosphere became charged almost with a spiritual influence that was not of the best. People quoted texts about him; kept when possible out of his way, and avoided his house after dark. None understood him, but though the majority loved him, an element of dread and mystery became associated with his name, chiefly owing to the ignorant gossip of the few.

A grove of pine trees behind the farm—the girl pointed them out to me on the slope of the hill—he said was the Wood of the Dead, because just before anyone died in the village he saw them walk into that wood, singing. None who went in ever came out again. He often mentioned the names to his wife, who usually published them to all the inhabitants within an hour of her husband's confidence; and it was found that the people he had seen enter the wood—died. On warm summer nights he would sometimes take an old stick and wander out, hatless, under the pines, for he loved this wood, and used to say he met all his old friends there, and would one day walk in there never to return. His wife tried to break him gently off this habit, but he always had his own way; and once, when she followed and found him standing under a great pine in the thickest portion of the grove, talking earnestly to someone she could not see, he turned and rebuked her very gently, but in such a way that she never repeated the experiment, saying—

"You should never interrupt me, Mary, when I am talking with the others; for they teach me, remember, wonderful things, and I must learn all I can before I go to join them."

This story went like wild-fire through the village, increasing with every repetition, until at length everyone was able to give an accurate description of the great veiled figures the woman declared she had seen moving among the trees where her husband stood. The innocent pine-grove now became positively haunted, and the title of "Wood of the Dead" clung naturally as if it had been applied to it in the ordinary course of events by the compilers of the Ordnance Survey.

On the evening of his ninetieth birthday the old man went up to his wife and kissed her. His manner was loving, and very gentle, and there was something about him besides, she declared afterwards, that made her slightly in awe of him and feel that he was almost more of a spirit than a man.

He kissed her tenderly on both cheeks, but his eyes seemed to look right through her as he spoke.

"Dearest wife," he said, "I am saying good-bye to you, for I am now going into the Wood of the Dead, and I shall not return. Do not follow me, or send to search, but be ready soon to come upon the same journey yourself."

The good woman burst into tears and tried to hold him, but he easily slipped from her hands, and she was afraid to follow him. Slowly she saw him cross the field in the sunshine, and then enter the cool shadows of the grove, where he disappeared from her sight.

That same night, much later, she woke to find him lying peacefully by her side in bed, with one arm stretched out towards her, *dead*. Her story was half believed, half doubted at the time, but in a very few years afterwards it evidently came to be accepted by all the countryside. A funeral service was held to which the people flocked in

great numbers, and everyone approved of the sentiment which led the widow to add the words, "The Father of the Village," after the usual texts which appeared upon the stone over his grave.

This, then, was the story I pieced together of the village ghost as the little inn-keeper's daughter told it to me that afternoon in the parlour of the inn.

"But you're not the first to say you've seen him," the girl concluded; "and your description is just what we've always heard, and that window, they say, was just where he used to sit and think, and think, when he was alive, and sometimes, they say, to cry for hours together."

"And would you feel afraid if you had seen him?" I asked, for the girl seemed strangely moved and interested in the whole story.

"I think so," she answered timidly. "Surely, if he spoke to me. He did speak to *you*, didn't he, sir?" she asked after a slight pause.

"He said he had come for someone."

"Come for someone," she repeated. "Did he say—" she went on falteringly.

"No, he did not say for whom," I said quickly, noticing the sudden shadow on her face and the tremulous voice.

"Are you really sure, sir?"

"Oh, quite sure," I answered cheerfully. "I did not even ask him." The girl looked at me steadily for nearly a whole

minute as though there were many things she wished to tell me or to ask. But she said nothing, and presently picked up her tray from the table and walked slowly out of the room.

Instead of keeping to my original purpose and pushing on to the next village over the hills, I ordered a room to be prepared for me at the inn, and that afternoon I spent wandering about the fields and lying under the fruit trees, watching the white clouds sailing out over the sea. The Wood of the Dead I surveyed from a distance, but in the village I visited the stone erected to the memory of the "Father of the Village"—who was thus, evidently, no mythical personage—and saw also the monuments of his fine unselfish spirit: the schoolhouse he built, the library, the home for the aged poor, and the tiny hospital.

That night, as the clock in the church tower was striking half-past eleven, I stealthily left the inn and crept through the dark orchard and over the hayfield in the direction of the hill whose southern slope was clothed with the Wood of the Dead. A genuine interest impelled me to the adventure, but I also was obliged to confess to a certain sinking in my heart as I stumbled along over the field in the darkness, for I was approaching what might prove to be the birth-place of a real country myth, and a spot already lifted by the imaginative thoughts of a considerable number of people into the region of the haunted and ill-omened.

The inn lay below me, and all round it the village clustered in a soft black shadow unrelieved by a single light. The night was moonless, yet distinctly luminous, for the stars crowded the sky. The silence of deep slumber was everywhere; so still, indeed, that every time my foot kicked against a stone I thought the sound must be heard below in the village and waken the sleepers.

