

A Sojourn on the Moors

I took to him at once, the surly fellow who met me at the gate: my cohabitant of this beautiful wilderness, whose queer story I shall be troubled with. Being a renouncer of the world myself, I was not to be deflected from liking him by his dark brow and his scowling eyes – though I did falter in my steps when his canine *alter ego* expressed loud disapproval of my advent.

I introduced myself as his tenant – having leased the property through agents – and was confirmed in my scepticism of his misanthropy when he swung open the gate and instructed me to walk in.

His house was low and plain, except for some out-of-place relievos over the porch, distinguishing it as the abode of a sixteenth-century yeoman who liked to greet his guests (or frighten them away) with shamelessly naked boys carved in stone.

We stooped through the doorway into the dark penetralium. My host barked orders to several figures who stirred in the shadows: to light a fire, to fetch wine. He threw open a curtain, and the spartan room was laid bare: hard chairs at a bare oak table on a stone floor. He said little and briefly, but to the point – about the arrangements at the Grange, and the rent, and the servants.

He hardly ever looked at me, and then only in shy glances, reverting quickly to the tabletop or the huge fireplace, which was the favourite object of his gaze. Before long fire reflected in his eyes. It seemed in place there, under that ever-frowning brow; it didn't make them any less black.

The fire compensated for the decreasing light such that I hardly noticed night fall. But I noticed the wind begin to rattle the corners of the house, and flurries of snow to smack at its windows. I commented that I was poorly equipped for inclement weather, having climbed the hill under a springlike sky without the least thought of winter apparel. He said something about the foolishness of going ill-clad on these moors, and I agreed with him.

After he'd been out of the room for a while an old manservant staggered in with food, and said I'd be stopping then, by all accounts. I indicated that I'd wait until the storm subsided; but he grumbled – more as if talking to himself – about the master giving orders for a bed to be made up, and disobeying that devil was summat he'd not dare, unless he wanted a thrashing.

I knew I was going to like these moorland folk.

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I was conducted into an upstairs apartment that was dusty and smelled of wood, and a candle was left with me for company. As far as I could make out the bed was a sort of boxed-in settle by a window, more like a pew. It was as uncomfortable as you'd guess.

The unquiet weather was equally uncondusive to sleep. I lay in the cubicle running my eyes and fingers over graffiti that were scratched in the wooden panelling: the name of my host and a woman's name, or rather a girl's name I suppose, recurred in various positions and combinations, in childish writing.

Childish writing and squally scratching sounds filled my night, and the two names. Repetitive, confusing, meaningless, with a pen like a twig, scratching and tapping noisily, squeaking the names it was writing, or instead of writing them. The names swirled around and the scratching wouldn't stop, whether I woke or slept, turned this way or that. It wasn't a dream it was a maddening pattern of graffiti, everywhere I tried to be: high in the loft or in the trees outside the window.

Branches held by the wind scraped signatures all over the house: the same two names over and over. The two names cascaded from the panelling like driven snow. Blasts of icy snow etched the glass with the sound of the two names.

A skeleton finger tapped at the window. A plaintive voice took shape in the storm, calling his name. The finger assumed flesh and scratched at the glass. The voice, a squeaky childish voice, repeated and repeated its appeal. A child's hand, clawing furiously now, louder as the storm raged louder, her voice almost screaming, punched through the window with a shriek like breaking glass. I grasped its cold fingers.

The voice that cried his name aloud was mine. The noises ceased.

Suddenly I was moving and hitting against things and everything was upside down. The house had collapsed in the storm, I thought. But hands were upon me: strong hands grasped me and propelled me. My back came to a hard stop against a banister, jolting my brain into wakefulness. A dark figure was momentarily in the doorway then was gone.

A strange sound came from within: a barking or heaving noise, like an animal, with percussive punctuation like a fist hitting wood. As my head cleared I was able to diagnose it. A man was crying with the unrestrained loudness of a child.

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Queer folk on t'ights (meaning on the Heights) was the saying among the servants and tradesmen who provided a lively atmosphere at the Grange.

My landlord especially was accounted a species of demon by them, and a variety of uncivil habits not to say downright unlawful doings attributed to him. They didn't quite claim that he ate babies – but had I persevered I could have wheedled it from them.

I'm sure he delighted in encouraging their silliness. For example: when he first visited, a few days after my nocturnal interlude at his house, he came in by the kitchen, threw a brace of pheasants on the table, barked (literally) at the little scullery maid, poked the fire with his gun, stole an onion, then bounded upstairs three steps at a time and burst into the drawing room unannounced – the dear housekeeper scurrying in after him with unnecessary handwringings and apologies.

