



The Wood of the Dead

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 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 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 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 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 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 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--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 realised 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 sunburn 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 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-waggon.

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 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."

The Woman's Ghost Story by Algernon Blackwood

"Yes," she said, from her seat in the dark corner, "I'll tell you an experience if you care to listen. And, what's more, I'll tell it briefly, without trimmings--I mean without unessentials. That's a thing story-tellers never do, you know," she laughed. "They drag in all the unessentials and leave their listeners to disentangle; but I'll give you just the essentials, and you can make of it what you please. But on one condition: that at the end you ask no questions, because I can't explain it and have no wish to."

We agreed. We were all serious. After listening to a dozen prolix stories from people who merely wished to "talk" but had nothing to tell, we wanted "essentials."

"In those days," she began, feeling from the quality of our silence that we were with her, "in those days I was interested in psychic things, and had arranged to sit up alone in a haunted house in the middle of London. It was a cheap and dingy lodging-house in a mean street, unfurnished. I had already made a preliminary examination in daylight that afternoon, and the keys from the caretaker, who lived next door, were in my pocket. The story was a good one--satisfied me, at any rate, that it was worth investigating; and I won't weary you with details as to the woman's murder and all the tiresome elaboration as to why the place was alive. Enough that it was.

"I was a good deal bored, therefore, to see a man, whom I took to be the talkative old caretaker, waiting for me on the steps when I went in at 11 P.M., for I had sufficiently explained that I wished to be there alone for the night.

"I wished to show you the room,' he mumbled, and of course I couldn't exactly refuse, having tipped him for the temporary loan of a chair and table.

"Come in, then, and let's be quick,' I said.

"We went in, he shuffling after me through the unlighted hall up to the first floor where the murder had taken place, and I prepared myself to hear his inevitable account before turning him out with the half-crown his persistence had earned. After lighting the gas I sat down in the arm-chair he had provided--a faded, brown plush arm-chair--and turned for the first time to face him and get through with the performance as quickly as possible. And it was in that instant I got my first shock. The man was not the caretaker. It was not the old fool, Carey, I had interviewed earlier in the day and made my plans with. My heart gave a horrid jump.

"Now who are you, pray?' I said. 'You're not Carey, the man I arranged with this afternoon. Who are you?'

"I felt uncomfortable, as you may imagine. I was a 'psychical researcher,' and a young woman of new tendencies, and proud of my liberty, but I did not care to find myself in an empty house with a stranger. Something of my confidence left me. Confidence with women, you know, is all humbug after a certain point. Or perhaps you don't know, for most of you are men. But anyhow my pluck ebbed in a quick rush, and I felt afraid.

"Who are you?' I repeated quickly and nervously. The fellow was well dressed, youngish and good-looking, but with a face of great sadness. I myself was barely thirty. I am giving you essentials, or I would not mention it. Out of quite ordinary things comes this story. I think that's why it has value.

"No,' he said; 'I'm the man who was frightened to death.'

"His voice and his words ran through me like a knife, and I felt ready to drop. In my pocket was the book I had bought to make notes in. I felt the pencil sticking in the socket. I felt, too, the extra warm things I had put on to sit up in, as no bed or sofa was available--a hundred things dashed through my mind, foolishly and without sequence or meaning, as the way is when one is really frightened. Unessentials leaped up and puzzled me, and I thought of what the papers might say if it came out, and what my 'smart' brother-in-law would think, and whether it would be told that I had cigarettes in my pocket, and was a free-thinker.

"The man who was frightened to death!' I repeated aghast.

"That's me,' he said stupidly.

"I stared at him just as you would have done--any one of you men now listening to me--and felt my life ebbing and flowing like a sort of hot fluid. You needn't laugh! That's how I felt. Small things, you know, touch the mind with great earnestness when terror is there--_real terror_. But I might have been at a middle-class tea-party, for all the ideas I had: they were so ordinary!

"But I thought you were the caretaker I tipped this afternoon to let me sleep here!' I gasped. 'Did--did Carey send you to meet me?'