I climbed the hill slowly, thinking chiefly of the strange story of the noble old man who had seized the opportunity to do good to his fellows the moment it came his way, and wondering why the causes that operate ceaselessly behind human life did not always select such admirable instruments. Once or twice a night-bird circled swiftly over my head, but the bats had long since gone to rest, and there was no other sign of life stirring.

Then, suddenly, with a singular thrill of emotion, I saw the first trees of the Wood of the Dead rise in front of me in a high black wall. Their crests stood up like giant spears against the starry sky; and though there was no perceptible movement of the air on my cheek I heard a faint, rushing sound among their branches as the night breeze passed to and fro over their countless little needles. A remote, hushed murmur rose overhead and died away again almost immediately; for in these trees the wind seems to be never absolutely at rest, and on the calmest day there is always a sort of whispering music among their branches.

For a moment I hesitated on the edge of this dark wood, and listened intently. Delicate perfumes of earth and bark stole out to meet me. Impenetrable darkness faced me. Only the consciousness that I was obeying an order, strangely given, and including a mighty privilege, enabled me to find the courage to go forward and step in boldly under the trees.

Instantly the shadows closed in upon me and "something" came forward to meet me from the centre of the darkness. It would be easy enough to meet my imagination half-way with fact, and say that a cold hand grasped my own and led me by invisible paths into the unknown depths of the grove; but at any rate, without stumbling, and always with the positive knowledge that I was going straight towards the desired object, I pressed on confidently and securely into the wood. So dark was it that, at first, not a single star-beam pierced the roof of branches overhead; and, as we

moved forward side by side, the trees shifted silently past us in long lines, row upon row, squadron upon squadron, like the units of a vast, soundless army.

And, at length, we came to a comparatively open space where the trees halted upon us for a while, and, looking up, I saw the white river of the sky beginning to yield to the influence of a new light that now seemed spreading swiftly across the heavens.

"It is the dawn coming," said the voice at my side that I certainly recognized, but which seemed almost like a whispering from the trees, "and we are now in the heart of the Wood of the Dead."

We seated ourselves on a moss-covered boulder and waited the coming of the sun. With marvellous swiftness, it seemed to me, the light in the east passed into the radiance of early morning, and when the wind awoke and began to whisper in the tree tops, the first rays of the risen sun fell between the trunks and rested in a circle of gold at our feet.

"Now, come with me," whispered my companion in the same deep voice, "for time has no existence here, and that which I would show you is already *there*!"

We trod gently and silently over the soft pine needles. Already the sun was high over our heads, and the shadows of the trees coiled closely about their feet. The wood became denser again, but occasionally we passed through little open bits where we could smell the hot sunshine and the dry, baked pine needles. Then, presently, we came to the edge of the grove, and I saw a hayfield lying in the blaze of day, and two horses basking lazily with switching tails in the shafts of a laden hay-waggon.

So complete and vivid was the sense of reality, that I remember the grateful realization of the cool shade where we sat and looked out upon the hot world beyond.

The last pitchfork had tossed up its fragrant burden, and the great horses were already straining in the shafts after the driver, as he walked slowly in front with one hand upon their bridles. He was a stalwart fellow, with sunburned neck and hands. Then, for the first time, I noticed, perched aloft upon the trembling throne of hay, the figure of a slim young girl. I could not see her face, but her brown hair escaped in disorder from a white sun-bonnet, and her still browner hands held a well-worn hay rake. She was laughing and talking with the driver, and he, from time to time, cast up at her ardent glances of admiration—glances that won instant smiles and soft blushes in response.

The cart presently turned into the roadway that skirted the edge of the wood where we were sitting. I watched the scene with intense interest and became so much absorbed in it that I quite forgot the manifold, strange steps by which I was permitted to become a spectator.

"Come down and walk with me," cried the young fellow, stopping a moment in front of the horses and opening wide his arms. "Jump! and I'll catch you!"

"Oh, oh," she laughed, and her voice sounded to me as the happiest, merriest laughter I had ever heard from a girl's throat. "Oh, oh! that's all very well. But remember I'm Queen of the Hay, and I must ride!"

"Then I must come and ride beside you," he cried, and began at once to climb up by way of the driver's seat. But, with a peal of silvery laughter, she slipped down easily over the back of the hay to escape him, and ran a little way

along the road. I could see her quite clearly, and noticed the charming, natural grace of her movements, and the loving expression in her eyes as she looked over her shoulder to make sure he was following. Evidently, she did not wish to escape for long, certainly not for ever.

In two strides the big, brown swain was after her, leaving the horses to do as they pleased. Another second and his arms would have caught the slender waist and pressed the little body to his heart. But, just at that instant, the old man beside me uttered a peculiar cry. It was low and thrilling, and it went through me like a sharp sword.

HE had called her by her own name—and she had heard.

For a second she halted, glancing back with frightened eyes. Then, with a brief cry of despair, the girl swerved aside and dived in swiftly among the shadows of the trees.