She was pacified by being sent to prepare tea. Though it immediately occurred to me that a demon might need something stronger. In fact he took tea, but he took it as if he were downing whisky.

He wouldn't sit at first. He paced restlessly or, when he paused, stood by the fireplace, looking down into it.

I flattered myself that he was interested in my talk of the outside world. He seemed, at the least, to have experience of its affairs – as a landlord would. His reputation indeed stretched to imputations of embezzlement and other fraudulence: by such worldly means was he reputed to have obtained the very premises in which I was his tenant.

A Yorkshire type of canniness and frugality, I deemed it: that he should receive a not inconsiderable rental for a comfortable, furnished mansion while himself residing in that rickety farmhouse in the hills.

I discovered, at his next visit, that cards was his game: or at least it was an effective way of getting him to sit down. I thought myself not unversed in the card table, but I lost each game – *and* he made me pay.

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I confess I liked his company prodigiously. I don't mean that he was sociable in any recognised way. Conventions of politeness, even normal conversational syntax, were all but absent from him – though not through ignorance (I felt) but from a truly commendable disavowal of them.

The servants viewed my fondness for him with perplexity, and were in constant expectation that I should see him in his true colours and ne'er stop running till I was t'other side Hebden Bridge – as one of the more droll of the old gardeners was heard saying.

I'd never thought myself talkative, but with him I seemed so. While he seemed to listen intently, interposing the occasional intimation of empathy. Terse as his utterances were, they revealed to me a man who was not devoid of the finer feelings.

Moreover, my talking like the card games stilled him, and gave me the opportunity to inspect his features, which is what I enjoyed. For he never looked directly at me when I talked (and only in fleeting glances at other times): the fireplace and tabletop monopolised his attention. So while I spoke of – frankly, I hardly know of what – I studied his countenance: I followed the lines and motions of his face.

The permanently brooding brow, the creases outside his eyes, the chiselled nose, the animal movement beside it that formed a snarl or a sneer now and then; his beautiful mouth, his perfectly shaped thin decisive lips, his sharp white teeth; his panoply of solemn expressions born of an inner existence unrelated to what was entering his ear. I'm bound to confess I have doubts if he was listening to me at all – any more than I was really listening to myself.

There was certainly something in his eyes. A fieriness it seemed, at times, or at times a fathomless gloom: an unutterable sorrow held in check for the moment but bound (one day) to burst forth in a torrent of grief or anger at some unpremeditated cue.

He was the dark hero of literature and legend: a creature of such intensity that the likeness of a man, a human being, suited his inner existence as ill as my civilised drawing-room and pretty curtains suited the outer man he was. He was a wild spirit imprisoned in a man's flesh: the unfallen waif of his childhood, roaming the moor with (I presume) the girl-child from the graffiti.

Already a legend, the old servants spoke from memory of these untamed children of the moor; while youngsters told of her ghost frequenting their erstwhile haunts, and of he himself going abroad on stormy nights calling her up – swearing faustian bargains to the wind if she will only appear, if she will only take him with her this time.

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I became a regular visitor to the house on the Heights, mindful to watch the weather and set out early enough to return in daylight. I know that ghosts are the retreat of the irrational; but I was wary of subjecting myself to another night in a house that had provoked so vivid a delirious nightmare.

Its discomfort eloquently expressed its atmosphere: and that was as drear and unfriendly as the people in it.

They consisted – in addition to my landlord – of the grumpy old manservant, who called his master a devil and talked about being thrashed; a clodhopping youth, perpetually dirty and busy with housework or farmwork or fetching and carrying; and a peevish, haughty young woman, slender of figure and startlingly handsome of visage yet devoid of the slightest softness, with neither smile nor sigh.

Sometimes my landlord was out, striding over the moor, riding or shooting, or on business in the nearest town perhaps. His gloomy ménage was not worth staying at home for, and can have offered little congeniality to this (secretly) sensitive and lonely man.

I was astonished the day someone addressed the young woman as if she were his wife. My face betrayed my thoughts, for the old retainer mumbled as he next passed by me that she was a widder-woman, would I believe, though nobbut a strip of a wench.

She turned out to be the widow of the master's son. I never heard who his wife was. Not the ghost-child, though the graffiti on the bed mixed their names together as if in childhood she or he, or they, expected it.

She asked me once (the widow-girl, that is) if I knew she was a prisoner there; and I replied that I did, for why else would anyone live in such a godforsaken place? My attempted humour discovered not the slightest chink in her armour of glumness.

