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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Inn

By REX ERNEST

A short story with a real shudder

BARLOW cursed as his foot plunged into a pocket of slimy mud and ice-cold water slithered in over the top of his shoe. He strained his eyes into the darkness, but could distinguish nothing more than heavier blackness of the trees that crowded down upon him. The rain poured down, making a monotonous dirge in the leaves. The weather was bad enough without getting himself lost. Taking a fresh grip on his case he pushed on through the murk and muck of the lonely country lane.

This was one thing he had not bargained for when he had applied for poor old Gough's territory—he had been thinking too much of the fat commissions that would be his. Still, travelers in strange parts must expect this sort of thing. It was queer about Gough. They had never been satisfied about his death—there was something funny about the whole business! Anyway, he wasn't married, left no wife and kids behind.—Thank God! A light!

Casting aside his ruminations, Barlow gazed ahead at the pallid yellow light that showed through the gloom. It was the window of some sort of building, and he steered his course toward it. When he was close enough to make out its looming bulk, he guessed it was an inn, and the thought cheered him greatly. Here was warmth and shelter, anyway. The rusty creaking of a sign-board, hidden in the darkness, confirmed his guess, and soon he felt cobblestones beneath his feet. He tried to make out what the sign said, but found the darkness too thick; so he stooped and got the swinging board

limned against the faint luminance of the night sky. It could be just made out: the crude figure of a bird. A name shuffled forward from the recesses of his memory: *The Blind Crow*. The recollection dragged behind it a grim fact; this was the inn where Gough had died!

Disquieted, Barlow stood a moment lost in strange sensations; then, as the cold discomfort of the rain again asserted itself, he shrugged his shoulders and scurried into the porch. Setting down his bag, he swept his sodden hat from his head, and slashed it through the air to rid it of its heavy wetness. He opened his coat and shook off some of the rain, and then looked around for bell or knocker that would bring someone to open the heavy door.

He was reaching for the heavy iron knocker, when the door swung open, silently. Its silence jarred on his already jumpy nerves: it was the sort of door that is expected to groan and protest. He blinked his eyes in the sickly radiance that crept out, seeking to distinguish the man who stood there. Tall, gaunt and bald, the man regarded him without interest. Here was no rubicund, cheery host; more, it seemed to Barlow, of a keeper, a guardian of grimmer places. The traveler was conscious that his voice was curiously subdued, as he said:

"Good evening! I'd like a room for the night!"

The other made no answer; just stood to one side and opened the door wider. Barlow stepped into the wide passage, waited for the taciturn inn-keeper to close the door, then followed him into a large

stone-flagged room. He was greeted by a warm atmosphere. A log fire hissed and crackled on the open hearth, filling the room with cheerful red light and dancing shadows, and a big table bore indications of toothsome fare. His spirits rose, and flinging his wet clothes across a chair, he rubbed his hands briskly together.

"I'll be grateful if you'll put me out something to eat. Some cold meat and pickles if you have it, and, of course, some beer."

The host nodded and uttered a grunt, and set about producing the food. When everything was on the table, he threw down a heavy key, attached to a small billet of wood. When he spoke, his voice was dry and rustling:

"Here's the key to your room. It's the second door on the landing. Good night!"

And without further conversation, the strange host shuffled away to the remote regions back of the kitchen.

BARLOW stared after him. He had intended getting him to talk about Gough, but somehow he feared to intrude upon the man's morose aloofness. He fingered the big key, and then turned to the goodly viands before him.

He took time over the meal. The cold meat was good and the beer was the best he had yet encountered. Mentally, he praised the host's foresight in serving an ample supply of the drink. Under the cheering influence of a satisfied stomach and the cozy warmth, a mellow contentment settled over him. Leisurely, he filled his pipe, and glanced around the big room. The log fire was still crackling redly, and, filling up his glass anew, Barlow turned down the lamp, and walked across to the big settle, stretching his legs toward the blaze. He lit his pipe, and with that drawing well, relaxed luxuriously. Ah! This was good!

With half-closed eyes gazing into the friendly heart of the fire, he sank into dreamy rumination. When he retired, he'd have a place like this. Nothing to beat it. Then his mind came back to Gough. Poor old Gough! Quite a decent fellow, in his way. Funny he should happen on the very place where he had died; still, in a way it was not so funny,— wasn't he traveling over the same ground? Still . . . wonder what really happened! He hadn't read the account; he only knew that some sort of mystery surrounded the case. Half aloud, he murmured: "Poor old Gough!" and prepared to dismiss the matter from his mind.

"Yes, it was unfortunate!" answered a deep voice.