But the young man saw the sudden movement and cried out to her passionately—

"Not that way, my love! Not that way! It's the Wood of the Dead!"

She threw a laughing glance over her shoulder at him, and the wind caught her hair and drew it out in a brown cloud under the sun. But the next minute she was close beside me, lying on the breast of my companion, and I was certain I heard the words repeatedly uttered with many sighs: "Father, you called, and I have come. And I come willingly, for I am very, very tired."

At any rate, so the words sounded to me, and mingled with them I seemed to catch the answer in that deep, thrilling whisper I already knew: "And you shall sleep, my child,

sleep for a long, long time, until it is time for you to begin the journey again."

In that brief second of time I had recognized the face and voice of the inn-keeper's daughter, but the next minute a dreadful wail broke from the lips of the young man, and the sky grew suddenly as dark as night, the wind rose and began to toss the branches about us, and the whole scene was swallowed up in a wave of utter blackness.

Again the chill fingers seemed to seize my hand, and I was guided by the way I had come to the edge of the wood, and crossing the hayfield still slumbering in the starlight, I crept back to the inn and went to bed.

A year later I happened to be in the same part of the country, and the memory of the strange summer vision returned to me with the added softness of distance. I went to the old village and had tea under the same orchard trees at the same inn.

But the little maid of the inn did not show her face, and I took occasion to enquire of her father as to her welfare and her whereabouts.

"Married, no doubt," I laughed, but with a strange feeling that clutched at my heart.

"No, sir," replied the inn-keeper sadly, "not married—though she was just going to be—but dead. She got a sunstroke in the hayfields, just a few days after you were here, if I remember rightly, and she was gone from us in less than a week."

Algernon Blackwood

Smith: An Episode in A Lodging-House

"When I was a medical student," began the doctor, half turning towards his circle of listeners in the firelight, "I came across one or two very curious human beings; but there was one fellow I remember particularly, for he caused me the most vivid, and I think the most uncomfortable, emotions I have ever known.

"For many months I knew Smith only by name as the occupant of the floor above me. Obviously his name meant nothing to me. Moreover I was busy with lectures, reading, cliniques and the like, and had little leisure to devise plans for scraping acquaintance with any of the other lodgers in the house. Then chance brought us curiously together, and this fellow Smith left a deep impression upon me as the result of our first meeting. At the time the strength of this first impression seemed quite inexplicable to me, but looking back at the episode now from a stand-point of greater knowledge I judge the fact to have been that he stirred my curiosity to an unusual degree, and at the same time awakened my sense of horror—whatever that may be in a medical student—about as deeply and permanently as these two emotions were capable of being stirred at all in the particular system and set of nerves called ME.

"How he knew that I was interested in the study of languages was something I could never explain, but one day, quite unannounced, he came quietly into my room in the evening and asked me point-blank if I knew enough Hebrew to help him in the pronunciation of certain words.

"He caught me along the line of least resistance, and I was greatly flattered to be able to give him the desired information; but it was only when he had thanked me and was gone that I realized I had been in the presence of an unusual individuality. For the life of me I could not quite seize and label the peculiarities of what I felt to be a very

striking personality, but it was borne in upon me that he was a man apart from his fellows, a mind that followed a line leading away from ordinary human intercourse and human interests, and into regions that left in his atmosphere something remote, rarefied, chilling.

"The moment he was gone I became conscious of two things—an intense curiosity to know more about this man and what his real interests were, and secondly, the fact that my skin was crawling and that my hair had a tendency to rise."

The doctor paused a moment here to puff hard at his pipe, which, however, had gone out beyond recall without the assistance of a match; and in the deep silence, which testified to the genuine interest of his listeners, someone poked the fire up into a little blaze, and one or two others glanced over their shoulders into the dark distances of the big hall.

"On looking back," he went on, watching the momentary flames in the grate, "I see a short, thick-set man of perhaps forty-five, with immense shoulders and small, slender hands. The contrast was noticeable, for I remember thinking that such a giant frame and such slim finger bones hardly belonged together. His head, too, was large and very long, the head of an idealist beyond all question, yet with an unusually strong development of the jaw and chin. Here again was a singular contradiction, though I am better able now to appreciate its full meaning, with a greater experience in judging the values of physiognomy. For this meant, of course, an enthusiastic idealism balanced and kept in check by will and judgment—elements usually deficient in dreamers and visionaries.

"At any rate, here was a being with probably a very wide range of possibilities, a machine with a pendulum that most likely had an unusual length of swing.

"The man's hair was exceedingly fine, and the lines about his nose and mouth were cut as with a delicate steel instrument in wax. His eyes I have left to the last. They were large and quite changeable, not in color only, but in character, size, and shape. Occasionally they seemed the eyes of someone else, if you can understand what I mean, and at the same time, in their shifting shades of blue, green, and a nameless sort of dark grey, there was a sinister light in them that lent to the whole face an aspect almost alarming. Moreover, they were the most luminous optics I think I have ever seen in any human being.