"No,' he replied in a voice that touched my boots somehow. 'I am the man who was frightened to death. And what is more, I am frightened _now_!'

"So am I!' I managed to utter, speaking instinctively. 'I'm simply terrified.'

"Yes,' he replied in that same odd voice that seemed to sound within me. 'But you are still in the flesh, and I--_am not_!'

"I felt the need for vigorous self-assertion. I stood up in that empty, unfurnished room, digging the nails into my palms and clenching my teeth. I was determined to assert my individuality and my courage as a new woman and a free soul.

"You mean to say you are not in the flesh!' I gasped. 'What in the world are you talking about?'

"The silence of the night swallowed up my voice. For the first time I realized that darkness was over the city; that dust lay upon the stairs; that the floor above was untenanted and the floor below empty. I was alone in an unoccupied and haunted house, unprotected, and a woman. I chilled. I heard the wind round the house, and knew the stars were hidden. My thoughts rushed to policemen and omnibuses, and everything that was useful and comforting. I suddenly realized what a fool I was to come to such a house alone. I was icily afraid. I thought the end of my life had come. I was an utter fool to go in for psychical research when I had not the necessary nerve.

"Good God!' I gasped. 'If you're not Carey, the man I arranged with, who are you?'

"I was really stiff with terror. The man moved slowly towards me across the empty room. I held out my arm to stop him, getting up out of my chair at the same moment, and he came to halt just opposite to me, a smile on his worn, sad face.

"I told you who I am,' he repeated quietly with a sigh, looking at me with the saddest eyes I have ever seen, 'and I am frightened _still_.'

"By this time I was convinced that I was entertaining either a rogue or a madman, and I cursed my stupidity in bringing the man in without having seen his face. My mind was quickly made up, and I knew what to do. Ghosts and psychic phenomena flew to the winds. If I angered the creature my life might pay the price. I must humor him till I got to the door, and then race for the street. I stood bolt upright and faced him. We were about of a height, and I was a strong, athletic woman who played hockey in winter and climbed Alps in summer. My hand itched for a stick, but I had none.

"Now, of course, I remember,' I said with a sort of stiff smile that was very hard to force. 'Now I remember your case and the wonderful way you behaved'

"The man stared at me stupidly, turning his head to watch me as I backed more and more quickly to the door. But when his face broke into a smile I could control myself no longer. I reached the door in a run, and shot out on to the landing. Like a fool, I turned the wrong way, and stumbled over the stairs leading to the next story. But it was too late to change. The man was after me, I was sure, though no sound of footsteps came; and I dashed up the next flight, tearing my skirt and banging my ribs in the darkness, and rushed headlong into the first room I came to. Luckily the door stood ajar, and, still more fortunate, there was a key in the lock. In a second I had slammed the door, flung my whole weight against it, and turned the key.

"I was safe, but my heart was beating like a drum. A second later it seemed to stop altogether, for I saw that there was some one else in the room besides myself. A man's figure stood between me and the windows, where the street lamps gave just enough light to outline his shape against the glass. I'm a plucky woman, you know, for

even then I didn't give up hope, but I may tell you that I have never felt so vilely frightened in all my born days. I had locked myself in with him!

"The man leaned against the window, watching me where I lay in a collapsed heap upon the floor. So there were two men in the house with me, I reflected. Perhaps other rooms were occupied too! What could it all mean? But, as I stared something changed in the room, or in me--hard to say which--and I realized my mistake, so that my fear, which had so far been physical, at once altered its character and became psychical. I became afraid in my soul instead of in my heart, and I knew immediately who this man was.

"How in the world did you get up here?" I stammered to him across the empty room, amazement momentarily stemming my fear.

"Now, let me tell you," he began, in that odd faraway voice of his that went down my spine like a knife. "I'm in different space, for one thing, and you'd find me in any room you went into; for according to your way of measuring, I'm all over the house. Space is a bodily condition, but I am out of the body, and am not affected by space. It's my condition that keeps me here. I want something to change my condition for me, for then I could get away. What I want is sympathy. Or, really, more than sympathy; I want affection--I want love!"

