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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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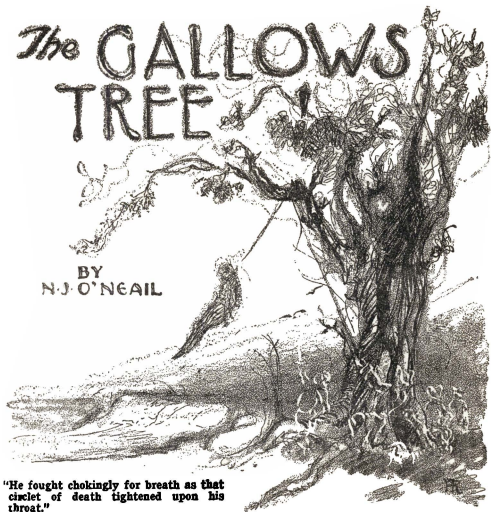
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The GALLOWS TREE

BY
N. J. O'NEIL



"He fought chokingly for breath as that
cinct of death tightened upon his
throat."

AUTHOR'S Foreword:—In presenting to the public for the first time the following extracts from the diary of Joseph Worth, the present writer does not venture any expression of opinion upon that unusual document, or upon its still more unusual sequel.

If the diary is accepted as genuine, its implications, in the light of what ensued, are almost incredible to Twentieth Century minds. But, on the other hand, if it is dismissed as a hoax, or as the product of a deranged imagination, the sequel must appear

in the light of an even more incredible and inexplicable coincidence.

The only known facts concerning the case appear in the extract from *The Bodmin Chronicle*, which is appended at the close of Worth's own narrative.

POLGARTH, APRIL 6, 1929:—What strange spell binds me to this preposterous place called Polgarth, which is scarcely a dot on the hinterland of Cornwall, I do not know, save that the six days which I have spent here have wrought in me a sensation of content-

ment and tranquillity such as I have not known in years of wandering over the surface of the globe.

There is no beauty in the spot; it is almost repellantly bleak; and yet, for the first time within my memory, the wanderlust which has burned within me appears to be at rest. Perhaps it is the very bleakness of the region which attracts me, for in all my odyssey, scenic splendor has never been my quest.

Perhaps, in truth, there has been no quest in my ramblings; for I have sought to find nothing; rather I have sought to lose something—and that something, myself.

I have fled in dismay from the most cosmopolitan centers of the new and old worlds alike, yearning for seclusion; and in the forests, the deserts, the mountains of four continents I have cried aloud for distraction and companionship. Yet here, in this lonely Cornish nook, which is neither metropolis nor absolute wilderness, I feel, unaccountably, as though I had come home.

There may be some atavistic explanation of it, for I know that my forefathers were English, three centuries ago; and they may well have come from Cornwall, since I remember a vague tradition that our surname was once Trewartha, which has surely a Cornish savor; although for generations it has been shortened to the form Worth.

And perhaps, if atavism enters into it, that, too, may account for the fascination which that tree holds for me; for farther back in the mists of time, not three, but eighteen, centuries ago, who knows what homage my tree-worshipping ancestors may have offered before some such woodland god?

I had no thought of this in mind when I first wandered into this corner of England; indeed, I can not say what impulse or whim of chance led my vagrant footsteps hither, unless it was the craving for a new and strange

environment. And my present peaceful mood is probably but transient; another week will find me racked once more with the old agony of unrest which has tortured my soul for more years than I can remember.

But at least, for the moment, I am at peace here—in a tiny settlement, which is scarcely a hamlet, and certainly far from a village; a ramshackle old inn where I am dwelling; a dozen scattered cottages, and for the rest, a region of rolling moorland, the monotony of which is broken only by an occasional straggling tree.

For the most part, they are just that—occasional straggling trees. But there is one exception, to which I have alluded, and which lingers within my mind as though I had spent a lifetime beneath its boughs, as though my very cradle had been suspended from them.

Heavens, what a tree is that gigantic oak, which stands alone upon the moor, it may be a mile and a half from this spot! A monstrous, towering growth, gnarled with the age, not of years, but of centuries, it must have been old when Shakespeare was young; it may have been in its prime when John signed the Charter at Runnymede.

It stands alone, towering high above the stunted landscape, like a Brobdignagian in Lilliput. It would be striking, amid a myriad giants of its kind, in the heart of Sherwood forest. Here, it seems to dominate the entire countryside, not merely by its physical magnitude, but by its majestic, aloof, almost contemptuous detachment, as it stands, as though brooding over a past rooted centuries deep in history.