"There, then, at the risk of a wearisome description, is Smith as I saw him for the first time that winter's evening in my shabby student's rooms in Edinburgh. And yet the real part of him, of course, I have left untouched, for it is both indescribable and un-get-atable. I have spoken already of an atmosphere of warning and aloofness he carried about with him. It is impossible further to analyse the series of little shocks his presence always communicated to my being; but there was that about him which made me instantly on the *qui vive* in his presence, every nerve alert, every sense strained and on the watch. I do not mean that he deliberately suggested danger, but rather that he brought forces in his wake which automatically warned the nervous centres of my system to be on their guard and alert.

"Since the days of my first acquaintance with this man I have lived through other experiences and have seen much I cannot pretend to explain or understand; but, so far in my life, I have only once come across a human being who suggested a disagreeable familiarity with unholy things, and who made me feel uncanny and 'creepy' in his presence; and that unenviable individual was Mr. Smith.

"What his occupation was during the day I never knew. I think he slept until the sun set. No one ever saw him on the stairs, or heard him move in his room during the day. He

was a creature of the shadows, who apparently preferred darkness to light. Our landlady either knew nothing, or would say nothing. At any rate she found no fault, and I have since wondered often by what magic this fellow was able to convert a common landlady of a common lodging-house into a discreet and uncommunicative person. This alone was a sign of genius of some sort.

"'He's been here with me for years—long before you come, an' I don't interfere or ask no questions of what doesn't concern me, as long as people pays their rent,' was the only remark on the subject that I ever succeeded in winning from that quarter, and it certainly told me nothing nor gave me any encouragement to ask for further information.

"Examinations, however, and the general excitement of a medical student's life for a time put Mr. Smith completely out of my head. For a long period he did not call upon me again, and for my part, I felt no courage to return his unsolicited visit.

"Just then, however, there came a change in the fortunes of those who controlled my very limited income, and I was obliged to give up my ground-floor and move aloft to more modest chambers on the top of the house. Here I was directly over Smith, and had to pass his door to reach my own.

"It so happened that about this time I was frequently called out at all hours of the night for the maternity cases which a fourth-year student takes at a certain period of his studies, and on returning from one of these visits at about two o'clock in the morning I was surprised to hear the sound of voices as I passed his door. A peculiar sweet odour, too, not unlike the smell of incense, penetrated into the passage.

"I went upstairs very quietly, wondering what was going on there at this hour of the morning. To my knowledge Smith never had visitors. For a moment I hesitated outside the door with one foot on the stairs. All my interest in this strange man revived, and my curiosity rose to a point not far from action. At last I might learn something of the habits of this lover of the night and the darkness.

"The sound of voices was plainly audible, Smith's predominating so much that I never could catch more than points of sound from the other, penetrating now and then the steady stream of his voice. Not a single word reached me, at least, not a word that I could understand, though the voice was loud and distinct, and it was only afterwards that I realized he must have been speaking in a foreign language.

"The sound of footsteps, too, was equally distinct. Two persons were moving about the room, passing and repassing the door, one of them a light, agile person, and the other ponderous and somewhat awkward. Smith's voice went on incessantly with its odd, monotonous droning, now loud, now soft, as he crossed and re-crossed the floor. The other person was also on the move, but in a different and less regular fashion, for I heard rapid steps that seemed to end sometimes in stumbling, and quick sudden movements that brought up with a violent lurching against the wall or furniture.

"As I listened to Smith's voice, moreover, I began to feel afraid. There was something in the sound that made me feel intuitively he was in a tight place, and an impulse stirred faintly in me—very faintly, I admit—to knock at the door and inquire if he needed help.

"But long before the impulse could translate itself into an act, or even before it had been properly weighed and considered by the mind, I heard a voice close beside me in

the air, a sort of hushed whisper which I am certain was Smith speaking, though the sound did not seem to have come to me through the door. It was close in my very ear, as though he stood beside me, and it gave me such a start, that I clutched the banisters to save myself from stepping backwards and making a clatter on the stairs.

"'There is nothing you can do to help me,' it said distinctly, 'and you will be much safer in your own room.'

"I am ashamed to this day of the pace at which I covered the flight of stairs in the darkness to the top floor, and of the shaking hand with which I lit my candles and bolted the door. But, there it is, just as it happened.

"This midnight episode, so odd and yet so trivial in itself, fired me with more curiosity than ever about my fellow-lodger. It also made me connect him in my mind with a sense of fear and distrust. I never saw him, yet I was often, and uncomfortably, aware of his presence in the upper regions of that gloomy lodging-house. Smith and his secret mode of life and mysterious pursuits, somehow contrived to awaken in my being a line of reflection that disturbed my comfortable condition of ignorance. I never saw him, as I have said, and exchanged no sort of communication with him, yet it seemed to me that his mind was in contact with mine, and some of the strange forces of his atmosphere filtered through into my being and disturbed my equilibrium. Those upper floors became haunted for me after dark, and, though outwardly our lives never came into contact, I became unwillingly involved in certain pursuits on which his mind was centered. I felt that he was somehow making use of me against my will, and by methods which passed my comprehension.

