

A Dreadful Night

By Edwin Lester Arnold

Only he who has been haunted by a dream, a black horror of the night so real and terrible that many days of repugnance and effort are needed to purge the mind of its ugly details, can understand how a dream that was a fact—a horrible waking fantasy, grotesque and weird, a repetition in hard actuality of the ingenious terrors of sleep—clings to him who, with his faculties about him, and all his senses on the alert, has experienced it.

Some five years ago I was hunting in the southwest corner of Colorado, where the great mountain-spurs slope down in rocky ravines and gullies from the inland ranges towards the green plains along the course of the Rio San Juan. I had left my camp, late one afternoon, in charge of my trusty comrade, Will Hartland and had wandered off alone into the scrub. Some five or six miles from the tents I stalked and wounded a buck. He was so hard hit that I already smelt venison in the supper-pot, and followed the broad trail he had left with the utmost eagerness. He crossed a couple of stony ridges with their deep intervening hollows, and came at last into a wild desolate gorge, full of loose rocks and bushes, and ribboned with game tracks, but otherwise a most desolate and Godforsaken place, where no man had been, or might come for fifty years. Here I sighted my venison staggering down the glen, and dashed after him as fast as I could, through the bushy tangled, and the dry, slippery, summer grass. In a few hundred yards the valley became a pass, and in a score more the steep, bare sides had drawn in until they were walls on either hand, and the way trailed along the bottom of what was little better than a knife-cleft in the hills.

I was a good runner, and the hunter blood was hot within me; my moccasins flashed through the yellow herbage; my cheeks burnt with excitement; I dropped my gun to be the freer—the quarry was plunging along only ten yards ahead, and seemed a certain victim! In front was the outing of that narrow ravine—long reaches of the silver San Juan twining in countless threads through interminable leagues of green pasture and forest—I saw it all like a beautiful picture in the narrow black frame of the rocks; the evening wind was blowing softly up the cañon, and the sky was already gorgeous and livid with the streaks of sunset. Another ten yards and we were flying down the narrowest part of the defile, the beast-path under our feet hardly a foot wide, and almost hidden by long, wiry, dead grass.

Suddenly the wounded buck, now within my grasp, staggered up on to its hind legs, in a mad fit of terror, just as, with a shout of triumph, I leapt up to it, and in half a breathing space I and the stag were reeling on the very brink of a horrible funnel,—a slippery yellow slope that had opened suddenly before us, leading down to a cavernous mouth gaping dark and dreadful in the heart of the earth. With a scream louder than my shout of triumph I threw up my hands and tried to stop; it was too late; I felt my feet slip from under me, and in a second, shouting and plunging, and clutching at the rotten herbage, I was flying downwards. I caught a last glimpse of the San Juan and the blaze of the sky overhead and then I was spinning into darkness, horrible stygian darkness, through which I fell for a giddy, senseless moment or two, and then landed with a thud which ought to have killed me, bruised and nearly senseless, on a soft quaggy. mound of something that seemed to sink under me like a feather bed. I passed out.

My first sensation on recovering consciousness was that of an overpowering smell, a sickly, deadly taint in the air that there was no growing accustomed to, and which, after a few gasps,

seemed to have run its deadly venom into every corner of my frame, and, turning my blood yellow, to have transformed my constitution into keeping with its own accursed nature. It was a damp, musty, charnel-house smell, sickly and wicked, with the breath of the slaughter-pit in it—an aroma of blood and corruption. I sat up and glared, gasped about in the gloom, and then I carefully felt my limbs up and down. All were safe and sound, and I was unhurt, though as sore and bruised as if my body had stood a long day's pummelling. Then I groped about me in the pitch dark, and soon touched the still warm body of the dead buck I had shot, and on which indeed I was sitting. Still feeling about, I found on the other side something soft and furry too. I touched and patted it, and in a minute recognized with a start that my fingers were deep in the curly mane of a bull bison. I pulled, and the curly mane came off in stinking tufts. That bull bison had been lying there six months or more. All about me, wherever I felt, was cold, clammy fur and hair and hoofs and bare ribs and bones mixed in wild confusion, and as that wilderness of death unfolded itself in the darkness to me, and the foetid, close atmosphere mounted to my head, my nerves began to tremble like harp-strings in a storm, and my heart, that I had always thought terror-proof, to patter like a girl's.

