

# The Thing from the Blasted Heath

by Brian Lumley, 1937–

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That, which I once boasted of as being the finest collection of morbid and macabre curiosities outside of the British Museum, is no more—and still I am unable to sleep. When night's furtive shadow steals over the moors, I lock and bolt my door to peer fearfully through my window at that spot in the garden which glows faintly, with its own inexplicable light, and about which the freshly grown grass is yellow and withered. Though I constantly put down seeds and crumbs no bird ever ventures into my garden, and without even the bees to visit them my fruit trees are barren and dying. No more will Old Cartwright come to my house of an evening to chat in the drowsy firelight or to share with me his home-pressed wines; for Old Cartwright is dead.

I have written of it to my friend in New England, he who sent me the shrub from the blasted heath, warning him never to venture again where once he went, for me lest he share a similar fate.

From the moment I first read of the blasted heath I knew I could never rest until I had something of it in my collection. I found myself a pen-friend in New England, developed a strong friendship with him and then, when by various means I had made him beholden to me, I sent him to do my bidding at the blasted heath. The area is a reservoir now, in a valley west of witch-haunted Arkham, but before men flooded that grey desolation the heath lay like a great diseased sore in the woods and fields. It had not always been so. Before the coming of the fine grey dust the place had been a fertile valley, with orchards and wildlife in plenty—but that was all before the strange meteorite. Disease had followed the meteorite and after that had come the dust. Many and varied are the weird tales to come filtering out of that area, and fiction or superstition though they may or may not be the fact remains that men will not drink the water of that reservoir. It is tainted by a poison unknown to science which brings madness, delirium and a lingering, crumbling death. The entire valley has been closed off with barbed-wire fences and warning notices stand thick around its perimeter.

Nonetheless, my friend climbed those fences and ventured deep into the haunted heart of the place, to the very water's edge, where he dug in the rotting earth before leaving with my prize. Within twenty-four hours the thing was on its way to me, and after seeing it I could readily understand his haste in getting rid of it. I could not even give the thing a name. I doubt if anyone could have named that shrub for it was the child of strange radiation, not of this world, and therefore unknown to man. Its leaves were awful, hybrid things—thick, flacid and white like a sick child's hands—and its slender trunk and branches were terribly twisted and strangely veined. It was in such a poor state when I planted it in my garden that I did not think it would live. Unfortunately I was wrong; it soon began its luxuriant growth and Old Cartwright often used to warily prod it with his cane when he came visiting.

„What was you burnin' t'other night?“ he asked me one morning in the garden. „I seen t'glow from me winder. Looked like you was burnin' old films or summat! Funny, silver lookin' flames they was.“

I was puzzled by his remarks. „Burning? Why, nothing! Where did you see this fire, Harry?“

„'Ere in t'garden, or so I tho't! P'raps it were just t'glow from your fire reflected in you winder.“ He nodded towards the house and spat expertly at the shrub. „Seemed to be just about there where yon thing is.“ He moved a pace closer to the shrub and prodded it with his cane.

„Gettin' right fat, aint 'e?“ Then he turned and looked at me curiously. „Can't rightly say as I like yon.“

„It's just a plant, Harry, like any other,“ I answered. Then, on afterthought: „Well, perhaps not quite like any other. It looks ugly, I'll admit—but it's perfectly harmless. Surprises me you don't like it! You don't seem to mind my Death-Masks or the other things I've got.“

„'Armless, they be,“ he said. „Interestin' toys and nowt else—but you wouldn't catch me plantin' yon in my garden!“ He grinned at me in that way of his which meant *I-know-something-you-don't-know*, and said: „Anyhow, can you answer me this, Mr. Bell? What kind o' bush is it what t'birds don't settle on, eh?“ He glanced sharply at the plant and then at me. „Never seen a sparrer on it yet, I aint...“ He spat again. „Not as I blames 'em, mind you. I shouldn't fancy sittin' on that thing myself. Just look at them leaves what never seem to move in

t'wind; and that leprosy-white colour of the trunk and branches. Why! Yon looks more like a queer, leafy octopus than a shrub."

At the time I thought very little of our conversation. Old Cartwright was always full of strange fancies and had said more or less the same things about my coaches when he first saw them. Yet a few weeks later, when I noticed the first really odd thing about the tree from the heath, I thought of his words again.