I first chanced upon it three nights ago, when strolling in the faint light of a moon which seemed as barren as all else in this barren area; a light so faint that even the spreading bulk of the tree itself cast no shadow. The moon is even fainter tonight; other-

wise I might almost see the tree from my window.

APRIL 8:—It is unaccountable, the atmosphere of isolation which surrounds that tree. I strolled past it again last night, and as I paused beneath the tangled canopy woven by its branches, far overhead, I seemed almost to step from the world of everyday into another realm—a realm of the unknown, at once perilous and alluring. I could almost have believed that the ground whereon I stood was hallowed—or unhallowed—to some spirit of the past. In such an aura, before such a tree, I could easily conjure up a vision of ancient Druidical rites and unnamable sacrifices. What tricks the human mind can play upon itself, once given scope!

Tonight, the moon is still pallid; but it seems that I can faintly discern that gigantic bulk on the distant moorland. Perhaps, if the light grows stronger later, I shall see it more clearly.

APRIL 10:—I was not mistaken in my earlier fancies; there is a definite, almost tangible fascination about that tree. For the last forty-eight hours I seem to have lain under its spell, my thoughts permeated by its overpowering presence. I seemed to feel it beckoning to me; yet I deliberately refrained from revisiting it until tonight, in order to taste to the full the piquant sensation of anticipation.

And tonight I sat for almost an hour beneath its fantastically sprawling limbs. Strange, that an inanimate object should have power to cast such a spell over one! Although a tree, in a sense, is not inanimate; particularly such a tree. Indeed, contrasted with it, man himself seems a puny creature; not alone in stature, but in the light of the countless human generations that such a titan of nature has seen run out their brief span of life.

If the superstitions of the dark ages still survived today, one might well conceive of such a living pillar, rooted in the depths of the nether-world, and extended upward, half-way to heaven.

A fantastic fancy, of course; why my thoughts should flow along such channels, I do not know; but tonight, as I sat beneath that monstrous bole, it almost seemed that its leaves, rustling far overhead, whispered to me of things beyond the ken of human mind, the sight of human eye; of thoughts and deeds weird, unnamable, yet overpoweringly alluring.

I am sure that from my window I can distinguish the outline of the tree—as dim as though it were a phantom figure upon a phantom moor. I can almost hear the whispering of its leaves—but that, of course, is stark imagination.

APRIL 11:—I should not have believed it possible, a week ago, that an obsession could so grip a human mind. My thoughts seem to twine as instinctively around *The Tree*—for it has become that to me—as does the mistletoe around another of its species.

I dreamed of it, last night; or rather, it formed the background of my dream, just as it does for almost every thought of my waking moments. Strangely enough, I have seldom known a dream of such intensity, and yet already its details are fading from my mind, and only the grim outline remains.

I found myself garbed in quaint, fantastic garments, which must, I believe, have been those of the Restoration or of the early Georgian period. Mounted on horseback, with a pistol in each hand, I was in hiding, it seemed, in a thicket; and as I listened for sounds of my pursuers, a welter of foul and furious emotions raged within my breast.

Pursuit came; I fled, but was overtaken, and torn from my mount by a

score of dream hands. And then The Tree limned itself upon my consciousness. I was being dragged toward it, and such a pall of horror as in my waking moments I can scarcely conceive, fell over me. I shudder even now, in the sane light of day, at the vague recollection of the dark and blasphemous thoughts which coursed madly through the channels of my brain and seemed to sear my very soul.

The Tree was drawing nearer, and every second the shroud of black terror enveloped me more closely, and the tempest of unholy frenzy set me quivering as from the palsy, in my unseen captors' grasp. And then, suddenly, I awoke—

A beam of moonlight fell athwart my bed, and through the open window, in the remote distance I beheld the shadowy silhouette of The Tree, its branches stirring tortuously in the night breeze—whispering, still whispering, it seemed.

Curious, what tricks the light of day can play! As I sit writing this, shortly before noon, I can not distinguish The Tree upon the moor. It is probably because the sunlight dazzles my eyes. I have never yet beheld The Tree by daylight. I shall, this afternoon, to test whether its spell is as potent as by night.

APRIL 12:—Merciful heavens, are the days of witchcraft not yet extinct?

I am so shaken by my experience of yesterday afternoon that I can scarcely yet marshal my fevered thoughts to place them upon paper. Either I am the victim of a delusion more incredible than ever conceived in the pages of fiction, or some accursed black magic stalks the moors of Cornwall in the Twentieth Century.