The boy came in with logs shortly after, and as he bowed to put them by the hearth she stroked his head and said that he was a prisoner too, like her. He hesitated, perhaps acknowledging the fact, but didn't look at her. Yet she looked at him: her large grey eyes followed him and gazed at the door for minutes after he'd left the room. They were of similar age (which wasn't much), yet she was as poised and proud as he was cowed and awkward.

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The inmates of this remote madhouse, as you can tell, made little concession to visitors from the normal world. As a result I was witness to several incidents that would have been considered shameful back in civilisation, not least those demonstrating the unnatural hatred that subsisted between daughter-in-law and father-in-law.

She hated him with a greater hate than I ever witnessed in any human being, never mind one so young and fair. Unlike the old servant, forever muttering insubordinate asides behind his master's back, she said hardly anything *except* in his presence. And then she seemed to taunt him with mean remarks, not unlike the gossip abroad anent his cruelty and blackheartedness, yet cutting in some private way that was palpable yet inaccessible to me.

He hardly ever responded. But sometimes when he turned away from her I caught the reflection of whatever light there was – an oil-lamp, the fire, the late afternoon sun – in the full wells of his eyes, or glistening on moist streaks below them.

One day she was speaking to him – presumably on routine domestic matters, I was taking no heed – when I noticed the exchange transmute, a tension enter the atmosphere. Her quiet coldness of speaking remained constant, but sharpened in a most peculiar, provocative way; while his clipped responses became untidy and impatient – until finally he strode towards her with a curse and his arm raised to strike.

He froze in that posture. And she stopped speaking but otherwise did not in the least flinch, staring icily and wide-eyed straight up into his face.

His large hand could assuredly have crushed her head. I'm convinced that provoking him into this moment was her purpose, and that thereby she had (or felt she had) the victory.

After some seconds his hand lowered slowly, the fingers extending from the fist as it passed her face, as if they would as lief have stroked her cheek or toyed with the edge of her yellow hair.

He staggered backwards to his usual prop, the mantelpiece, and hung his head.

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My fussy old housekeeper gradually vouchsafed to me the background to these strange cohabitants. I wondered why the young woman so hated her father-in-law. Imagine my surprise when she spoke her name, and it was the name carved on the bed.

Ah no, she said, that was her mother, as unlike as spring flowers are to bare winter trees, except (she added thoughtfully) as well as her name she has her mother's wilfulness – and also, her mother's eyes.

She should be the true owner of this house, she went on, but he took it from her, as he took the Heights from the lad.

That surprised me. The lad, I said quizzically; so he's not a servant? Young mistress's cousin, the lad is, but his father lost everything in card games, and left house and child at the mercy of that devil – if you'll pardon.

Poor wretch, she added, hasn't a thing nor a friend in the world. I said that the young mistress seemed to be kind to him, and she looked pleased and said Praise God for that anyhow.

It transpires that my landlord was a foundling, a street urchin, a cuckoo in the nest, brought into the bosom of his family by the kindly father of the house, at about the age of seven, and brought up with his own children, a boy and a girl.

This girl became the foundling's special playfellow; they were more alike than brother and sister: there was no separating them. Came a time when the bond between them was so strong as to be unnatural – or a deal too natural, if I read between the lines of my informant's disapproval.

Wild untameable creatures they were: barfoot o'er heath and crag their dark hair streaming behind them as one, or huddled in chimbley-nook muttering away in that private language of theirs. My housekeeper had commenced in service at the Heights and remembered it all.

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Of course a day came when the girl realised she was the privileged daughter of the house, and the foundling realised he was nothing but a servant; when the girl discovered the attraction of finer things, and the urchin discovered he was nothing but a servant; when the girl perceived a comfortable future layed out for her, and the waif perceived he was nothing but a servant.

As we say in these parts (my informant confided) she'd gotten her whitsuntide clothes, one fine year, and filled them prettily and ne'er looked back. But the lad looked back, black as thunder, and saw himself a dirty servant-boy in her eyes, and she lured away from him by fine feathers and the soft life of the Grange.

Lovely she was, with the dirt scraped off her and her pretty tresses combed out. And a lovely bride she made, the day she married the young master from the Grange.

The lad – my landlord – had gone by then: he ran away.

Happen there was nowt else for it, she being a lady and him nobbut a farmhand. Yet she loved him, in her way, and rued his running off.

When he came back a few years after he was different: by what means soever we knew not, he'd turned himself into somewhat of a gent, if it isn't impolite to gents to call him one. For his wildness was still there, and also, something more.

I reckon (she said, after some thought) he came back with a notion of showing himself worthy of her; but he stayed to reek vengeance – on her, and hers, and both houses.