Oh, yes! It was a tree by then. It had nearly trebled its size since I planted it and was almost three feet tall. It had put out lots of new, greyly-mottled branches, and because its trunk and lower branches had thickened, the weirdly-knotted dark veins stood out clearly against the drowned-flesh texture of the tree's limbs. It was that day that I had to stop Old Cartwright from pestering it. I had thought he was going just a bit heavy with his cane, for after all, the tree was the show-piece of my collection and I did not want it damaged.

"It's you, ain't it, what glows at night?" he had asked of the thing, prodding away. "It's you what shines like them yeller toadstools do! I come over 'ere last night, Mr. Bell, but you was already in bed. Tho't I seen a fire in your garden again, but it weren't a fire—'twas 'im!" He prodded the tree harder, actually shaking it. "What kind o' tree is it?" he asked, "what t'birds don't sit on and what glows at night, eh?" That was when I got angry and told him to leave the tree alone.

He could be petulant at times, Old Harry, and off he went in a huff in the direction of his cottage. I walked back towards the house and then, thinking I had been perhaps a bit too gruff with the old boy, I turned to call him back for a drink. Before I could open my mouth to shout I noticed the tree. As God is my witness the thing was straining after Old Cartwright like a leashed dog strains after a cat. Its white leaves were all stretched out straight like horrid hands, pointing in his direction, and the trunk had literally bent towards his retreating figure...

He was right. That night I stayed up purposely and saw it for myself. The tree did glow in the night, with a strange, silvery St. Elmo's Fire of its own. It was then that I decided to get rid of it, and what I found in the garden the next morning really clinched the matter.

I do not think that at the time the glowing really bothered me. As Old Harry himself had remarked, certain toadstools are luminous in the dark and I knew that the same thing holds true of one or two species of moss. Even higher life-forms—for instance many fishes of the great deeps—are known to carry their own peculiar lighting systems, and plankton lies luminous even upon the ocean's surface. No, I was sure that the glowing was not important; but that which I found in the morning was something else! For none of the aforementioned life-forms are capable of doing that which I was ready to believe the tree had somehow done that night.

I noticed the thing's horrid new luxuriance the moment I stepped into the garden. It looked altogether... stronger, and the leaves and veins seemed somehow to be of a darker tint than before. I was so taken up by the change in the plant that I did not see the cat until I almost stepped on it. The body was lying in the grass at the foot of the tree and when I turned it over with my boot I was surprised that it was not stiff. The animal was obviously dead, being merely skin and bone, and...

I kneeled to examine the small, furry corpse—and felt the hackles suddenly rise at the back of my neck! The body of the cat was not stiff—because there was nothing to stiffen!

There were only bones inside that unnatural carcass; and looking closer I saw that the small mouth, nostrils and the anal exit were terribly mutilated. Of course, a car could have gone over the poor creature's body and forced its innards (I shuddered) outwards; but then who would have thrown the body into my garden?

And then I noticed something else: there were funny little molehills all about the foot of the tree! Now, I asked myself, since when are moles flesh-eaters? Or had they perhaps been attracted by the smell of the corpse? Funny, because I was damned if I could smell it! No, this was a freshly dead cat.

I had studied the tree before, of course, but now I gave it a really thorough going over. I suppose, in the back of my mind, that I was thinking of my *Dionaea Muscipulas*—my Venus-Flytraps—but for the life of me I could in no way match the two species. The leaves of this tree were not sticky, as I knew the leaves of some flesh-eaters to be, and their edges were not spiked or hinged. Nor did the plant seem to have the necessary drainage apparatus to do that which I feared had been done. There were no spines or thorns on the thing at all, and so far as I could tell there was nothing physically poisonous about it.

What then had happened to the cat? My own cat, a good companion of many years, had died of old age long before I ever heard of the blasted heath. I had always intended to get another. Now I was glad I had not done so. I did not know how this animal had died but one thing I was sure of—I could no longer abide the blasphemy from the heath in my garden. Collection or not, it had to go.

That same day I walked into Marske and put through a telephone call to a botanist friend in London. It was he who had sold me my fly-traps. I told him all about my tree and after I had assured him I was not „pulling his leg“ he said he would come up over the weekend to have a look at it. He told me that if the specimen was anything like my description he would be only too pleased to have it and would see that I did not lose on the deal.

