

Weird Tales



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... is now a sinister, sullen carmine in hue,
so that it resembles a lake of blood.



Woe Water

BY H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD

WEAR LODGE.
Oct. 3rd: At last! What a huge relief to be away from all that foul publicity, the brutally cynical re-

porters, the cruel animal stares of the mob, those hard-eyed detectives, hoping to get their hands on me, and all the bestiality I've been through during the last month.

This house is, of course, much too big for just Barratt and me, but I was in no mood to be selective and took the first more or less suitable place that offered. One thing, my privacy will not be violated here. We are two miles from the village and the grounds are extensive and well wired-in. I shall be merciless to trespassers.

Only ten anonymous letters this morning—the rush is over! This experience has taught me what sub-human devils people can be, and what a lust consumes them to believe the worst and grind into the mire the unfortunate who is *down*. As if any sane person could possibly believe I wouldn't have done, and didn't do, my very best to save poor Angela? Of course that perverse fool of a Welsh coroner was responsible for much of my tribulation. He should have realized that when I said it was Angela who suggested going bathing that night it was simply a slip of the tongue. (What a strange displeasing cry that is! Bird or beast?) As for that bruise on the head, it could *not* have been acquired *before* death, as that fool of a doctor suggested. Absurd! Impossible! And what conceivable motive had I for ridding myself of her! We had our differences like any other married couple—no more, no less. She was a little difficult at times and no doubt, I was too.

As for her money—I never wanted it; I had enough for my simple wants, and I didn't care if she didn't leave me a penny, though I'm quite sure it was untrue she was thinking of making a new will disinheriting me. Sims, her lawyer, must have misunderstood her, and his evidence, again, made a very bad impression. Everything seemed to conspire against me at that inquest and the "Open" verdict was meant as a slur on me. Of course it ought to have been "Misadventure"! I am becoming more and more convinced that some men are born unlucky, born in the Red, destined inevitably to suffer, the pack of Fate stacked rigorously against them, always that Red turning up to consolidate their doom.

I am going to keep a diary for the future. It will be something to do, and help, perhaps, to comfort and clarify my mind.

I shall be very lonely for the rest of my life, I suppose. Barratt is an excellent servant and a good enough fellow, but an uneducated man is never really company for an educated one, and I don't believe he really likes me, even though he has been with me so long. Angela was his favorite. I am also going to prepare a statement giving the true version of these events, so that when it is read after my death it will be understood how terribly I've been the victim of circumstance, of shameful suspicion and malignant tongues. (There's that cry again!) It is strange and awful to realize how a perfectly innocent man can be slandered and tortured as I have been. It has made me much more sympathetic and understanding towards unlucky men, so-called "failures," for I see clearly how easily they can fall into ghastly traps, as I did, and how their fate can pursue them to the bitter, hopeless end.

I STILL dread the postman's knock, but, though I'm sleeping very badly, I think that recurrent nightmare of choking and struggling, which is so unnerving, is, perhaps, not quite so vivid. Curiously enough, I have at times a powerful sense of Angela's presence after dark; so odd because she never entered, or even heard of, this house. It will probably fade after a while. If only the dead could speak! (There is that cry once more! What can it be?)

Oct. 4th: I took this place in such a hurry—almost panic—that I had never properly explored the grounds till today, when I strolled around with old Carlman, the gardener. He is a grizzled and rather unforthcoming rustic, at least he was hardly polite to me, though I provide his bread and butter. Of course he has heard things and I am hardened to that sort of treatment by now. To my astonishment I found there is a pool, a small lake, actually, in the southeast corner of the estate. I suppose the reason I didn't notice it on my one hurried visit is that it is entirely surrounded by a barrier of weeping willows. It is an ellipse in shape, about a hundred yards across the major axis, eighty across the lesser. It is an odd, slate-back hue, due,

perhaps, to the over-hang of the willows and the shadows they cast.

The old man surveyed it with some solemnity, and almost made me laugh for the first time since it happened, by informing me its depth was unknown, bottom in the middle never having been reached, a ludicrous yarn which I'll disprove before long. I got the impression he is somewhat nervous of it, and it is undoubtedly sombre and forbidding. He told me it was called "Woc Water" and used to be on common land, but was enclosed—polite term for "stolen"—many years ago, and that the villagers have never forgiven this. "It's always been a place of sin and death," he said, an enigmatic remark, which I found by cross-examination meant a favored venue for suicides—fifteen in his lifetime! This sounds hardly credible, and no doubt he was drawing the long bow. I asked him in a joking way why the sparse inhabitants of Drarley Parva were so addicted to self-slaughter. "There are wicked men here as everywhere," he replied, "and they come to the water to cleanse away their sins." By which I deduced he belongs to the Bible-thumping brigade. "And their scarlet sins color the water," he went on, "so that when there is a body within it, it takes the look of blood, and the body troubles the water while it is lying within it, troubles it for seven days, and on the seventh day the people come to meet and greet the dead man, and his sinful body comes up white as snow and picked clean of its evil flesh."