Plunging and slipping I got upon my feet, and then became conscious of a dim circle of twilight far above, representing the hole through which I had fallen. The twilight was fading outside every moment, and it was already so faintly luminous that my hand, held in front of me, looked ghostly and scarcely discernible. I began to explore slowly round the walls of my prison. With a heart that grew sicker and sicker, and sensations that you can imagine better than I can describe, I traced the jagged but unbroken circle of a great chamber in the underground, ~ hundred feet long, perhaps, by fifty across, with cruel, remorseless walls that rose sloping gently inwards from an uneven horrible floor of hides and bones to that narrow neck far overhead, where the stars were already twinkling in a cloudless sky. By this time I was fairly frightened, and the cold perspiration of dread began to stand in beads upon my forehead.

A fancy then seized me that some one might be within hearing distance above. I shouted again and again, and listening acutely each time as the echoes of my shout died away, I could have sworn something like the clash of ghostly teeth on teeth, something like the rattle of jaws in an ague fit, fell on the silence behind. With beating heart, and an unfamiliar dread creeping over me, I crouched down in the gloom and listened. There was water dripping out in the dark, monotonous and dismal, and something like the breath from a husky throat away in the distance of the cavern came fitfully to my ears, though so uncertain that at first I thought it might have been only the rustle of the wind in the grass far overhead.

Again mastering all my resolution I shouted until the darkness rang, then listened eagerly with every faculty on stretch; and again from the dimness came that tremulous gnashing of teeth, and that wavering, long-drawn breath. Then my hair literally stood on end, and my eyes were fixed with breathless wonder in front of me, for out of the remotest gloom, where the corruption of the floor was already beginning to glow with pale blue wavering phosphorescent light as the night fell, rose glimmering itself with that ghastly lustre, something slim and tall and tremulous. It was full of life and yet was not quite of human form, and reared itself against the dark wall, all agleam, until its top, set with hollow eyes, was nine or ten feet from the ground, and oscillated and wavered, and seemed to feel about, as I had done, for an opening—and then on a sudden collapsed in a writhing heap upon the ground, and I distinctly heard the fall of its heavy body as it disappeared into the blue inferno that burnt below.

Again that spectral thing rose laboriously, this time many paces nearer to me, to twice the height of a man, and wavered and felt about, and then sank down with a fall like the fall of heavy

draperies, as though the energy that had lifted it suddenly expired. Nearer and nearer it came, travelling round the circuit of the walls in that strange way, and awed and bewildered I crept out into the open to let that dreadful thing go by. And presently, to my infinite relief, it travelled away, still wavering and writhing and I breathed again.

As that luminous shadow faded into the remote corners of the cave, I shouted once more, for the pleasure, it must have been, of hearing my own voice,—again there was that gnashing of teeth—and the instant afterwards such a hideous chorus of yells from the other side of the cavern, such a commingled howl of lost spirits, such an infernal moan of sorrow and shame and misery, that rose and fell on the stillness of the night, that, for an instant, lost to everything but that dreadful sound, I leapt to my feet, with the stagnant blood cold as ice within me, my body pulseless for the moment, and mingled my mad shouting with the voices of those unseen devils in a hideous chorus. Then my manhood came back with a rush upon me, and judgment and sense, and I recognised in the trembling echoes a cry that I had often listened to in happier circumstances. That uproar came from the throats of wolves that had been trapped like myself. But, were they alive? I thought in fascinated wonder,—how could they be in this horrible pit? and if they were not, picture oneself cornered in such a trap with a pack of wolfish spirits—it would not bear thinking of; already my fancy saw constellations of fierce yellow eyes everywhere, and herds of wicked grey backs racing to and fro in the shadows. With a tremulous hand I felt in my pocket for a match, and found I had two—and two only!

By this time the moon was up and a great band of silver light, broad and bright, was creeping down the walls of our prison, but I would not wait for it. I struck the match with feverish eagerness, and held it overhead. It burnt brightly for a moment, and I saw I was in a great natural crypt, with no outlet anywhere but by the narrow neck above, and all chance of reaching that was impossible, as the walls sloped inwards everywhere as they rose to it. All the floor was piled thigh-deep with a ghastly tangle of animal remains, in every state of return to their native earth, from the bare bones, that would have crumbled at a touch, to the hide, still glossy and sleek, of the stag that had fallen in only a week or two before. Such a carnage place I never saw,—such furs, such trophies, such heads and horns there were all round, as raised the envy of my hunter spirit, even in that emergency.