That was on Thursday, and I went home from the village happy in the belief that by Sunday I would be rid of the thing from the blasted heath and the birds would be singing in my garden once again.

I could not have even dreamt it then, but things were to happen before Sunday which would make it impossible for me ever to be happy again, or for that matter, ever again to have a good night's sleep.

That evening I developed an awful headache. I had a good double brandy and went to bed earlier than usual. The last thing to catch my attention before I dozed off was the silvery glow in the garden. It was so plain out there that I was surprised I had not noticed it before Old Harry Cartwright brought it to my attention.

My awakening was totally inexplicable. I found myself stretched flat on my face on the garden path just outside my front door. My headache had worsened until the pounding inside my skull was like a trip hammer.

„What in hell...?“ I said aloud as I looked dazedly about. I had obviously tripped over the draft-strip on the doorstep; but how had I come to be there in the first place?

From my prone position I looked down the garden toward the tree. The clatter of my fall onto the gravel of the path must have disturbed the thing. It was straining in my direction with the same horrible eagerness it had displayed towards Old Cartwright. I got painfully to my feet and, as I turned to go into the house, saw that the tree was already swaying away from me to point up the road in the direction of Old Cartwright's place.

„What's bothering the thing now?“ I wondered, going inside and locking the door again. I sat on my bed and tried to work it all out. Thank God for the draft-strip! I had been threatening all summer to remove it because hardly a day went by that I did not trip over it. „Just as well I didn't,“ I muttered to myself, unknowingly understating the fact. My meaning was simply that if people had seen me walking down the country road in the middle of the night, dressed only in my pyjama bottom—well, it just did not bear thinking about. The Marske villagers probably already thought me a bit queer because of my collection—Old Harry was a real gossip at times.

The night was perfectly calm and hardly a breeze disturbed the warm air. It was when this stillness was broken that I awoke once more. I had heard the iron gate to the garden slam shut.

Thoroughly disgruntled by the night's disturbances I leapt out of bed and threw open the window.

Old Cartwright was in the garden beside the tree. His eyes were wide open and staring at the thing, which was leaning toward him in that horribly familiar fashion.

Though I was surprised that the old boy was out there I was doubly astonished to note that he was attired only in his nightshirt. Could it be that he also was walking in his sleep? It seemed so. I opened my mouth to call out to him—but even as I did so I saw something which caused the breath to whoosh out of my lungs as my body constricted in a sudden agony of horror.

Something was happening to the ground around the plant's base! My first thought was molehills sprouting up about the trunk of the freak from the heath and around Old Harry's feet.

But the things coming up out of those little mounds of soil were not moles!

Roots!

My mind went numb with dreadful terror, a gibbering evil gripped my brain as I stumbled from the window to reel away across the room. I tried to cry out, to scream, but my throat seemed completely paralysed. The weirdness of the tree's mobility and the queer nocturnal gropings of its roots aside—I had finally recognized in Old Cartwright's actions an exact replica of my own earlier that night!

I lurched drunkenly down the hall to the door and unlocked it with fumbling, dead fingers. I tottered out into the night knowing that something monstrously unnatural was happening, aware that but for pure good fortune I might have been in the old man's place. As the night air hit me I regained control and ran down the garden yelling to the old man to get away—to get well away from the tree, the glowing horror...

But I was too late!

His naked feet stuck out from under the bright monster's branches—branches which were all folded downwards, covering his body. Then, as I went down on my knees in shock and disbelief, I saw that which twisted my mind and blasted my nerves into these useless knots that they have been ever since.

I had had the right idea about the tree—but I had looked at the problem in the wrong way! The thing was a freak, a mutation caused by radiations from another world. It had no parallel on Earth; and I, like a fool, had tried to compare it with the flytraps. True, the thing from the blasted heath did draw its nourishment from living things, but the manner of its feeding was nonetheless the same as for most other soil-sprouted plants—it fed through its roots!

Those slender roots, hidden from above by the way in which the branches had folded down, were all sharply-thorned—and for each thorn there was a tiny sucker. Even as I watched, hypnotized, those vile roots were pulsing down into Cartwright's open mouth... until his lips began to split under the strain of their loathsome contents!