"How d'you mean 'troubles it'?" I asked as seriously as I could manage.

"It is all astir," he replied, "wind or no wind, and the dead man's wave runs across it."

Just a bit of yokel myth-making, of course. I asked him if there were any fish in it, and he said he didn't think so.

At that very moment there was a huge "rise" out in the middle—a monster carp, I imagine, and I said mockingly, "What about *that!*" But he just muttered and hurried away.

Paid the bill for Angela's funeral today, as they've been pressing me. A

hundred and forty pounds; extortionate, of course, but then they know I daren't query anything in my position, and naturally nothing could be too good for her. A peculiarly infamous anonymous letter this morning—fifteen pages! Would you credit that anyone could be so sparking with venomous malignity as to spend what must have been hours composing such a vicious screed? And the writer's no half-wit either. He makes what he is pleased to call "six points which indicate irrefutably your guilt." In the course of time I am going to get down on paper a complete answer to this cowardly, knavish brute, point by point.

I HAVE several times alluded to a strange piercing cry which I hear as I sit writing late at night. It comes from the direction of the pool and is made presumably by some water bird. A heron? I do not know. Apart from fishing, I am very ignorant of country matters, and I mean to study the birds and beasts which visit my domain. There it is again! It is an almost human, despairing note. Rather blood-chilling, rather too reminiscent of—no! I won't even think of such a comparison. That is craven and contemptible, and I must train my mind away from all such frailties. My nerves have enough to carry as it is.

I'll order a small rowboat for the lake and try for that big fish. I've drunk too much whiskey today. I never used to indulge like this, but I think it will help me to sleep. Sense of Angela's presence very strong at the moment.

Oct. 5th: Been in poorish spirits today, bored and lonely. Thinking too, of my poor dead father, who suffered, as I am suffering, and from that odious woman, my mother. Getting tired of my own company, I suppose, but it can't be helped and must be endured. Everyone of my so-called "friends" would cut me dead if he met me in the street. Barratt is no good to me; he is sullen and irresponsive. That cry is becoming rather too *much*—very oppressive. It starts at dusk and recurs at intervals from then on. Curiously enough, I could see no signs of any water fowl when I visited the

lake today. Perhaps they just come there to roost. I'll go out there one night with a gun, for I fear that thing responsible, whatever it may be, will have to die. There it is again!

That anonymous slanderer's first point was that Angela was afraid of water and would never have bathed that night unless I'd forced her to. What nonsense! *I'm* the one who fears water, always have done so since that fortune-teller warned me against it years ago, but I've fought the phobia with some success. It is true, as that chambermaid said, that I wanted Angela to come with me. It was a lovely night, I dislike being alone in the sea, and I thought a bath would be good for her nerves. But that spying maid was lying when she swore she overheard me *threaten* Angela. It was spite; I should have tipped her more at the end of the first week in the hotel.

I wonder if cotton wool in my ears would help to damp and dim the stridency of that cry? I'll try it. I've finished a whole bottle today. I must strive to cut down.

Oct. 6th: Seven anonymous letters this morning. One included my horoscope, says I'll be dead before the end of the year, which "will be good riddance of a bestial wife-murderer." Some nice people in the world. Took another stroll with old Carlman this morning. We visited the pool and I questioned him some more. He says they never drag for the bodies which, he repeated, always surface again on the seventh day and the villagers flock down to see them rise. Well, they won't do that again while I'm here. There'll be no more suicides in my time, the suicidal trespasser will be prosecuted as rigorously as all others. He'll have to select another spot. I asked him about water-fowl.

"None ever come here," he said, "and no bird visits these trees." And, indeed, I confess I haven't seen or heard one in the neighborhood of the pool *by day*.

The second point made by that cowardly swine is that I am a strong swimmer and that Angela was a poor one. Not so poor, really! And that I deliberately took her too far out, and asks, why I didn't stay near her? Why did I swim so far from her?

according to my account. "In reality," he writes, "you *did* stay close to her and struck her over the head with your fist and let her drown." And that I didn't expect the bruise would be discovered because of her thick hair. That shows to what lengths a foul, diseased imagination can go! The fact is I was floating on my back, and Angela swam away from me, not purposefully, but pursuing her own way, until she was dangerously far from me. I called her, but got no reply and must have swum in the wrong direction. The tide was on the ebb and we must have been carried out further than I expected. She must have got a cramp, and it was then she cried out so horribly—like that! No *not* like that! Curse that creature whatever it may be! As for the bruise, the body was not recovered for twelve hours, and some flotsam must have struck her during that time. I shan't deal with any more of the vicious brute's insinuations in this diary. I find doing so troubles me and racks my nerves, and these sleepless nights are wearing me down. I keep looking up furtively to see if there's anyone in the room. There comes that devilish cry again; cotton wool does *no* good. I am going out now to kill that bird. I can stand it no more.