But what held me spell-bound and rooted my eyes into the shadows was—twenty paces off, lying full stretch along the glossy, undulating path which the incessant feet of new victims had worn, month after month, over the hill and valley of dead bodies under the walls—a splendid eighteen-foot python. It was this creature's ghostly rambles and ineffectual attempts to scale the walls that had first scared me in that place of horrors. I turned round, for the match was short, and scarcely noticing a score or two of dejected rats, who squeaked and scrambled amongst lesser snakes and strange reptiles, looked hard across the cave.

There, on their haunches, in a huddle against the far wall, staring at me with dull cold eyes, were five of the biggest, ugliest wolves ever mortal saw. I had often seen wolves, but never any like those. All the pluck, grace and savage vigour of their kind had gone from them; their bodies, gorged with carrion, were vast, swollen, and hideous; their shaggy fur was hanging in tatters from their red and mangy skins, the saliva streamed from their jaws in yellow ribbons, their bleary eyes were drowsy and dull, their great throats, as they opened them to howl in sad chorus at the handful of purple night above, were dry and yellow, and there was about them such an air of disgusting misery and woebegoneness, that, with a shudder and a cry I could not suppress, I let the last embers of the burning match fall to the ground.

How long I crouched in the darkness against the wall, with those hideous serenaders grinding their foam-flecked teeth and bemoaning our common fate in hideous unison, I do not know. Nor have I space to tell the wild horrible visions which filled my mind for the next hour or two, but presently the moonlight had come down off the wall, and was spread at my feet in a silver carpet, and as I sullenly watched the completion of that arena of light, I was aware that the wolves were moving. Very slowly they came forward out of the darkness, led by the biggest and ugliest, until they were all in the silver circle, gaunt, spectral, and vile, every mangy tuft of loose hair upon their sore-speckled backs clear as daylight. Then those pot-bellied phosphorescent undertakers began the strangest movements, and after watching them for a moment or two in fascinated wonder, I saw they had come to me in their despair to solicit my companionship and countenance. I could not have believed it possible that dumb brutes could have made their meaning so clear, as those poor shaggy scoundrels did. They halted ten yards off, and with humble heads sagged down, and averted eyes, slowly wagged their mud-locked tails. Then they came a few steps further and whined and fawned, and then another pace, and lay down upon their stomachs, putting their noses between their paws like dogs who watch and doze, while they regarded me steadfastly with sad, great eyes, forlorn and terrible.

Foot by foot, grey and silver in the moonlight, they advanced with the offer of their dreadful friendship, until at last I was fairly bewitched, and when the big wolf came forward till he was at my knees, a horrible epitome of corruption, and licked my hand with his great burning tongue, I submitted to the caress as readily as though he were my favourite hound. Henceforth the pack seemed to think the compact was sealed, and thrust their odious company upon me, trotting at my heels, howling when I shouted, and muzzling down to me, putting their heavy paws upon my feet, and their great steaming jaws upon my chest whenever, in despair and weariness, I tried to snatch a moment's sleep.

But it would be impossible to go step by step through the infinitely painful hours of that night. Not only was the place full of spectral forms and strange cries, but presently legions of unclean things of a hundred kinds, that had lived on those dead beasts when they too were living, swarmed in thousands and assailed us, adding a new terror to the inferno, ravaging us who still kept body and soul together, till our flesh seemed burning on our bones.

There was no rest for man or brute; the light was a mockery and the silence hideous. Round and round we pattered, I and the gaunt wolves, over the dim tracks worn by the feet of disappointment and suffering; we waded knee-deep through a wavering sea of steamy blue flame, that rose from the remains and bespattered us from head to heel, stumbling and tripping and groping, and cursing our fates, each in his separate tongue, while the night waned, the dew fell clammy and cold into our prison, and the Stars, who looked down upon us from the free purple sky overhead, made a dim twilight in our cell.

I was blundering and staggering round the walls for the hundredth time, feeling about with my hands in a hopeless search for some cleft or opening, when the grimmest thing of the whole evening happened. In a lonely corner of the den, in a little recess not searched before, pattering about in the dark, I suddenly touched with my hand—think with what a shock it thrilled me—the cloth-clad shoulder of a man! With a gasp and a cry I leapt back, and stood trembling and staring into the shadows, scarcely daring to breathe. Much as I had suffered in that hideous place, nothing affected me half so much as dropping my hand upon that dreadful shoulder. Heaven knows we were all cowards down there, but for a minute I was the biggest coward of us, and felt full of those strange throes of superstitious terror that I had often wondered before to hear weaker men describe.