Eighteen winters it is ago she died, and still he won't rest. You'd think a storm would blow itself out, now wouldn't you?

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How these moorlanders love their melodramas. I suppose it comes from being remote from the polite world, and limited in the available *dramatis personae*. Their capacity to exaggerate the eventualities of humdrum existence into an epic of love, hate, and revenge is singularly amazing.

That haughty prisoner at the Heights (I incline to believe) truly thinks herself a tragic heroine, held hostage by a murderous warlord or foul Gypsy.

They make my landlord – and in some measure he plays the part – a sort of warrior chieftain: the windswept moor his kingdom, his subjects a surly chamberlain, an enslaved youth, a captive princess.

I don't think they know where legend (or gossip) ends and reality begins.

Perhaps that's what animates the grief of this unprovenanced man. Perhaps he can be whoever he imagines himself to be, conquer and subjugate whomsoever he pleases – only to find himself lord over desolation, the emptiness of vengeance his foundling inheritance.

When I went walking with him he strode over the moor as if it were *his*, and much of what little he said was to name places, as if possessing them by doing so. Or as if he were Adam naming things for the first time, and laying claim. He seemed as solitary and as elemental as Adam: a natural, original part of the place, for all he has no roots.

That's what he should be, a *true* demon, an elemental: the wind his garment, his body dark with downy hair, his skin taut and sinewy, wading through the heath and harebells, the primal conqueror. The essence of the moor, rising from the purple waves to be its breathing heartbeat.

He should stand at sunrise on the crag, erect and handsome, the outspread cosmic man, and give his body to the wind's shameless exploration, the wind's breathless kiss. His hair blowing out, his seed on the brink: the man with no ancestors poised to colonise the land.

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I made my mind up on that walk: I was not going to throw away another opportunity. On my next visit to the Heights it came, predictably enough.

I took his hand. I placed my other hand in his hair. I turned his head on its side. I rested my face against his, shared his tears with my cheek and my lips. Our lips brushed and brushed again. I kissed his brow; I kissed his mouth.

Wind hugged and vibrated the house; fire bathed and lotioned the room. Either I or the wind said his name. I said his name. He and the fire said her name. Our hands, his hands, colonised and claimed; our hearts named. The naming and possessing filled my night. A name in touch, signed by fingers or lips. The whole room swirled with our names; the trees outside swayed.

Suddenly I was floating, the house was upside down, I was hitting against furniture. Strong hands grasped me and immobilised me: the table's bare wood came hard under my body. My hands and feet reached to the eight corners of the room.

Then I was all curled up and enclosed, smothered in softness, flames dancing outside my eyelids, my body small in the strength of his embrace: in the breathless utterance of our names. Our two names.

Somewhere deep in a dream the wind and the fire gathered all trees into one great tree, and our four hands smoothed the tree into a living trunk; and the tears that welled in our two eyes dissolved the trunk into a wuthering gasp, a quiet libation of names.

A gentle shower of names moistened the forest with infinite sensations.

And the breath we breathed with our one mouth came again and sang, and caressed us like a breeze from the moors, and caressed us again – unto a profligate flowering of butterflies. The upside-down turning universe fluttered apart, into a velvet silence.

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I woke to the whispering of my name, my new name. Fingers touching my cheek, my hair. Eyes turning away. A dark figure was momentarily in the doorway then was gone. My beautiful foundling, my tyrant, my captor. I spoke his name.

The hearthstone my bed and a rag-rug my blanket, my body filled with aches as soon as I moved. I hadn't noticed: my second night at the Heights knew no discomfort. Instead of delirium I'd turned and tossed in rapture, instead of ghostly fingers I'd grasped eternal life.

The grumbling old servant brought a bowl of water for washing. I see nowt I say nowt, he croaked, I know my place – in reference to the sight of me rising from the ashes. New born, newly baptised. I wasn't ashamed.

I threw open a window, and the warmth of another spring blew in and enfolded me with all the smells of the moor. I knew he was out there, in his element. My beautiful waif, my coloniser, my master. The wind whispered his name.

On my way out I happened to look into the kitchen. The cruel girl and the stupid boy were huddled together in a sunny window-seat intent upon something that lay across their laps: it was a book. As their fingers moved in starts along the lines, the girl would pause, and then speak each word, quietly and carefully; or, sometimes, instead of the pause, the boy mumbled the word. And each time he did so she kissed him by the ear.

I tiptoed away, loath to intrude upon so tender an act of redemption.

All vengeance is spent, all grief assuaged. There are no ghosts. The soul of the moor blows free. My beautiful man, my landlord, my husband. A stone bears his name.

He sleeps now, his work is done.

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