Dream Trespass

by Algernon Blackwood

The little feathers of the dusk were drifting through the autumn leaves when we came so unexpectedly upon the inn that was not marked upon our big-scaled map. And most opportunely, for Ducommun, my friend, was clearly overtired. An irritability foreign to his placid temperament had made the last few hours' trudge a little difficult, and I felt we had reached that narrow frontier which lies between non-success and failure.

"Another five miles to the inn we chose this morning," I told him "but we'll soon manage it at a steady pace."

And he groaned, "I'm done! I simply couldn't do it."

He sank down upon the bit of broken wall to rest, while the darkness visibly increased, and the wind blew damp and chill across the marshes on our left. But behind the petulance of his tone, due to exhaustion solely, lay something else as well, something that had been accumulating for days. For our walking tour had not turned out quite to measure, distances always under-calculated; the inns, moreover, bad; the people surly and inhospitable; even the weather cross.

And Ducommun's disappointment had in a sense been double, so that I felt keen sympathy with him. For this was the country where his ancestors once reigned as proprietors, grand seigneurs, and the rest; he had always longed to visit it; and secretly in his imagination had cherished a reconstructed picture in which he himself would somehow play some high, distinguished role his proud blood entitled him to. Clerk to-day in a mere insurance office, but descendant of romantic, ancient stock, he knew the history of the period intimately; the holiday had been carefully, lovingly planned; and—the unpleasantness of the inhabitants had shattered his dream thus fostered and so keenly anticipated. The breaking-point had been reached. Was not this inn we hoped to reach by dark a portion of the very chateau—he had established it from musty records enough—where once his family dwelt in old-time splendour? And had he not indulged all manner of delightful secret dreaming in advance? . . .

It was here, then, returning from a little private reconnoitring on my own account, that I reported my brave discovery of an unexpected half-way house, and found him almost asleep upon the stones, unwilling to believe the short half-mile I promised. "Only another nest of robbery and insolence," he laughed sourly, "and, anyhow, not the inn we counted on." He dragged after me in silence, eyeing askance the tumbled, ivy-covered shanty that stood beside the roadway, yet gladly going in ahead of me to rest his weary limbs, and troubling himself no whit with bargaining that he divined might be once more unpleasant.

Yet the inn proved a surprise in another way—it was entirely delightful. There was a glowing fire of peat in a biggish hall, the *patron* and his wife were all smiles and pleasure, welcoming us with an old-fashioned dignity that made bargaining impossible, and in ten minutes we felt as much at home as if we had arrived at a country house where we had been long expected.

"So few care to stop here now," the old woman told us, with a gracious gesture that was courtly rather than deferential, "we stand no longer upon the old high road," and showed in a hundred nameless ways that all they had was entirely at our disposal. Till even Ducommun melted and turned soft: "Only in France could this happen," he whispered with a touch of pride, as though claiming that this fragrance of gentle life, now fast disappearing from the world, still lingered in the land of his descent and in his own blood too. He patted the huge, rough deer-hound that seemed to fill the little room where we awaited supper, and the friendly creature, bounding with a kind of subdued affection, added another touch of welcome. His face and manners were evidence of kind treatment; he was proud of his owners and of his owners' guests. I thought of well-loved pets in our English country houses. "This beast," I laughed, "has surely lived with gentlemen." And Ducommun took the compliment to himself with personal satisfaction.

It is difficult to tell afterwards with accuracy the countless little touches that made the picture all so gentle—they were so delicately suggested, painted in silently with such deft spiritual discretion. It stands out in my memory, set in some strange, high light, as the most enchanting experience of many a walking tour; and yet, about it all, like a veil of wonder that evades description, an atmosphere of something at the same time—I use the best available word—truly singular. This touch of something remote, indefinite, unique, began to steal over me from the very first, bringing with it an incalculable, queer charm. It lulled like a drug all possible suspicions. And in my friend—detail of the picture nearest to my heart, that is—it first betrayed itself, with a degree of surprise,

moreover, not entirely removed from shock.