Later. No luck! There was some moonlight, but I could see nothing. Yet the cry came both as I was going out and returning. The pool looked very sinister and forbidding. I can understand, in a way, how it might lure a suicide to his doom. It even exerts a certain perverse attraction over me. It works on that *phobia* of mine. It is often, too often, in my thoughts. I am half-drunk again, utterly exhausted, and may sleep for once.

Oct. 8th: The rowboat came this morning and was launched on the lake. I rowed out into the middle with a leaded line, but, oddly enough, I couldn't find bottom. There seems to be some sort of current which swings the line. I don't think any pole would be long enough. It doesn't matter, but I'd like to have shown old Carlman, who I spotted peering at me through the trees. What a superstitious old fool he is! In the afternoon I tried some fishing, and

again with no luck at all. There was not a breath of wind and the pool lay black, thick, a lake of oil, it seemed. I gave my float a lot of line and at once it received a tremendous tug which almost jerked the rod from my hand and started the reel screaming. Then the line went slack, and on reeling in, found it had been snapped well above the float. This seemed very queer and I tried once more, with the same startling result. It must be, I suppose, that the reeds grip it in some way, but I have known nothing like it in a long piscatorial experience. It does seem to be true about the birds. After landing I carefully searched the trees, but didn't see or start a wing.

YET what is that cry I hear? There it comes again. I have definitely come to the conclusion that the lake is a very strange place, almost, it seems, with laws of its own. Nothing seems quite normal about it. I shall keep away from it as much as I can. I'm sorry I wasted money on that boat, it was impulsive and heedless.

Oct. 10th: Barratt came to me this morning. I could tell by his face something was wrong. I haven't liked the look of him for some time. He had the impudence to say he could no longer keep silent about that *other* matter. It was too much on his conscience. His conscience! He should acquire a brain first. I swore to him, almost desperately, that it had been a pure accident, that Angela must have somehow switched on the gas as she was undressing. He said truculently that that might be so, but the authorities should be told; that they'd left the verdict "open" to see if any more evidence came out, and this should be made known. The ignorance and insolence of the man! I can see he hates me in his heart. We argued for over an hour, and at last I said, "Why this sudden change of mind? I've paid you well. You promised to keep your mouth shut. Why this new resolve?" At first he wouldn't say, but at last he blurted out, "It's that screaming every night. It's the voice of the Missus. And I feel her about, too, and she wants the truth known." I pretended to laugh heartily at this, and told

him it was just a bird at the pool. "I've seen it," I said, "and tried to shoot it!" He appeared unconvinced; so I went on, "Come to the lake tonight and I'll show it to you. Will *that* satisfy you?" "If you show me the thing that makes that cry, sir, I'll think it over," he replied. "Otherwise I'll have to tell what I know."

"Remember," I said, "if you do that wicked, stupid act, I'll sack you without a character and say you tried to blackmail me, and good jobs aren't so easy to come by for men of your age."

"Never mind about that," he replied with effrontery, "you show me the bird which screams like a drowning woman!" And he went on his way. I'm writing this in great agitation. I've burnt my boats. I shall have to fool him now. I daren't let him tell of that incident. It was a pure accident, and if Angela had let me share her room it would never have happened. It would mean reopening the whole thing and I cannot face it. I daren't, especially as the doctor who attended Angela was very "sticky" about it at the time, and his evidence would be dangerous. I can stand no more persecution. I must use my wits to-night.