"I was at that time, moreover, in the heavy, unquestioning state of materialism which is common to medical students when they begin to understand something of the human

anatomy and nervous system, and jump at once to the conclusion that they control the universe and hold in their forceps the last word of life and death. I 'knew it all,' and regarded a belief in anything beyond matter as the wanderings of weak, or at best, untrained minds. And this condition of mind, of course, added to the strength of this upsetting fear which emanated from the floor below and began slowly to take possession of me.

"Though I kept no notes of the subsequent events in this matter, they made too deep an impression for me ever to forget the sequence in which they occurred. Without difficulty I can recall the next step in the adventure with Smith, for adventure it rapidly grew to be."

The doctor stopped a moment and laid his pipe on the table behind him before continuing. The fire had burned low, and no one stirred to poke it. The silence in the great hall was so deep that when the speaker's pipe touched the table the sound woke audible echoes at the far end among the shadows.

"One evening, while I was reading, the door of my room opened and Smith came in. He made no attempt at ceremony. It was after ten o'clock and I was tired, but the presence of the man immediately galvanised me into activity. My attempts at ordinary politeness he thrust on one side at once, and began asking me to vocalise, and then pronounce for him, certain Hebrew words; and when this was done he abruptly inquired if I was not the fortunate possessor of a very rare Rabbinical Treatise, which he named.

"How he knew that I possessed this book puzzled me exceedingly; but I was still more surprised to see him cross the room and take it out of my book-shelf almost before I had had time to answer in the affirmative. Evidently he knew exactly where it was kept. This excited my curiosity

beyond all bounds, and I immediately began asking him questions; and though, out of sheer respect for the man, I put them very delicately to him, and almost by way of mere conversation, he had only one reply for the lot. He would look up at me from the pages of the book with an expression of complete comprehension on his extraordinary features, would bow his head a little and say very gravely—

"'That, of course, is a perfectly proper question,'—which was absolutely all I could ever get out of him.

"On this particular occasion he stayed with me perhaps ten or fifteen minutes. Then he went quickly downstairs to his room with my Hebrew Treatise in his hand, and I heard him close and bolt his door.

"But a few moments later, before I had time to settle down to my book again, or to recover from the surprise his visit had caused me, I heard the door open, and there stood Smith once again beside my chair. He made no excuse for his second interruption, but bent his head down to the level of my reading lamp and peered across the flame straight into my eyes.

"'I hope,' he whispered, 'I hope you are never disturbed at night?'

"'Eh?' I stammered, 'disturbed at night? Oh no, thanks, at least, not that I know of—'

"'I'm glad,' he replied gravely, appearing not to notice my confusion and surprise at his question. 'But, remember, should it ever be the case, please let me know at once.'

"And he was gone down the stairs and into his room again.

"For some minutes I sat reflecting upon his strange behavior. He was not mad, I argued, but was the victim of some harmless delusion that had gradually grown upon him as a result of his solitary mode of life; and from the books he used, I judged that it had something to do with medieval magic, or some system of ancient Hebrew mysticism. The words he asked me to pronounce for him were probably 'Words of Power,' which, when uttered with the vehemence of a strong will behind them, were supposed to produce physical results, or set up vibrations in one's own inner being that had the effect of a partial lifting of the veil.

"I sat thinking about the man, and his way of living, and the probable effects in the long-run of his dangerous experiments, and I can recall perfectly well the sensation of disappointment that crept over me when I realized that I had labelled his particular form of aberration, and that my curiosity would therefore no longer be excited.

"For some time I had been sitting alone with these reflections—it may have been ten minutes or it may have been half an hour—when I was aroused from my reverie by the knowledge that someone was again in the room standing close beside my chair. My first thought was that Smith had come back again in his swift, unaccountable manner, but almost at the same moment I realized that this could not be the case at all. For the door faced my position, and it certainly had not been opened again.

"Yet, someone was in the room, moving cautiously to and fro, watching me, almost touching me. I was as sure of it as I was of myself, and though at the moment I do not think I was actually afraid, I am bound to admit that a certain weakness came over me and that I felt that strange disinclination for action which is probably the beginning of the horrible paralysis of real terror. I should have been glad to hide myself, if that had been possible, to cower into

a corner, or behind a door, or anywhere so that I could not be watched and observed.

"But, overcoming my nervousness with an effort of the will, I got up quickly out of my chair and held the reading lamp aloft so that it shone into all the corners like a searchlight.

"The room was utterly empty! It was utterly empty, at least, to the *eye*, but to the nerves, and especially to that combination of sense perception which is made up by all the senses acting together, and by no one in particular, there was a person standing there at my very elbow.

"I say 'person,' for I can think of no appropriate word. For, if it *was* a human being, I can only affirm that I had the overwhelming conviction that it was *not*, but that it was some form of life wholly unknown to me both as to its essence and its nature. A sensation of gigantic force and power came with it, and I remember vividly to this day my terror on realizing that I was close to an invisible being who could crush me as easily as I could crush a fly, and who could see my every movement while itself remaining invisible.

