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Lindenberg Pool

By WILLIAM MORRIS

I READ once in lazy humor Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*, on a cold May night when the north wind was blowing; in lazy humor, but when I came to the tale that is here amplified there was something in it that fixed my attention and made me think of it; and whether I would or no, my thoughts ran in this way, as here follows.

So I felt obliged to write, and wrote accordingly, and by the time I had done the gray light filled all my room; so I put out my candles, and went to bed, not without fear and trembling, for the morning twilight is so strange and lonely. This is what I wrote.

YES, on that dark night, with that wild unsteady north wind howling, though it was Maytime, it was doubtless dismal enough in the forest, where the boughs clashed eerily, and where, as the wanderer in that place hurried along, strange forms half showed themselves to him, the more fearful because half seen in that way: dismal enough doubtless on wide moors where the great wind had it all its own way dismal on the rivers creeping on and on between the marshlands, creeping through the

willows, the water trickling through the locks, sounding faintly in the gusts of the wind.

Yet surely nowhere so dismal as by the side of that still pool.

I threw myself down on the ground there, utterly exhausted with my struggle against the wind, and with bearing the fathoms and fathoms of the heavily leaded plumb-line that lay beside me.

Fierce as the wind was, it could not raise the leaden waters of that fearful pool, defended as they were by the steep banks of dripping yellow clay, striped horribly here and there with ghastly uncertain green and blue.

They said no man could fathom it; and yet all round the edges of it grew a rank crop of dreary reeds and segs, some round, some flat, but none ever flowering as other things flowered, never dying and being renewed, but always the same stiff array of unbroken reeds and segs, some round, some flat. Hard by me were two trees leafless and ugly, made, it seemed, only for the wind to go through with a wild sough on such nights as these; and for a mile from that place were no other trees.

True, I could not see all this at that time, then, in the dark night, but I knew well that it was all there; for much had I studied this pool in the daytime, trying to learn the secret of it; many hours I had spent there, happy with a kind of happiness, because forgetful of the past. And even now, could I not hear the wind going through those trees, as it never went through any trees before or since? could I not see gleams of the dismal moor? could I not hear those reeds just taken by the wind, knocking against each other, the flat ones scraping all along the round ones? Could I not hear the slow trickling of the land-springs through the clay banks?

The cold, chill horror of the place was too much for me; I had never been there by night before, nobody had for quite a long time, and now to come on such a night! If there had been any moon, the place would have looked more as it did by day; besides, the moon shining on water is always so beautiful, on any water even: if it had been starlight, one could have looked at the stars and thought of the time when those fields were fertile and beautiful (for such a time was, I am sure), when the cowslips grew among the grass, and when there was promise of yellow-waving corn stained with poppies; that time which the stars had seen, but which we had never seen, which even they would never see again—past time!

Ah! what was that which touched my shoulder?—Yes, I see, only a dead leaf.—Yes, to be here on this eighth of May too of all nights in the year, the night of that awful day when ten years ago I slew him, not undeservedly, God knows, yet how dreadful it was!—Another leaf! and another!—Strange, those trees have been dead this hundred years, I should think. How sharp the wind is, too, just as if I were moving along and meeting it;—why, I *am* moving! what then, I am not there after all;

where am I then? there are the trees; no, they are freshly planted oak saplings, the very ones that those withered last-year's leaves were blown on me from.

I have been dreaming then, and am on my road to the lake; but what a young wood! I must have lost my way; I never saw all this before. Well—I will walk on stoutly.

May the Lord help my senses! I am *riding!*—on a mule; a bell tinkles somewhere on him; the wind blows something about with a flapping sound: something? in Heaven's name, what? *My* long black robes.—Why—when I left my house I was clad in serviceable broadcloth of the Nineteenth Century.

I shall go mad—I am mad—I am gone to the Devil—I have lost my identity; who knows in what place, in what age of the world I am living now? Yet I will be calm; I have seen all these things before, in pictures surely, or something like them. I am resigned, since it is no worse than that. I am a priest then, in the dim, far-off Thirteenth Century, riding, about midnight, to carry the blessed sacrament to some dying man.

Soon I found that I was not alone; a man was riding close to me on a horse; he was fantastically dressed, more so than usual for that time, being striped all over in vertical stripes of yellow and green, with quaint birds like exaggerated storks in different attitudes counterchanged on the stripes; all this I saw by the lantern he carried, in the light of which his debauched black eyes quite flashed. On he went, unsteadily rolling, very drunk, though it was the Thirteenth Century, but he sat his horse fairly well.