"While he was speaking I gathered myself slowly upon my feet. I wanted to scream and cry and laugh all at once, but I only succeeded in sighing, for my emotion was exhausted and a numbness was coming over me. I felt for the matches in my pocket and made a movement towards the gas jet.

"I should be much happier if you didn't light the gas," he said at once, "for the vibrations of your light hurt me a good deal. You need not be afraid that I shall injure you. I can't touch your body to begin with, for there's a great gulf fixed, you know; and really this half-light suits me best. Now, let me continue what I was trying to say before. You know, so many people have come to this house to see me, and most of them have seen me, and one and all have been terrified. If only, oh, if only some one would be not terrified, but kind and loving to me! Then, you see, I might be able to change my condition and get away."

"His voice was so sad that I felt tears start somewhere at the back of my eyes; but fear kept all else in check, and I stood shaking and cold as I listened to him.

"Who are you then? Of course Carey didn't send you, I know now," I managed to utter. My thoughts scattered dreadfully and I could think of nothing to say. I was afraid of a stroke.

"I know nothing about Carey, or who he is," continued the man quietly, "and the name my body had I have forgotten, thank God; but I am the man who was frightened to death in this house ten years ago, and I have been frightened ever since, and am frightened still; for the succession of cruel and curious people who come to this house to see the ghost, and thus keep alive its atmosphere of terror, only helps to render my condition worse. If only some one would be kind to me-- laugh, speak gently and rationally with me, cry if they like, pity, comfort, soothe me--anything but come here in curiosity and tremble as you are now doing in that corner. Now, madam, won't you take pity on me?" His voice rose to a dreadful cry. "Won't you step out into the middle of the room and try to love me a little?"

"A horrible laughter came gurgling up in my throat as I heard him, but the sense of pity was stronger than the laughter, and I found myself actually leaving the support of the wall and approaching the center of the floor.

"By God!" he cried, at once straightening up against the window, "you have done a kind act. That's the first attempt at sympathy that has been shown me since I died, and I feel better already. In life, you know, I was a misanthrope. Everything went wrong with me, and I came to hate my fellow men so much that I couldn't bear to see them even. Of course, like begets like, and this hate was returned. Finally I suffered from horrible delusions, and my room became haunted with demons that laughed and grimaced, and one night I ran into a whole cluster of them near the bed--and the fright stopped my heart and killed me. It's hate and remorse, as much as terror, that clogs me so thickly and keeps me here. If only some one could feel pity, and sympathy, and perhaps a little love for me, I could get away and be happy. When you came this afternoon to see over the house I watched you, and a little hope came to me for the first time. I saw you had courage, originality, resource-- love. If only I could touch your heart, without frightening you, I knew I could perhaps tap that love you have stored up in your being there, and thus borrow the wings for my escape!"

"Now I must confess my heart began to ache a little, as fear left me and the man's words sank their sad meaning into me. Still, the whole affair was so incredible, and so touched with unholy quality, and the story of a woman's murder I had come to investigate had so obviously nothing to do with this thing, that I felt myself in a kind of wild dream that seemed likely to stop at any moment and leave me somewhere in bed after a nightmare.

"Moreover, his words possessed me to such an extent that I found it impossible to reflect upon anything else at all, or to consider adequately any ways or means of action or escape.

"I moved a little nearer to him in the gloom, horribly frightened, of course, but with the beginnings of a strange determination in my heart.

"'You women,' he continued, his voice plainly thrilling at my approach, 'you wonderful women, to whom life often brings no opportunity of spending your great love, oh, if you only could know how many of _us_ simply yearn for it! It would save our souls, if but you knew. Few might find the chance that you now have, but if you only spent your love freely, without definite object, just letting it flow openly for all who need, you would reach hundreds and thousands of souls like me, and _release us_! Oh, madam, I ask you again to feel with me, to be kind and gentle--and if you can to love me a little!'

"My heart did leap within me and this time the tears did come, for I could not restrain them. I laughed too, for the way he called me 'madam' sounded so odd, here in this empty room at midnight in a London street, but my laughter stopped dead and merged in a flood of weeping when I saw how my change of feeling affected him. He had left his place by the window and was kneeling on the floor at my feet, his hands stretched out towards me, and the first signs of a kind of glory about his head.