"To this terror was added the certain knowledge that the 'being' kept in my proximity for a definite purpose. And that this purpose had some direct bearing upon my well-being, indeed upon my life, I was equally convinced; for I became aware of a sensation of growing lassitude as though the vitality were being steadily drained out of my body. My heart began to beat irregularly at first, then faintly. I was conscious, even within a few minutes, of a general drooping of the powers of life in the whole system, an ebbing away of self-control, and a distinct approach of drowsiness and torpor.

"The power to move, or to think out any mode of resistance, was fast leaving me, when there rose, in the distance as it were, a tremendous commotion. A door opened with a clatter, and I heard the peremptory and commanding tones of a human voice calling aloud in a language I could not comprehend. It was Smith, my fellow-lodger, calling up the stairs; and his voice had not sounded for more than a few seconds, when I felt something withdrawn from my presence, from my person, indeed from my*very skin*. It seemed as if there was a rushing of air and some large creature swept by me at about the level of my shoulders. Instantly the pressure on my heart was relieved, and the atmosphere seemed to resume its normal condition.

"Smith's door closed quietly downstairs, as I put the lamp down with trembling hands. What had happened I do not know; only, I was alone again and my strength was returning as rapidly as it had left me.

"I went across the room and examined myself in the glass. The skin was very pale, and the eyes dull. My temperature, I found, was a little below normal and my pulse faint and irregular. But these smaller signs of disturbance were as nothing compared with the feeling I had—though no outward signs bore testimony to the fact—that I had narrowly escaped a real and ghastly catastrophe. I felt shaken, somehow, shaken to the very roots of my being."

The doctor rose from his chair and crossed over to the dying fire, so that no one could see the expression on his face as he stood with his back to the grate, and continued his weird tale.

"It would be wearisome," he went on in a lower voice, looking over our heads as though he still saw the dingy top floor of that haunted Edinburgh lodging-house; "it would be tedious for me at this length of time to analyse my

feelings, or attempt to reproduce for you the thorough examination to which I endeavoured then to subject my whole being, intellectual, emotional, and physical. I need only mention the dominant emotion with which this curious episode left me—the indignant anger against myself that I could ever have lost my self-control enough to come under the sway of so gross and absurd a delusion. This protest, however, I remember making with all the emphasis possible. And I also remember noting that it brought me very little satisfaction, for it was the protest of my reason only, when all the rest of my being was up in arms against its conclusions.

"My dealings with the 'delusion,' however, were not yet over for the night; for very early next morning, somewhere about three o'clock, I was awakened by a curiously stealthy noise in the room, and the next minute there followed a crash as if all my books had been swept bodily from their shelf on to the floor.

"But this time I was not frightened. Cursing the disturbance with all the resounding and harmless words I could accumulate, I jumped out of bed and lit the candle in a second, and in the first dazzle of the flaring match—but before the wick had time to catch—I was certain I *saw* a dark grey shadow, of ungainly shape, and with something more or less like a human head, drive rapidly past the side of the wall farthest from me and disappear into the gloom by the angle of the door.

"I waited one single second to be sure the candle was alight, and then dashed after it, but before I had gone two steps, my foot stumbled against something hard piled up on the carpet and I only just saved myself from falling headlong. I picked myself up and found that all the books from what I called my 'language shelf' were strewn across the floor. The room, meanwhile, as a minute's search revealed, was quite empty. I looked in every corner and behind every stick of furniture, and a student's bedroom

on a top floor, costing twelve shillings a week, did not hold many available hiding-places, as you may imagine.

"The crash, however, was explained. Some very practical and physical force had thrown the books from their resting-place. That, at least, was beyond all doubt. And as I replaced them on the shelf and noted that not one was missing, I busied myself mentally with the sore problem of how the agent of this little practical joke had gained access to my room, and then escaped again. *For my door was locked and bolted.*

"Smith's odd question as to whether I was disturbed in the night, and his warning injunction to let him know at once if such were the case, now of course returned to affect me as I stood there in the early morning, cold and shivering on the carpet; but I realized at the same moment how impossible it would be for me to admit that a more than usually vivid nightmare could have any connection with himself. I would rather stand a hundred of these mysterious visitations than consult such a man as to their possible cause.

"A knock at the door interrupted my reflections, and I gave a start that sent the candle grease flying.

"'Let me in,' came in Smith's voice.

"I unlocked the door. He came in fully dressed. His face wore a curious pallor. It seemed to me to be under the skin and to shine through and almost make it luminous. His eyes were exceedingly bright.

"I was wondering what in the world to say to him, or how he would explain his visit at such an hour, when he closed the door behind him and came close up to me—uncomfortably close.

"'You should have called me at once,' he said in his whispering voice, fixing his great eyes on my face.

