

THE PLOUGHMAN

A Story by Stephen Wand

The idea to walk eight miles from home to my girlfriend's house seemed sound at the time. Events dictated otherwise and now, three years later, I'm relating this to you in the faint hope that the recounting allows me to accept what I saw that night. I hope, too, it brings a healing to my tortured mind.

My decision was taken out of economy. My finances were unhealthy to say the least. I was surprised Gill had anything to do with me. She said she loved me – said I looked like Keifer Sutherland. Her mother reckoned I was a rogue. Astute creatures, mothers.

Once I was out of town the evening's walk became enjoyable. The lane was full of the smell of cow parsley and the humming of hoverflies. Lapwings performed aerobatics over the fields and the very air seemed charged with life.

With about three miles to go I saw the friendly face of a full moon slowly crawl across a back-cloth of faded denim. I pressed on and, as I watched the moon climb toward its zenith, large,

slate grey clouds closed in bringing a threat of rain. I quickened my pace but soon felt the first icy 'plop' on my bare forearm. Moments later the torrent rushed toward me, staining the road in an advancing line accompanied by an ominous 'husssh'.

A bit of rain doesn't bother me at all when I'm dressed for it, but that night I wasn't and had no wish to become drenched. Just as I began to feel sorry for myself I saw a familiar farm track off to the left, flanked by trees and overgrown brambles. I smiled inwardly. I knew this place. I also knew the old derelict house that squatted at the far end of the track.

As I approached the trail a flicker of white in one of the bordering beeches caught my eye. Glancing up I saw the dark cowed form of a Magpie; a hooded executioner, its tail flicking as the bird balanced on a branch before me. I was surprised to see that it remained perched there as I approached, its dark eyes glinting menacingly.

'My, you're a brave chap,' I said, my voice strange in the sudden quiet that had descended. The bird bobbed its head twice and, with a sudden 'ka ka ka ka' like insane laughter, it darted from the branch and flew down the trail, a piebald blur. I stood, startled by the bird's harsh cry and unexpected flight, until a quickening in the rainfall brought me to my senses. I turned onto the uneven track and hurried along, partially shielded now by the canopy of overhanging branches. In the close atmosphere formed by the dense cover and unruly undergrowth the smell of wild garlic was heavy.

I didn't notice the mist crawling in under the trees, until a cloying sulphurous scent alerted me that something was amiss.

The mist swept in, yellow and unnatural with a rank, unhealthy stench. I tried vainly to hold my breath as I ran but soon, either the lack of clean air or lung-fulls of the unholy smog I'd already inhaled caused me to feel light headed. I stumbled on through puddles – strangely warm – which splashed my ankles as I slipped in the ruts, kicking up grass-caked clods of sodden earth.

Swaying drunkenly, I stole a glance ahead and saw the rain-shrouded silhouette of my goal, with its steeply-raked gables and battered lean-to. Almost sick with relief I winced as bile rose to the back of my mouth and, with faltering steps, reached the edge of the wood. There, I gasped for one more fetid breath and tottered toward the house. At last I reached the door, its paint peeling like the skin of a reptile, and pushed my way inside. As I crossed the threshold a shudder surged through me and my vision blanked as though an invisible hood had been thrown over me. With a gut-heaving surge I collapsed to the floor.

It was night when I awoke with a start. I peered about me, my eyes slowly adjusting to the gloom of my surroundings. The musty odour of old hay was overwhelming and I realised I was laying on a wooden pallet covered with the stuff. Several rust-rimmed beer cans littered the floor; the once quaint cottage now simply a doss-house for under-age drinkers. Moonlight shone full through a broken window to my right lending the room a sylvan glow. I turned to look through the shattered pane to the pale orb of moon beyond. Its face no longer looked down kindly but seemed to sneer with unconcealed malevolence. A shiver ran through me at the thought. Perhaps the strange circumstance of my unexpected visit was messing with my mind.

‘Get a grip,’ I said out loud in a futile effort to dispel my melancholy. As my senses gradually returned I realised that a noise had woken me and lay still, straining to listen out for more of the same. The rain had stopped and all was now silent outside. Too silent, for these woods were never quiet at night. There’d always been an intermittent rustling in the undergrowth. The scuttling of night-creatures. The sound of owls had been almost continuous – I’d identified three with certainty: the screech of little owls, the ‘*too-whit-to-who*’ of the tawny and the occasional weird snoring of the barn owl. Yes, creatures of the night reigned here once the sun had set. Silence never did.

Then I heard it. The clink of metal upon metal resounded over the clearing, followed immediately by another. I tried to move but my strained limbs refused to obey. I tried to replay the sound inside my head to identify what may be outside. In my mind I heard blades drawn; imagined them glinting in the moonlight. I breathed deeply, slowly, so as not to make a sound and the fresh oxygen supply surging into my brain unlocked my muscles and I reached out to push myself up off the pallet.