I began to scream as I saw the veins in the trunk and branches start their scarlet pulsing, and, as the entire plant commenced throbbing with a pale, pinkish suffusion, I passed into a merciful oblivion. For Old Cartwright's entire body was jerking and twitching with a nauseating internal action which was not its own—and all the time his dead eyes stared and stared...

There is not much more to tell. When I recovered consciousness I was still half insane. In a gibbering delirium I staggered to the woodshed and returned with the axe. Moaning in morbid loathing I cut the tree—once, twice—deeply across the trunk, and in a fit of uncontrollable twitching I watched the horror literally bleed to death!

The end had to be seen to be believed. Slowly the evil roots withdrew from Cartwright's body, shuddering and sluggishly pulling back underground, releasing their grisly internal hold on his bloodless form. The branches and leaves writhed and twined in a morbid dance of death; the horrible veins—real veins—pulsed to a standstill and the whole tree started to slope sideways as a terrible disintegration took hold on it. The unnatural glow surrounding the thing dimmed as it began visibly to rot where it stood. The smell of utter corruption which soon started to exude from the compost the hell-plant was rapidly becoming forced me to back away, dragging Old Cartwright's corpse after me.

I was brought up short by the garden fence and that was where I stayed, shivering and staring at the rapidly blackening mass in the garden.

When at last the glow had died away completely and all that remained of the tree was an odorous, sticky, reddish-black puddle, I noticed that the first light of dawn was already brightening the sky. It was then that I formed my plan. I had had more than my fill of horror—all I wanted to do was forget—and I knew the authorities would never believe my story; not that I intended trying to tell it.

I made a bonfire over the stinking spot where the plant had been, and as the first cock crowed in the distance I set fire to the pile of leaves and sticks and stood there until there was only a blackened patch on the grass to show that the horror from the heath had ever stood there. Then I dressed and walked into Marske to the police station.

No one could quite understand the absence of Old Cartwright's blood or the damage to his mouth and the other—internal—injuries which the post mortem later showed; but it was undeniable that he had been „queer“ for a long time and lately had been heard to talk openly about things that „glowed at night“ and trees with hands instead of leaves. Everyone had known, it appeared, that he would end up „in a funny way“.

After I made my statement to the police—about how I had found Old Cartwright's body at dawn, in my garden—I put through another call to London

and told my botanist friend that the tree had been destroyed in a garden fire. He said that it was unfortunate but did not really matter. He had to catch an evening 'plane to South America anyway and would be away for many months.

He asked me to see if I could get another specimen in the meantime.

But that is not quite the end of the story. All that I have related happened last summer. It is already spring. The birds have still not returned to my garden and though each night I take a sleeping pill before locking my door, I cannot rest.

I thought that in ridding myself of the remainder of my collection I might also kill the memory of that which once stood in my garden. I was wrong.

It makes no difference that I have given away my conches from the islands of Polynesia and have shattered into fragments the skull I dug from beneath the ground where once stood a Roman ruin.

Letting my *Dionaea Muscipulas* die from lack of their singular nourishment has not helped me at all! My devil-drums and death-masks from Africa now rest beneath glass in Wharby Museum along with the sacrificial gown from Mua-Aphos. My collection of ten nightmare paintings by Pickman, Chandler Davies and Clark Ashton Smith now belong to an avid American collector, to whom I have also sold my complete set of Poe's works. I have melted down my Iceland meteorite and parted forever with the horribly inscribed silver figurine from India. The silvery fragments of unknown crystal from dead G'harne rest untended in their box and I have sold in auction all my books of Earth's elder madness.

Yes, that which I once boasted of as being the finest collection of morbid and macabre curiosities outside of the British Museum is no more; yet still I am unable to sleep. There is something—some fear that keeps me awake—which has caused me of late to chain myself to the bed when I lie down.

You see, I know that my doctor's assurance that it is „all in my mind“ is at fault, and I know that if ever I wake up in the garden again it will mean permanent insanity—or worse!

For the spot where the spring grass is twisted and yellow continues to glow feebly at night. Only a week ago I decided to clear the very soil from that area but as soon as I drove my spade into the ground I was sure I saw something black and wriggly—like a looped off root—squirm quickly down out of sight!

Perhaps it is my imagination but I have also noticed, in the dead of night, that the floorboards sometimes creak beneath my room—and then, of course, there is that other thing.

I get the most dreadful headaches.