"I stammered something about an awful dream, but he ignored my remark utterly, and I caught his eye wandering next—if any movement of those optics can be described as 'wandering'—to the book-shelf. I watched him, unable to move my gaze from his person. The man fascinated me horribly for some reason. Why, in the devil's name, was he up and dressed at three in the morning? How did he know anything had happened unusual in my room? Then his whisper began again.

"'It's your amazing vitality that causes you this annoyance,' he said, shifting his eyes back to mine.

"I gasped. Something in his voice or manner turned my blood into ice.

"'That's the real attraction,' he went on. 'But if this continues one of us will have to leave, you know.'

"I positively could not find a word to say in reply. The channels of speech dried up within me. I simply stared and wondered what he would say next. I watched him in a sort of dream, and as far as I can remember, he asked me to promise to call him sooner another time, and then began to walk round the room, uttering strange sounds, and making signs with his arms and hands until he reached the door. Then he was gone in a second, and I had closed and locked the door behind him.

"After this, the Smith adventure drew rapidly to a climax. It was a week or two later, and I was coming home between two and three in the morning from a maternity case, certain features of which for the time being had very much taken possession of my mind, so much so, indeed,

that I passed Smith's door without giving him a single thought.

"The gas jet on the landing was still burning, but so low that it made little impression on the waves of deep shadow that lay across the stairs. Overhead, the faintest possible gleam of grey showed that the morning was not far away. A few stars shone down through the sky-light. The house was still as the grave, and the only sound to break the silence was the rushing of the wind round the walls and over the roof. But this was a fitful sound, suddenly rising and as suddenly falling away again, and it only served to intensify the silence.

"I had already reached my own landing when I gave a violent start. It was automatic, almost a reflex action in fact, for it was only when I caught myself fumbling at the door handle and thinking where I could conceal myself quickest that I realized a voice had sounded close beside me in the air. It was the same voice I had heard before, and it seemed to me to be calling for help. And yet the very same minute I pushed on into the room, determined to disregard it, and seeking to persuade myself it was the creaking of the boards under my weight or the rushing noise of the wind that had deceived me.

"But hardly had I reached the table where the candles stood when the sound was unmistakably repeated: 'Help! help!' And this time it was accompanied by what I can only describe as a vivid tactile hallucination. I was touched: the *skin* of my arm was clutched by fingers.

"Some compelling force sent me headlong downstairs as if the haunting forces of the whole world were at my heels. At Smith's door I paused. The force of his previous warning injunction to seek his aid without delay acted suddenly and I leant my whole weight against the panels, little

dreaming that I should be called upon to give help rather than to receive it.

"The door yielded at once, and I burst into a room that was so full of a choking vapour, moving in slow clouds, that at first I could distinguish nothing at all but a set of what seemed to be huge shadows passing in and out of the mist. Then, gradually, I perceived that a red lamp on the mantelpiece gave all the light there was, and that the room which I now entered for the first time was almost empty of furniture.

"The carpet was rolled back and piled in a heap in the corner, and upon the white boards of the floor I noticed a large circle drawn in black of some material that emitted a faint glowing light and was apparently smoking. Inside this circle, as well as at regular intervals outside it, were curious-looking designs, also traced in the same black, smoking substance. These, too, seemed to emit a feeble light of their own.

"My first impression on entering the room had been that it was full of—*people*, I was going to say; but that hardly expresses my meaning. *Beings*, they certainly were, but it was borne in upon me beyond the possibility of doubt, that they were not human beings. That I had caught a momentary glimpse of living, intelligent entities I can never doubt, but I am equally convinced, though I cannot prove it, that these entities were from some other scheme of evolution altogether, and had nothing to do with the ordinary human life, either incarnate or discarnate.

"But, whatever they were, the visible appearance of them was exceedingly fleeting. I no longer saw anything, though I still felt convinced of their immediate presence. They were, moreover, of the same order of life as the visitant in my bedroom of a few nights before, and their proximity to my atmosphere in numbers, instead of singly as before,

conveyed to my mind something that was quite terrible and overwhelming. I fell into a violent trembling, and the perspiration poured from my face in streams.

"They were in constant motion about me. They stood close to my side; moved behind me; brushed past my shoulder; stirred the hair on my forehead; and circled round me without ever actually touching me, yet always pressing closer and closer. Especially in the air just over my head there seemed ceaseless movement, and it was accompanied by a confused noise of whispering and sighing that threatened every moment to become articulate in words. To my intense relief, however, I heard no distinct words, and the noise continued more like the rising and falling of the wind than anything else I can imagine.

"But the characteristic of these 'Beings' that impressed me most strongly at the time, and of which I have carried away the most permanent recollection, was that each one of them possessed what seemed to be a *vibrating centre* which impelled it with tremendous force and caused a rapid whirling motion of the atmosphere as it passed me. The air was full of these little vortices of whirring, rotating force, and whenever one of them pressed me too closely I felt as if the nerves in that particular portion of my body had been literally drawn out, absolutely depleted of vitality, and then immediately replaced—but replaced dead, flabby, useless.