Despite my caution, the noise as I raised my frigid body off the hay seemed to fill the room. I sensed a rush of adrenaline into my system and looked to the door only a few feet away. I realise I should have made for the door then – rushed through and never looked back. But no, for the second time that night I made a colossal error of judgement.

Lifting myself to a crouch I reached for the moonlit windowsill. Cold sweat tickled my scalp as I raised my head above the sill and peered out into the night. What I saw would

torture me, night after sleepless night from then on. How often have I wished I'd braved the storm and walked on, past the farmhouse and its vile secret? Thousands of times. Every night.

The moonlight, unnaturally bright, showed everything in stark relief. The mist had cleared but an unwholesome odour pervaded the air, causing me to gag. There before me, his back to the window, a ploughman pushed his shares through the ground, turning over great sods of slick, brown earth. Ahead of the ancient contraption, the like of which I've only ever seen in museums, was a monstrous, black horse, its steaming neck thick and muscular. Head down it hauled the blades effortlessly through the sodden ground as the ploughman followed steering a straight furrow. Chains connecting the plough to the horse's harness slapped against the equipment with a sharp *clink* that pierced the stillness.

Half of the clearing had been turned and the earth glistened from the night's rain. Turning my gaze to the man I saw he was dressed in a dirty smock tied at the waist with string. A large, wide brimmed hat flopped over his ears giving him an appearance that was both comical and sinister. He trudged, back bent as he leaned over the plough shafts. Ahead of him the horse turned beneath the overarching limbs of a beech. The man steered the plough to follow and, head down, returned toward me slicing a further parallel cut.

I watched as the team came level with the window. To this day I don't know why the man looked up; I know I hadn't made a sound. It was though he'd sensed me, had known I was there and, just as he drew level, he turned to me. I gasped, a harsh,

rasping sound escaping my mouth as ice slithered down my spine. I clutched at the rotting window frame, my fingernails gouging deep into the wood. For there, in the shade of his wide brimmed hat, the man's moon-shaped face was devoid of features. None were needed to telegraph his evil – the very air was thick with it. An aura charged with corruption hung about him like a foul, tattered shroud.

I couldn't move and stood like a petrified carcass, my face staring at that thing before me. I felt my mind becoming scourged. Stripped of all I'd learned, thought and believed. I saw my life acted out, viewed not through my eyes but from above. I, a hidden onlooker – a base voyeur peeping on a visual autobiography; all the dramas, great and small, act by act, scene by scene; cheapening all that I held dear, those most treasured memories.

Just as I began to feel I was already dead and this was some silent, strangely lit after-life, the man's featureless scab of a face began to animate; to rumple and crease. Where there should have been a mouth a slit formed, an evil, sneering maw that slowly twisted and contorted into a parody of hateful expressions, the last of which was a leering grin accompanied by depraved, maniacal laughter. To my utter dismay I realised I'd heard it before.

'Ka ka ka ka kaa ...'

I propelled myself from the window and ran, ran blindly, shadows billowing before my eyes, hellish shapes dancing at the edges of my vision. Driven by cold fear and adrenaline, I ripped the warped door open, the deformed wood screaming across the

flagstones, drowning out the hateful sound that chased me from beyond the shattered pane.

I sensed my freedom by the wind sweeping past my flushed cheeks, cooling my fevered face, and all became silent as I ran in a vacuum of peace. My overloaded mind was spinning now, like a gear stripped of its teeth, ruined but gyrating, whirling out of control. I ran until I could run no more and fell to the ground, my chest heaving in ragged, painful spasms.

The tumbling warble of a blackbird tugged me from the blackness and I opened my eyes to a dawn I never believed I would see. Sunlight caressed my face, filtered by the leaves of a towering oak tree. I shook my head, feeling hung-over – my brain rolling long after my head became still.

I slowly pulled myself to my feet, trying to recall the past night's events through the miasma of my numb mind. I turned to where the old house sat, a dull shadow waiting beyond the tree-line. I retraced my steps, shuffling along the lane in the direction of the ancient cottage.

To this day I don't know why I returned. Curiosity? I don't think so as I was beyond rational thought, otherwise I would have fled; returned to the tenuous comforts of civilisation. But I didn't. I was drawn back and as I stepped from the tangle of clawing shrubbery, I saw that which was to haunt me ever after.

I could've claimed the horrors of the previous night to be a dream, or the imaginings of a mind poisoned by an excess of B-movies and pulp-fiction. But no, I returned to the scene. And

there before me, where only hours earlier had lain a confusion of unkempt meadow sodden by rain, now stretched a corrugation of glistening wet soil. The ridges and furrows of freshly-turned earth.