For as he passed before me underneath that low-browed porch, quite undeniably he altered. This indefinable change clothed his entire presentment to my eyes; to tired eyes, I freely grant, as also that it was dusk, and that the transforming magic of the peat fire was behind him. Yet, eschewing paragraphs of vain description, I may put a portion of it crudely thus, perhaps: that his lankiness turned suddenly all grace; the atmosphere of the London office stool, as of the clerk a-holidaying, vanished; and that the way he "bowed his head to enter the dark-beamed lintel of the door was courtly and high bred, instinct with native elegance, and in the real sense aristocratic. It came with an instant and complete conviction. It was wonderful to see; and it gave me a moment's curious enchantment. All that I divined and loved in the man, usually somewhat buried, came forth upon the surface. A note of explanation followed readily enough, half explanation at any rate—that houses alter people because, like dressing-up with women and children, they furnish a new setting to the general appearance, and the points one is accustomed to undergo a readjustment. Yet with him this subtle alteration did not pass; it not only clung to him during the entire evening, but most curiously increased. He maintained, indeed, his silence the whole time, but it was a happy, dreaming silence holding the charm of real companionship, his disappointment gone as completely as the memory of our former cheerless inns and ill-conditioned people. I cannot pretend, though, that I really watched him carefully, since an attack from another quarter divided my attention equally, and the charm of the daughter of the house, in whose eyes, it seemed to me, lay all the quiet sadness of the country we had walked through—*triste, marne*, forsaken land—claimed a great part of my observant sympathy. The old people left us entirely to her care, and the way she looked after us, divining our wants before we ventured to express them, was more suggestive of the perfect hostess than merely of someone who would take payment for all that she supplied. The question of money, indeed, did not once intrude, though I cannot say whence came my impression that this hospitality was, in fact, offered without the least idea of remuneration in silver and gold. That it did come, I can swear; also, that behind it lay no suggestion of stiff prices to be demanded at the last moment on the plea that terms had not been settled in advance. We were made welcome like expected guests, and my heart leaped to encounter this spirit of old-fashioned courtesy that the greed of modern life has everywhere destroyed.

"To-morrow or the next day, when you are rested," said the maiden softly, sitting beside us after supper and tending the fire, I will take you through the *Allee des tilleuls* towards the river, and show you where the fishing is so good."

For it seemed natural that she should sit and chat with us, and only afterwards I remembered sharply that the river was a good five miles from where we housed, across marshes that could boast no trees at all, *tilleuls* least of all, and of avenues not a vestige anywhere.

"We'll start," Ducommun answered promptly, taking my breath a little, "in the dawn"; and presently then made signs to go to bed.

She brought the candles, lit them for us with a spill of paper from the peat, and handed one to each, a little smile of yearning in her deep, soft eyes that I remember to this day.

"You will sleep long and well," she said half shyly, accompanying us to the foot of the stairs. "I made and aired the beds with my own hands."

And the last I saw of her, as we turned the landing corner overhead, was her graceful figure against the darkness, with the candle-light falling upon the coiled masses of her dark-brown hair. She gazed up after us with those large grey eyes that seemed to me so full of yearning, and yet so sad, so patient, so curiously resigned...

Ducommun pulled me almost roughly by the arm. "Come," he said with sudden energy, and as though everything was settled. "We have an early start, remember!"

I moved unwillingly; it was all so strange and dreamlike, the beauty of the girl so enchanting, the change in himself so utterly perplexing.

"It's like staying with friends in a country house," I murmured, lingering in a moment of bewilderment by his door. "Old family retainers almost, proud and delighted to put one up, eh?"

And his answer was so wholly unexpected that I waited, staring blankly into his altered eyes:

"I only hope we shall get away all right," he muttered. "I mean, that is get off."

Evidently his former mood had flashed a moment back. "You feel tired?" I suggested sympathetically, "so do I."

"Dog-tired, yes," he answered shortly, then added in a slow, suggestive whisper—"And I feel cold, too—extraordinarily cold."

The significant, cautious way he said it made me start. But before I could prate of chills and remedies, he quickly shut the door upon me, leaving those last words ringing in my brain "cold, extraordinarily cold." And an inkling stole over me of what he meant I uninvited and unwelcome it came, then passed at once, leaving a vague uneasiness behind. For the cold he spoke of surely was not bodily cold. About my own heart, too, moved some strange touch of chill. Cold sought an entrance. But it was not common cold. Rather it was in the mind and thoughts, and settled down upon the spirit. In describing his own sensations he had also described my own; for something at the very heart of me seemed turning numb....

I got quickly into bed. The night was still and windless, but, though I was tired, sleep held long away. Uneasiness continued to affect me. I lay, listening to the blood hurrying along the thin walls of my veins, singing and murmuring, and, when at length I dropped off, two vivid pictures haunted me into unconsciousness—his face in the doorway as he made that last remark, and the face of the girl as she had peered up so yearningly at him over the shaded candle.