"Then, suddenly, for the first time my eyes fell upon Smith. He was crouching against the wall on my right, in an attitude that was obviously defensive, and it was plain he was in extremities. The terror on his face was pitiable, but at the same time there was another expression about the tightly clenched teeth and mouth which showed that he had not lost all control of himself. He wore the most resolute expression I have ever seen on a human countenance, and, though for the moment at a fearful disadvantage, he looked like a man who had confidence in

himself, and, in spite of the working of fear, was waiting his opportunity.

"For my part, I was face to face with a situation so utterly beyond my knowledge and comprehension, that I felt as helpless as a child, and as useless.

"'Help me back—quick—into that circle,' I heard him half cry, half whisper to me across the moving vapours.

"My only value appears to have been that I was not afraid to act. Knowing nothing of the forces I was dealing with I had no idea of the deadly perils risked, and I sprang forward and caught him by the arms. He threw all his weight in my direction, and by our combined efforts his body left the wall and lurched across the floor towards the circle.

"Instantly there descended upon us, out of the empty air of that smoke-laden room, a force which I can only compare to the pushing, driving power of a great wind pent up within a narrow space. It was almost explosive in its effect, and it seemed to operate upon all parts of my body equally. It fell upon us with a rushing noise that filled my ears and made me think for a moment the very walls and roof of the building had been torn asunder. Under its first blow we staggered back against the wall, and I understood plainly that its purpose was to prevent us getting back into the circle in the middle of the floor.

"Pouring with perspiration, and breathless, with every muscle strained to the very utmost, we at length managed to get to the edge of the circle, and at this moment, so great was the opposing force, that I felt myself actually torn from Smith's arms, lifted from my feet, and twirled round in the direction of the windows as if the wheel of some great

machine had caught my clothes and was tearing me to destruction in its revolution.

"But, even as I fell, bruised and breathless, against the wall, I saw Smith firmly upon his feet in the circle and slowly rising again to an upright position. My eyes never left his figure once in the next few minutes.

"He drew himself up to his full height. His great shoulders squared themselves. His head was thrown back a little, and as I looked I saw the expression on his face change swiftly from fear to one of absolute command. He looked steadily round the room and then his voice began to *vibrate*. At first in a low tone, it gradually rose till it assumed the same volume and intensity I had heard that night when he called up the stairs into my room.

"It was a curiously increasing sound, more like the swelling of an instrument than a human voice; and as it grew in power and filled the room, I became aware that a great change was being effected slowly and surely. The confusion of noise and rushings of air fell into the roll of long, steady vibrations not unlike those caused by the deeper pedals of an organ. The movements in the air became less violent, then grew decidedly weaker, and finally ceased altogether. The whisperings and sightings became fainter and fainter, till at last I could not hear them at all; and, strangest of all, the light emitted by the circle, as well as by the designs round it, increased to a steady glow, casting their radiance upwards with the weirdest possible effect upon his features. Slowly, by the power of his voice, behind which lay undoubtedly a genuine knowledge of the occult manipulation of sound, this man dominated the forces that had escaped from their proper sphere, until at length the room was reduced to silence and perfect order again.

"Judging by the immense relief which also communicated itself to my nerves I then felt that the crisis was over and Smith was wholly master of the situation.

"But hardly had I begun to congratulate myself upon this result, and to gather my scattered senses about me, when, uttering a loud cry, I saw him leap out of the circle and fling himself into the air—as it seemed to me, into the empty air. Then, even while holding my breath for dread of the crash he was bound to come upon the floor, I saw him strike with a dull thud against a solid body in mid-air, and the next instant he was wrestling with some ponderous thing that was absolutely invisible to me, and the room shook with the struggle.

"To and fro *they* swayed, sometimes lurching in one direction, sometimes in another, and always in horrible proximity to myself, as I leaned trembling against the wall and watched the encounter.

"It lasted at most but a short minute or two, ending as suddenly as it had begun. Smith, with an unexpected movement, threw up his arms with a cry of relief. At the same instant there was a wild, tearing shriek in the air beside me and something rushed past us with a noise like the passage of a flock of big birds. Both windows rattled as if they would break away from their sashes. Then a sense of emptiness and peace suddenly came over the room, and I knew that all was over.

"Smith, his face exceedingly white, but otherwise strangely composed, turned to me at once.

"'God!—if you hadn't come—You deflected the stream; broke it up—' he whispered. 'You saved me.'"

The doctor made a long pause. Presently he felt for his pipe in the darkness, groping over the table behind us with both hands. No one spoke for a bit, but all dreaded the sudden glare that would come when he struck the match. The fire was nearly out and the great hall was pitch dark.

But the story-teller did not strike that match. He was merely gaining time for some hidden reason of his own. And presently he went on with his tale in a more subdued voice.

"I quite forget," he said, "how I got back to my own room. I only know that I lay with two lighted candles for the rest of the night, and the first thing I did in the morning was to let the landlady know I was leaving her house at the end of the week.

"Smith still has my Rabbinical Treatise. At least he did not return it to me at the time, and I have never seen him since to ask for it."

Algernon Blackwood