"'Put your arms round me and kiss me, for the love of God!' he cried. 'Kiss me, oh, kiss me, and I shall be freed! You have done so much already--now do this!'

"I stuck there, hesitating, shaking, my determination on the verge of action, yet not quite able to compass it. But the terror had almost gone.

"'Forget that I'm a man and you're a woman,' he continued in the most beseeching voice I ever heard. 'Forget that I'm a ghost, and come out boldly and press me to you with a great kiss, and let your love flow into me. Forget yourself just for one minute and do a brave thing! Oh, love me, _love me_, LOVE ME! and I shall be free!'

"The words, or the deep force they somehow released in the center of my being, stirred me profoundly, and an emotion infinitely greater than fear surged up over me and carried me with it across the edge of action. Without hesitation I took two steps forward towards him where he knelt, and held out my arms. Pity and love were in my heart at that moment, genuine pity, I swear, and genuine love. I forgot myself and my little tremblings in a great desire to help another soul.

"'I love you! poor, aching, unhappy thing! I love you,' I cried through hot tears; 'and I am not the least bit afraid in the world.'

"The man uttered a curious sound, like laughter, yet not laughter, and turned his face up to me. The light from the street below fell on it, but there was another light, too, shining all round it that seemed to come from the eyes and skin. He rose to his feet and met me, and in that second I folded him to my breast and kissed him full on the lips again and again."

All our pipes had gone out, and not even a skirt rustled in that dark studio as the story-teller paused a moment to steady her voice, and put a hand softly up to her eyes before going on again.

"Now, what can I say, and how can I describe to you, all you skeptical men sitting there with pipes in your mouths, the amazing sensation I experienced of holding an intangible, impalpable thing so closely to my heart that it touched my body with equal pressure all the way down, and then melted away somewhere into my very being? For it was like seizing a rush of cool wind and feeling a touch of burning fire the moment it had struck its swift blow and passed on. A series of shocks ran all over and all through me; a momentary ecstasy of flaming sweetness and wonder thrilled down into me; my heart gave another great leap--and then I was alone.

"The room was empty. I turned on the gas and struck a match to prove it. All fear had left me, and something was singing round me in the air and in my heart like the joy of a spring morning in youth. Not all the devils or shadows or hauntings in the world could then have caused me a single tremor.

"I unlocked the door and went all over the dark house, even into kitchen and cellar and up among the ghostly attics. But the house was empty. Something had left it. I lingered a short hour, analyzing, thinking, wondering--you can guess what and how, perhaps, but I won't detail, for I promised only essentials, remember--and then went out to sleep the remainder of the night in my own flat, locking the door behind me upon a house no longer haunted.

"But my uncle, Sir Henry, the owner of the house, required an account of my adventure, and of course I was in duty bound to give him some kind of a true story. Before I could begin, however, he held up his hand to stop me.

"'First,' he said, 'I wish to tell you a little deception I ventured to practice on you. So many people have been to that house and seen the ghost that I came to think the story acted on their imaginations, and I wished to make a better test. So I invented for their benefit another story, with the idea that if you did see anything I could be sure it was not due merely to an excited imagination.'

"'Then what you told me about a woman having been murdered, and all that, was not the true story of the haunting?'

"'It was not. The true story is that a cousin of mine went mad in that house, and killed himself in a fit of morbid terror following upon years of miserable hypochondriasis. It is his figure that investigators see.'

"'That explains, then,' I gasped----

"'Explains what?'

"'I thought of that poor struggling soul, longing all these years for escape, and determined to keep my story for the present to myself.

"'Explains, I mean, why I did not see the ghost of the murdered woman,' I concluded.

"'Precisely,' said Sir Henry, 'and why, if you had seen anything, it would have had value, inasmuch as it could not have been caused by the imagination working upon a story you already knew.'"

Footnote: Taken by permission from "The Listener and Other Stories,"--E.P. Dutton & Co.