I watched him in my proper Nineteenth Century character, with insatiable curiosity and intense amusement; but as a quiet priest of a long-past age, with contempt and disgust enough, not unmixed with fear and anxiety.

He roared out snatches of doggerel verse as he went along, drinking-songs, hunting-songs, robbing-songs, lust-songs, in a voice that sounded far and far above the roaring of the wind, though that was high, and rolled along the dark road that his lantern cast spikes of light along ever so far, making the devils grin: and meanwhile I, the priest, glanced from him wrathfully every now and then to That which I carried very reverently in my hand, and my blood curdled with shame and indignation; but being a shrewd priest, I knew well enough that a sermon would be utterly thrown away on a man who was drunk every day in the year, and, more especially, very drunk then. So I held my peace, saying only under my breath:

"Dixit insipiens in corde suo, non est Deus. Corrupti sunt et abominabiles facti sunt in studiis suis; non est qui faciat bonum non est usque ad unum: sepulchrum patens est guttur eorum, linguis suis dolose agebant, venenum aspidum sub labiis eorum. Dominum non invocaverunt; illic trepidaverunt timore, ubi non erat timor. Quis dabit ex Sion salutare Israel?"

and so I went on, thinking too at times about the man who was dying and whom I was soon to see; he had been a bold bad plundering baron, but was said lately to have altered his way of life, having seen a miracle or some such thing; he had departed to keep a tournament near his castle lately, but had been brought back sore wounded, so this drunken servant, with some difficulty and much unseasonable merriment, had made me understand, and now lay at the point of death, brought about by unskilful tending and such like. Then I thought of his face—a bad face, very bad, retreating forehead, small twinkling eyes, projecting lower jaw; and such a voice, too, he had! like the grunt of a boar mostly.

Now don't you think it strange that this face should be the same, actually the same as the face of my enemy, slain that very day ten years ago? I

did not hate him, either that man or the baron, but I wanted to see as little of him as possible, and I hoped that the ceremony would soon be over, and that I should be at liberty again.

And so with these thoughts and many others, but all thought strangely double, we went along, the varlet being too drunk to take much notice of me, only once, as he was singing some doggerel, like this, I think, making allowances for change of language and so forth:

"The Duke went to Treves
On the first of November;
His wife stay'd at Bonn—
Let me see, I remember;

"When the Duke came back
To look for his wife,
We came from Cologne,
And took the Duke's life;

"We hung him mid-high
Between spire and pavement,
From their mouths dropp'd the cabbage
Of the carles in amazement."

"'Boo—hoo! Church-rat! Church-mouse! Hilloa, Priest! have you brought the pyx, eh?'"

From some cause or other he seemed to think this an excellent joke, for he almost shrieked with laughter as he went along; but by this time we had reached the castle. Challenge, and counter-challenge, and we passed the outermost gate and began to go through some of the courts, in which stood lime-trees here and there, growing green tenderly with that May-time, though the wind bit keenly.

How strange again! as I went farther, there seemed no doubt of it; here in the aftertime came that pool, how I knew not; but in the few moments that we were riding from the outer gate to the castle-porch I thought so intensely over the probable cause for the existence of that pool, that (how strange!) I could almost have thought I was back again listening to the oozing of the land-springs through the high clay banks there. I was wakened from that, before it grew too strong, by the glare

of many torches, and, dismounting, found myself in the midst of some twenty attendants, with flushed faces and wildly sparkling eyes, which they were vainly trying to soften to due solemnity; mock solemnity I had almost said, for they did not seem to think it necessary to appear really solemn, and had difficulty enough apparently in not prolonging indefinitely the shout of laughter with which they had at first greeted me. "Take the holy Father to my Lord," said one at last, "and we will go with him."

So they led me up the stairs into the gorgeously furnished chamber; the light from the heavy waxen candles was pleasant to my eyes after the glare and twisted red smoke of the pine-torches; but all the essences scattered about the chamber were not enough to conquer the fiery breath of those about me.

I PUT on the alb and stole they brought me, and, before I went up to the sick man, looked round on those that were in the rooms; for the rooms opened one into the other by many doors, across some of which hung gorgeous tapestry; all the rooms seemed to have many people, for some stood at these doors, and some passed to and fro, swinging aside the heavy hangings; once several people at once, seemingly quite by accident, drew aside almost all the veils from the doors, and showed an endless perspective of gorgeousness.

And at these things my heart fainted for horror. "Had not the Jews of late," thought I, the priest, "been very much in the habit of crucifying children in mockery of the Holiest, holding gorgeous feasts while they beheld the poor innocents die? these men are Atheists, you are in a trap, yet quit yourself like a man."