Yesterday afternoon I set out from the inn to survey The Tree by daylight. It stood, I recalled, about a mile and a half distant, at the first

crossroad one encountered to the east—half an hour's walk; but the road so rambles and twists that The Tree is unlikely to be visible until one is close upon it; although, as I have said, it can be seen in a direct line from my window on a cloudless night.

I covered the distance leisurely, grappling in my mind with the incredible spell which the thing appears to have cast over me. And then, as I reached the crossroads, a chill of incredulous amazement, almost of consternation, gripped me.

For The Tree was not there!

The moor rolled east and west and south, broken only by a few patches of scrubby brush. The Tree had vanished as though obliterated by a giant hand. It was not merely that it had been leveled by ax or saw, or uprooted by some cataclysm of nature; the earth whereon it had stood was as smooth, and level, and unbroken, as though for centuries; The Tree itself had simply been wiped out of existence, if indeed it had ever existed.

Then indeed, for a moment, my brain reeled and tottered on the brink of chaotic madness. Such a thing was unthinkable—and yet, it was the truth!

As I stood, numbed with bewilderment, a possible explanation suggested itself. Could I have mistaken the spot? But a moment's reflection convinced me of the futility of that theory. I knew the spot all too well. Four times before had I visited it, the first by chance, the other three by design. Here, in the angle formed by the roadway which I had followed, and a transverse path across the moor, The Tree had stood; and now the spot was as smooth and level as the turf beneath a tennis roller.

No, there could be no mistaking the location, for there was not another transverse path within a mile; and, moreover, from this point I could discern in the distance the inn, and my own window, through which I had

more than once gazed upon the blurred outline of The Tree.

As the incredible, inexplicable realization seeped slowly through my reluctant brain, I observed an aged peasant approaching, and accosted him—cautiously, for I was not prepared to expose what must seem my madness to the world.

"Can you tell me," I asked, "what has become of the great oak which once grew here?"

He surveyed me with incurious, yet non-understanding eyes.

"There don't belong to be no oak tree, nor no other tree there, sir, nor ever was, as I remember," he answered.

"Surely I can not be mistaken," I pressed him. "I visited this place once, in the past, and I seem to recall a large tree growing here."

"Not in the seventy years that I belong to live in these parts, sir," he insisted.

With a word of apology, and a muttered explanation that I must have mistaken my direction, I left him, and for hours paced the moor in a vain attempt to fathom the riddle.

Vain, indeed, for to one of two conclusions I must come: either I had suffered a delusion when I saw The Tree, or I suffered one now, when I could not see it. But the peasant's assurance dispelled the latter possibility, and drove me inevitably to a realization that for the last week I must have labored under some incredible hypnotic spell.

I have looked from my window to-night, half expecting to see once more the nebulous blur of The Tree that is not, and can never have been, a tree. But the sky is overcast with an ominous cloud-pall, and naught is visible on the distant moor. And yet—merciful heaven, am I indeed on the verge of madness? I seem even now to hear the phantom rustling of those leaves that can have no existence save in the disorder of my brain.

APRIL 13:—Beyond all question, there is some devilry afoot upon these accursed Cornish moors; some intangible, fiendish force, which works its malevolent purpose through that Tree of hell, spawned up from the very inferno itself.

And yet, after what I passed through last night, after that ordeal which has left me racked, not alone with physical pain, but with incredible and agonizing terror of mind and soul, should I call it an intangible force? I do not know; I only know that at this moment I stand at the border of a land of unseen, unthinkable horrors, from which phantom hands stretch forth to clutch me, and drag me into their unhallowed depths.

Tonight I shall sleep—if indeed I sleep at all—behind bolted doors and windows; though I doubt whether such puny artifices can avail against the forces of evil which have apparently beset me. And tomorrow I shall flee from Cornwall forever. I have had enough of wandering for one lifetime; henceforth, any spot which is sufficiently far removed from this fiend's pest-hole is a welcome home to me.

Even in this diary, which no other eye than mine shall ever scan, I scarcely dare to set down the thing that befell me last night; for even now it almost drives me to question my own sanity. Have I, who ever scoffed at the supernatural, fallen beneath the thrall of sorcery as black as ever flourished in ancient Thebes or in the darkest mediæval era?

Or will mental obsession, auto-hypnosis and somnambulism explain away my ordeal? No—a thousand times no, as I still feel that rasping knot of death upon my throat, and behold the gigantic shape of that hell-tree, rearing itself from the very pit of perdition.

I dreamed again last night—and yet, I scarcely dare say what I dreamed, and what was soul-chilling reality, so hectically are the two in-

terwoven in a dread pattern of occult horror.