Then—at once, it seemed—I was wide awake again, aware, however, that an interval had passed, but aware also of another thing that was incredible, and somehow dreadful, namely, that while I slept, the house had undergone a change. It caught me, shivering in my bed, utterly unprepared, as though unfair advantage had been taken of me while I lay unconscious. This startling idea of external alteration made me shudder. How I so instantly divined it lies beyond all explanation. I somehow realised that, while the room I woke in was the same as before, the building of which it formed a little member had known in the darkness some transmuting, substituting change that had turned it otherwise. My terror I also cannot explain, nor why, almost immediately, instead of increasing, it subtly shifted into that numbness I have already mentioned—a curious, deep bemusement of the spirit that robbed it of really acute distress. It seemed as if only a part of me—the wakened part—knew what was going on, and that some other part remained in sleep and ignorance.

For the house was now enormous. It *had* experienced this weird transformation. The roof, I somehow knew, rose soaring through the darkness; the walls ran over acres; it had towers, wings, and battlements, broad balconies, and magnificent windows. It had grown both dignified and ancient and had swallowed up our little inn as comfortably as a palace includes a single bedroom. The blackness about me of course concealed it, but I *felt* the yawning corridors, the gape of lofty halls, high ceilings, spacious chambers, till I seemed lost in the being of some stately building that extended itself with imposing majesty upon the night.

Then came the instinct—more, perhaps, a driving impulse than a mere suggestion—to go out and see. See what? I asked myself, as I made my way towards the window gropingly, unwilling or afraid to strike a light. And the answer, utterly without explanation, came hard and sharp like this—

"To catch them on the lawn."

And the curious phrase I knew was right, for the surroundings had changed equally with the house. I drew aside the curtain and peered out upon a lawn that a few hours ago had been surely a rather desolate, plain roadway, and beyond it into spacious gardens, bounded by park-like timber, where before had been but dreary, half-cultivated fields.

Through a risen mist the light of the moon shone faintly, and everywhere my sight confirmed the singular impression of extension I have mentioned, for away to the left another mass of masonry that was like the wing of some great mansion rose dimly through the air, and beneath my very eyes a projecting balcony obscured pathways and beds of flowers. Next, where a gleam of moonlight caught it, I saw the broad, slow bend of river edging the lawn through clumps of willows. Even the river had come close. And while I stared, striving to force from so much illusion a single fact that might explain, a little tree upon the lawn just underneath moved slightly nearer, and I saw it was a human figure—a figure that I recognised. Wrapped in some long, loose garment, the daughter of the house stood there in an attitude of waiting. And the waiting was at once explained, for another figure—this time the figure of a man that seemed to me both strange and familiar at the same time—emerged from the shadows of the house to join her. She slipped into his arms. Then came a sound of horses neighing in their stalls, and the couple moved away with sudden swiftness silently as ghosts, disappearing in the mist while three minutes later I heard the crunch of hoofs on gravel, dying rapidly away into the distance of the night.

And here a sudden, wild reaction, not easy of analysis, rushed over me, as if that other part of me that had not waked now came sharply to the rescue, set free from the inhibition of some drug. I felt anger, disgust, resentment, and a wave of indignation that

somehow I was being tricked. Impulsively—there seemed no time for judgment or reflection—I crossed the landing, now so oddly deep and lofty, and, without knocking, ran headlong into my friend's room. The bed, I saw at once, was empty, the sheets not even lain in. The furniture was in disorder, garments strewn about the floor, signs of precipitate flight in all directions. And Ducommun, of course, was gone.

What happened next confuses me when I try to think of it, for my only recollection is of hurrying distractedly to and fro between his bedroom and my own. There was a rush and scuttling in the darkness, and then I blundered heavily against walls or furniture or both, and the darkness rose up over my mind with a smothering thick curtain that blinded everything . . . and I came to my senses in the open road, my friend standing over me, enormous in the dusk, and the bit of broken wall where he had rested while I reconnoitred, just behind us. The moon was rising, the air was damp and chill, and he was shouting in my ear, "I thought you were never coming back again. I'm rested now. We'd better hurry on and do those beastly five miles to the inn."

We started, walking so briskly that we reached it in something over seventy minutes, and passing on the way no single vestige of a house nor of any kind of building. I was the silent one, but when Ducommun talked it was only to curse the desolate, sad country, and wonder why his forbears had ever chosen such a wilderness to live in. And when at length we put up at this inn which he made out was a part of his original family estate, he spent the evening poring over maps and papers, by means of which he admitted finally his calculations were all wrong. "The house itself," he said, "must have stood farther back along the road we came by. The river, you see," pointing to the dirty old chart, "has changed its course a bit since then. Its older bed lay much nearer to the chateau, flanking the garden lawn below the park." And he pointed again to the place with a finger that obviously now held office pens.

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