"Ah, sharp one," thought I, the author, "where are you at last? try to pray as a test.—Well, well, these things are strangely like devils.—O man, you have talked about bravery

often, now is your time to practise it: once for all trust in God, or I fear you are lost."

Moreover it increased my horror that there was no appearance of a woman in all these rooms; and yet was there not? there, those things—I looked more intently; yes, no doubt they were women, but all dressed like men;—what a ghastly place!

"O man! do your duty," my angel said; then in spite of the bloodshot eyes of man and woman there, in spite of their bold looks, they quailed before me.

I stepped up to the bedside, where under the velvet coverlid lay the dying man, his small sparkling eyes only (but dulled now by coming death) showing above the swathings. I was about to kneel down by the bedside to confess him, when one of those—things—called out (now they had just been whispering and sniggering together, but the priest in his righteous, brave scorn would not look at them; the humbled author, half fearful, half trustful, dared not): so one called out:

"Sir Priest, for three days our master has spoken no articulate word; you must pass over all particulars; ask for a sign only."

Such a strange ghastly suspicion flashed across me just then; but I choked it, and asked the dying man if he repented of his sins, and if he believed all that was necessary to salvation, and, if so, to make a sign, if he were able: the man moved a little and groaned; so I took it for a sign, as he was clearly incapable either of speaking or moving, and accordingly began the service for the administration of the sacraments; and as I began, those behind me and through all the rooms (I know it was through all of them) began to move about, in a bewildering dance-like motion, mazy and intricate; yes, and presently music struck up through all those rooms, music and singing, lively and gay; many of the tunes I had

heard before (in the Nineteenth Century); I could have sworn to half a dozen of the polkas.

The rooms grew fuller and fuller of people; they passed thick and fast between the rooms, and the hangings were continually rustling; one fat old man with a big belly crept under the bed where I was, and wheezed and chuckled there, laughing and talking to one who stooped down and lifted up the hangings to look at him.

Still more and more people talking and singing and laughing and twirling about, till my brain went round and round, and I scarce knew what I did; yet, somehow, I could not leave off: I dared not even look over my shoulder, lest I should see something so horrible as to make me die.

So I got on with the service, and at last took the pyx, and took thereout the sacred wafer, whereupon was a deep silence through all those rooms, which troubled me, I think, more than all which had gone before, for I knew well it did not mean reverence.

I held it up, that which I counted so holy, when lo! great laughter, echoing like thunder-claps through all the rooms, not dulled by the veiling hangings, for they were all raised up together, and, with a slow upheaval of the rich clothes among which he lay, with a sound that was half snarl, half grunt, with helpless body swathed in bedclothes, a huge *swine* that I had been shriving tore from me the Holy Thing, deeply scoring my hand as he did so with tusk and tooth, so that the red blood ran on to the floor.

Therewithal he rolled down on to the floor, and lay there helplessly, only able to roll to and fro, because of the swathings.

Then right madly skirled the intolerable laughter, rising to shrieks that were fearfuller than any scream of agony I ever heard; the hundreds of people through all those grand rooms danced and wheeled about me, shrieking, hemming me in with inter-

laced arms, the women loosing their long hair and thrusting forward their horribly grinning unsexed faces toward me till I felt their hot breath.

Oh! how I hated them all! almost hated all mankind for their sakes; how I longed to get right quit of all men; among whom, as it seemed, all sacredest things even were made a mock of. I looked about me fiercely; I sprang forward, and clutched a sword from the gilded belt of one of those who stood near me; with savage blows that threw the blood about the gilded walls and their hangings right over the heads of those—things—I cleared myself from them, and tore down the great stairs madly, yet could not, as in a dream, go fast enough, because of my passion.

I was out in the courtyard, among the lime-trees soon, the north wind blowing freshly on my heated forehead in that dawn. The outer gate was locked and bolted; I stooped and raised a great stone and sent it at the lock with all my strength, and I was stronger than ten men then; iron and oak gave way before it, and through the ragged splinters I tore in reckless fury, like a wild horse through a hazel hedge.

And no one had pursued me. I knelt down on the dear green turf outside, and thanked God with streaming eyes for my deliverance, praying Him forgiveness for my unwilling share in that night's mockery.

Then I arose and turned to go, but even as I did so I heard a roar as if the world were coming in two, and looking toward the castle, saw, not a castle, but a great cloud of white lime-dust swaying this way and that in the gusts of the wind.

Then while the east grew bright there arose a hissing, gurgling noise, that swelled into the roar and wash of many waters, and by then the sun had risen a deep black lake lay before my feet.

And this is how I tried to fathom the Lindenberg Pool.