Then I mustered my wavering spirit, and with the gaunt wolves squatting in a luminous circle around me, went into the recess again, and put my hand once more upon my grim companion. The coat upon him was dry and rough with age, and beneath it—I could tell by the touch—there was nothing but bare, rattling bones! I stood still, grimly waiting for the flutter of my physical cowardice to subside, and then I thought of that second match, and in a moment of keen intensity, with such care as you may imagine, struck it against the wall. It lit, and at my feet, in ragged miner's garb, sitting against the wall with his knees drawn up and his chin upon them, was the skeleton of a man so bleached and dry, that it must have been there for fifty years at least. At his side lay his miner's pick and pannikin, an old dusty pocket-Bible, the fragments of a felt hat, and a pair of heavy boots, still neatly side by side, just as the luckless fellow had placed the well-worn things when, for some reason, he last took them off.

And overhead something scratched upon a flat face of the rock. Hastily I snatched a scrap of paper from my pocket and, lighting it at the expiring match, read on the stone,—

‘Monday,’
‘Tuesday,’
‘Wednesd—’

—there was nothing but that, and even the ‘Wednesday’ was unfinished, dying away in a shaky, uncertain scratch, that spoke infinitely more plainly than many words would have done, of the growing feebleness of the hand that traced it,—and then all was darkness again.

I crept back to my distant corner, and crouched like the dead man against the wall, with my chin upon my knees, and kept repeating to myself the horrible simplicity of that diary—‘Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday!’ ‘Poor nameless Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday! And was this to be my fate?’ I laughed bitterly,—I would begin such another record with the first streak of dawn, and in the meantime I would sleep, whatever befell, and sleep I did, with those restless blue wolves cantering round the well-worn paths of the charnel-house, to their own hideous music, the silent unknown away in the distance, and the opal eyes of the great serpent staring at me like baleful planets, cold, sullen, and cruel, from between the dead man's feet.

It was a shout that woke me next morning, a clear ringing shout, that jerked me from dreadful dreams. I scrambled to my feet and saw from the bright light about me that it was day above, and while I still staggered and wandered stupidly, again came that shout. I stared up overhead where the sunlight was making the neck of the trap a disc of intolerable brightness and there, when my eyes grew accustomed to that shining, was a round something that presently resolved itself into the blessed face of my steadfast chum, Will Hartland.

There is little need to say more. With the help of his strong cow-rope, at his saddle-bow, and a round point of earth-embedded rock as purchase, he had me out of that accursed hole in an incredibly, ridiculously short space of time. And there I was, leaning on his shoulder, free again, in the first flush of as glorious a morning as you could wish for, with the San Juan away in the distance, winding in a sapphire streak through miles of emerald forests, a sweet blue sky above, and underfoot the earth wet with morning mist, smelling like a wine cooler, and every bent and twig underfoot gemmed with glittering prismatic dewdrops. I sat down on a stone, and after a long pull at Will's flask, told him something like the narrative I have just given. And when the tale was done I paused a minute, and then said somewhat shyly, ‘And now I am going back, Will, old man! back for those poor devils down yonder, who haven't a chance for their lives

unless I do.' Will, who had listened to my narrative with horror and wonder flitting across his honest brown face, started up at this as though he thought the night's adventure had fairly turned my head. But he was a good fellow, chivalrous and tender of heart under his Mexican jacket, and speedily acknowledging that I was right, set to work to help me.

Down I went back into the pit, the very sight and shadow of which now made me sick, and with the noose end of Will's lasso (he holding the other end above) set to work to secure those poor beasts, who whined and crowded round my legs in hideous glee to have me back again amongst them. 'Twas easy work; they were stupid and heavy, and seemed to have time, and when a wolf was fast, shouted to Will, who hauled some idea of my intentions, and thus I noosed them one at a away with scant ceremony, and up the grey ghoul went into that sunshine he had not seen for many weeks, until he and all his comrades were free once more, spinning, and struggling, and yelping—truly a wonderful sight.

But nothing would move the python. I followed him round and round, trying all I knew to get his cruel, cynical head through the noose, and then, when he had refused it a dozen times, I grew angry and cursed him and gathering up all the tortoises, lizards, and lesser beasts I could find into my waistband, ascended into the sweet outer air once more.

A very few hours afterwards a heavy blasting-charge, fetched from a neighbouring mine, was dangling by a string just inside the mouth of the detestable trap, with its fuse burning brightly. A few minutes of suspense, a mighty crash, a cloud of white smoke hanging over the green hill-top, and one of the most treacherous places that ever marred the face of nature's sweet earth was a harmless heap of dust and tumbled stones.