Later. A terrible thing has happened—Barratt was drowned at the pool! It was a pure accident. We went there together at ten o'clock, as arranged. It was dark except for starlight. As we approached, that cry came, but it was *no nearer*. I was terrified lest Barratt should realize this. As it was, he hesitated. I put my hand on his shoulder and found he was trembling violently. "Don't be a coward!" I whispered, "That is the bird. I'll show it to you. Keep quiet and move stealthily." I led the way till we reached the tree barrier and, moving a branch, peered through. Then I whispered again to Barratt. "Come up beside me and try to follow the direction of my arm." He did so and I said, "There, man, on the shore, can't you see it!" In his eagerness he moved still further forward. The bank was damp, he seemed to slip, and the next moment he was in. There was a splash but no other sound. It was a *pure accident!*

I dashed round to the boat and searched

the spot, but could find nothing. And then, heaven be my witness, I saw a wave moving across the face of the water. It swung the boat high and broke on the further shore. And that fearful cry came and its echo screamed in my head. What to do now? It was an accident, but dare I tell the truth after all that has happened? No, I dare not. I must plan otherwise. Luckily Barratt has no relatives alive, no friends, I fancy; no one will enquire after him. I must impersonate him for a week till his body comes up, and then I must dispose of it. I'll weight it heavily and sink it again for ever. Then I'll take the car and drive up to town very late at night, tell the agent I found the place too lonely and unsuitable, and tell him to put it on the market. Then I'll go abroad—the Argentine, which I know well, and have all my funds transferred there. I'll burn Barratt's trunk and all his clothes save one suit and his cap. Luckily he was about my height and not too unlike me in build and appearance. I swear to God it was an accident!

This has shattered my nerves. I thought I saw Angela just now, standing by the door in her shroud, her eyes hard on me. Just an illusion. I've been drinking too much, that is it. I'm near drunk now. My one longing is to leave this hellish place. There is that cry again! I must stick it out this week, drunk or sober, and then my troubles will be over.

Oct. 11th: All went well. I rose early and dressed in Barratt's suit and cap, which I pulled down over my eyes. I knew him so long I can imitate his walk and even his voice. I took a short stroll in the garden to show myself, and when the milkman came, I waved to him from a distance. There will be the butcher tomorrow and I shall just say, "Nothing this week," through the door.

Then I changed into my own clothes and carefully surveyed the pool just in case. I have prepared some weighted ropes and will bury them near the pool tomorrow. I searched it again in the evening just before dark. It is very strange and inexplicable, but it seems to have changed

color. It is now a sinister, sullen carmine in hue, so that it resembles a lake of blood, and it is continually disturbed by a huge ripple which passes across it. I noticed old Carlman kept out of my way. I don't know why, but it was quite obvious. I mistrust this. I shall have a hard struggle to fight myself through this week. Every time I doze off I wake from hideous dreams. I have to drink to keep sane. Thought I saw Barratt in his pantry when I was getting my supper. I keep fancying I see Angela—keep glancing up. The day seems endless.

Oct. 14th: All goes well. My impersonation of Barratt has worked perfectly. Tradespeople not calling again. Old Carlman still avoids me, that is all that worries me, during the day, but, O God, the evening and the night! The body should reappear Sunday, but I am keeping the closest watch. I shall spend all day on the lake on Sunday pretending to fish. How fortunate it is so hemmed in; little chance of being overlooked while I'm doing the job. There'll be a risk, of course, but, by God, I'm hardened to those by now! The pool is still that horrid hue and is continually disturbed, ever restless and reeking—yes, it stinks! Wants rain to freshen it. I shan't write in the diary again till it is over. The trembling and sweating of my hand makes it almost impossible. Oh, these fearful, endless days! Sometimes I have to force my lips together with my hand lest I start to scream, and if I started, I could never stop. Am as far gone as that! Only four days to wait, only four. Supposing it doesn't reappear! I dare not think of that. That cry again, that death cry. Angela is standing by the door.

Oct. 19th: What can have happened? When I looked out of my bedroom window at dawn this morning, I could see a number of people moving towards the pool and breaking down the wire fence. I hurried out to them and bade them be gone, threatened to prosecute every one of them. They took not the slightest notice of me, completely ignored me, simply looked through me, and continued to pour through the gap. They even shouldered me brutally aside when I tried to dispute their passage. Even old Carlman forced his way past me, his

eyes, like theirs, rapt and staring. They are like devotees obsessed and absorbed in some rite and drilled in its enactment. I saw not one speak or smile, and each took up his place on the bank till the pool was entirely surrounded, and then they fixed their eyes on the water. I know why they are there! I cursed and raved at them, but they had not ears for me.

So I came back to the house and am watching from the window. How did they know! How could they have known! It is deadly still and I could hear any sound they make, but they make no sound. What shall I do? Angela and Barratt are here in the

room with me. Speak! Speak, you dead and absolve me! So it has come to this. Water! Water! As was prophesied. Shall I get the police? Shall I take the car and fly? What will they do when—I shall swear to them Barratt fell in. I'll defend myself to the last. I did my best to save him. How much longer to wait? Shall I—? Hark! Hark! A great and dreadful shout comes from them! He has risen! I know it! Father! Father!

(On December 16th, 1921, James Greville Leas was hanged for the murder of his servant, George William Barratt, at Reading Jail.)