Barlow sat bolt-upright, stared about the room. Then, just as he was beginning to think the voice had been a figment of his imagination, he discerned a figure hunched up in the shadows on the opposite side of the fire. Gradually, his fright subsided. He peered at the other, trying to see more than the indistinct outlines that merged into the surrounding shadows, changing shape with each vagary of the flickering flames. His sense of companionship came to the fore.

"Good evening!" he said. "I thought I was alone. I didn't notice you there."

He paused a moment, then, as the other made no reply, he continued:

"Beastly weather! Are you 'on the road'?"

"No!"

"Oh, you live here, then?"

"No, I don't live here." The deep voice seemed to come from the very depths of the deepest shadow. "But I am here very frequently."

Barlow drew on his pipe, and sought for some new lead to fresh fields of conversation. Then he remembered the stranger's entry into his consciousness.

"Didn't you make some remark about Gough—the fellow that died here?"

"I said that it was unfortunate."

"Yes, it was a sad affair. He worked for the same firm as I do. I knew him well. Not a bad chap. Funny nobody seems to know exactly what happened. All I seem to be able to get is that he was found in bed here dead, with an expression of great fear on his face! The doctors said heart failure, but if you had known Gough—why, the man was like a horse!"

"The symptoms stated were indicative of death from fear—extreme terror."

"Fear? Why, man, Gough feared nothing on earth. It would take something to frighten him at all, let alone scare him to death."

"Scared of nothing on earth? Maybe, but he died from terror."

The traveler pondered this. Outside, the wind moaned and sent the rain scrabbling at the window-panes. He plucked up courage, and blurted out the question that had been burning on his lips since the conversation started.

"You seem to know a lot about it. Perhaps you would tell me?"

"I know all about it."

FOLLOWING the abrupt admission, the other fell silent for so long that Barlow feared he had offended him in some way. Just as he was about to make some effort at making amends for any offense he might have caused, the other began to speak.

"Gough arrived here in much the same manner as you—he had lost the last train, and it was raining hard. He was given the second room off the landing, and after a good supper, he retired.

"He settled down to read for an hour or so, but the old four-poster was so comfortable, he soon extinguished the light, cuddled down under the warm blankets,

and dropped off to sleep. Just after midnight he awoke. He did not know what had caused him to awake, and he gave a sleepy glance around and then tried to get to sleep again. In a few minutes, he was awake again. This time, he tried to define the cause. It was not long before he realized that there was something in the room—another Presence.

"He sat up in the bed, and peered into the shadows. He could see nothing, and hear nothing beyond the dismal drip-drip of the rain from the eaves. Still, he knew that something was there. Suddenly, he stiffened, stared intently into the darkest corner. Something moved, deep in the shadows—more like the swirl of thick smoke than actual movement. Faintly, but distinctly, a peculiar musty smell reached his nostrils. There was an evil tension in the air that caused the short hairs on his neck to tingle, and a moisture to break out on his brow.

"Fascinated, he watched the vague movements gather strength; saw them become a virile, sinister writhing. Soon, something bulked large and menacing within the depths of the shadow, something that began to move toward the foot of the bed. By now, Gough was clutching the sheets tightly, unable to do more than watch with terrified eyes. His vocal cords were frozen, and his muscles refused to obey his spell-bound mind. He had to sit there and wait, wait.

"The thing moved out from the shadows, itself only a black shadowy bulk. It reached the foot of the bed, where it seemed to grow yet more, rearing up, looming hungrily toward the terrified man. Then, the cold, white moonlight came from a rift in the storm-rack, poured through the window, full upon the thing.

"Gough's eyes widened, bulged. He tried to scream, but no sound issued from his dry throat. He thrust out shaking

hands to ward off the thing from the shadows—a futile gesture. Then, with a tortured sob, he fell back onto the pillows, dead!

“Thus they found him the next morning!”

FOR some minutes after the other ceased speaking Barlow sat as if in a trance. His pipe had gone cold, and the fire had died away to red embers, where an occasional flame flickered its brief life. Outside, the rain still poured, beating against the sides of the house. With a sigh, Barlow came back to earth, and leaned back, mopping his forehead. His heart was still racing with the horror of what he had heard. Then a thought struck through his daze, a thought that sent his fears scurrying back to their hid-

ing-places. The more he thought of it, the more he wanted to laugh. He was careful to speak with nonchalance:

“How terrible! What a horrible death!”

The figure in the shadows made no reply. Barlow went on, allowed a little triumph to creep into his tone:

“Your story was very vivid, my friend. Too vivid! Gough was *alone*—and only he could have known what happened!”

He leaned forward, waiting for an answer to his challenge. Somewhere, a clock chimed twelve times. From the shadows, the reply came.

“Yes! Only Gough *and the thing from the shadows!*”

And the figure moved forward into the dying light of the fire.