The Wood of the Dead

by Algernon Blackwood

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 colourings 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 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 odour 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 coun-
try 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
neighbourhood?"

"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 flow-
er 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 aston
ishment on hearing so poetic an utterance from
such a figure of a man, though at the same time
realising 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—"

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 man-
er 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 unaccount-
able 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 par-  

tial lifting of the veil had its undeniable effect  
upon me.

The breeze from the sea had died away out-  
side, and the blossoms were still. A yellow butter-  
fly floated lazily past the window. The song of the  
birds hushed—I smelt the sea—I smelt the per-  
fume 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 yearn-  
ing 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 realised and understood that plea-  
sure 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 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 light-  
ness and power began to steal over me.

Suddenly the door opened and the inn-  
keeper's daughter came in. By all ordinary stan-  
dards, 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 sur-  
prise 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, com-  
ing closer to my chair with a little nervous move-  
ment 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 supersti-  
tion that had obviously gathered with the years  
round the memory of a strangely picturesque fig-  
ure, 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

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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 school-house 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 recognised, 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-wagon.

So complete and vivid was the sense of reality, that I remember the grateful realisation 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 recognised 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