At least, however, my dream began as did that of three nights ago. Again, attired in the garb of bygone centuries, armed and mounted, I fled from I know not what pursuit. Again I was overpowered by that horde of dream figures, and again borne across the moor, toward that appalling Tree, whose sinister secret I had not fully grasped before. Again my brain seemed to quail beneath the storm of inchoate fury that seethed within me, as I struggled madly against the horror yet to come.

Now I stood beneath The Tree, and my welter of volcanic madness gave way to a cold stark despair, and to a hell-born hatred, as I felt my hands being bound behind my back, and a noose twining snake-like about my neck.

Another moment and the earth receded from beneath my feet, I dangled in midair, and fought chokingly for breath as that circle of death tightened ruthlessly upon my throat. A haze of black oblivion veiled before my staring eyes, and then—

It must, I think, have been at that point that my dream broke off, and grim reality succeeded it, for of a sudden the noose had vanished from about my throat, and in the reaction, I lay in a sobbing, gasping frenzy.

And then came the crowning horror of reality, to climax and eclipse the horror of my dream. As the chill night wind slowly fanned the fever from my brow, I raised my head, and—

Merciful heavens!

I lay, not in my bed in the inn, but upon the very moor, at that very spot, at the crossroads, and—what diabolical enchantment lay at the bottom of it, I know not—beside me that accursed Tree of hell once more had reared itself, and in the moonless murk of night it seemed to spread until it enveloped the earth with a miasma of dreadful omen.

At the realization of where I was and what I saw, I screamed aloud, and then I must have swooned; for when I next opened my eyes, sunlight was streaming over the moors, and that appalling, towering shape had vanished like a noxious mist of night.

Somehow—I do not recall how—I must have reeled or staggered, like a sobbing, gibbering madman, home to the inn; for I remember gaining the shelter of my room, and then collapsing once more, a quivering, soul-shaken, human shell.

Not all the gold of the Indies could tempt me to spend another twenty-four hours in this region of devildom. Had I the strength, I should flee from the spot ere nightfall, but in my shaken condition I can not start until morning. But tonight I shall sleep with doors and windows bolted, and with a loaded revolver within reach of my hand. And, more, I shall tie myself to my bed.

That may be a vain precaution; for, gladly though I would believe it, I know in my heart of hearts that it was not mere somnambulism that led me to the moor last night.

Sometimes, in my calmer moments, I have tried to reason that it was, and that all I experienced until daybreak was a dream. But such self-deception is futile. I am still uncertain of the exact point at which my dream broke off and grim reality took up the ordeal of horror; but this I know, as a final and inexorable proof—my throat still throbs with agonizing pain, and it is encircled by a livid weal—the imprint of a noose.

[Here ends the journal of Joseph Worth.]

(Extract from *The Bodmin Chronicle*, April 17)

MYSTERY OF THE MOOR

Tragic Death of Tourist
Remains Unsolved

No evidence tending to clear up the mystery was adduced at the inquest held last
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The Gallows Tree

(Continued from page 766)

night into the death of Joseph Worth, 45, of New Jersey, U. S. A., whose body was found Sunday morning on the moor near the village of Polgarth.

Medical evidence tended to establish that Worth had evidently died of strangulation, which was borne out by a livid weal, such as might have been caused by a noose, encircling the man's throat. No trace of any such noose was found, however.

Mr. Roscarroll, the coroner, stated that suicide, under the circumstances, would have been impossible; and no motive for foul play could be assigned, as the deceased had no known enemies, and a considerable sum of money was found on his person. The jury returned a verdict of death from strangulation inflicted in a manner unknown.

Further mystery is added to the case by the fact that the late Mr. Worth had apparently left his room in the Polgarth Inn by a window which opens onto a balcony, as his door was locked on the inside. A loaded revolver was found on a table beside the bed, and two strong cords were tied, in a peculiar manner, to the posts at the foot of the bed. There was no evidence of any struggle, and apparently, the deceased had left the room of his own accord, although for an unknown motive.

Local antiquarians recall, as a singular coincidence, that centuries ago, a number of criminals were hanged from a gigantic oak, known colloquially as "The Gallows Tree," which then stood upon the exact spot where Mr. Worth's body was found, but which was cut down more than one hundred and fifty years ago.

The last person to meet death there was the highwayman known as Black Giles Trewartha, who was betrayed into the hands of the law by his brother Joseph in 1715. As he stood beneath the Gallows Tree, Trewartha imposed a curse upon his brother and on any of the latter's descendants who should ever tread Cornish soil.