

Wentworth's Day

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North of Dunwich lies an all but abandoned country, one which has returned in large part — after its successive occupation by the old New Englanders, the French-Canadians who moved in after them, the Italians, and the Poles who came last — to a state perilously close to the wild. The first dwellers wrested a living from the stony earth and the forests that once covered all that land, but they were not versed in conservation of either the soil or its natural resources, and successive generations still further depleted that country. Those who came after them soon gave up the struggle and went elsewhere.

It is not an area of Massachusetts in which many people like to live. The houses which once stood proudly there have fallen into such disuse that most of them would not now support comfortable living. There are still farms on the gentler slopes, with gambrel-roofed houses on them, ancient buildings, often brooding in the lee of rocky ledges over the secrets of many New England generations; but the marks of decay are everywhere apparent — in the crumbling chimneys, the bulging side walls, the broken windows of the abandoned barns and houses. Roads crisscross it, but, once you are off the state highway which traverses the long valley north of Dunwich, you find yourself in byways which are little more than rutted lanes, as little used as most of the houses on the land.

Moreover, there broods eternally about this country an undeniable atmosphere not alone of age and desertion, but also of evil. There are areas of woodland in which no axe has ever fallen, as well as dark, vine-grown glens, where brooks trickle in a darkness unbroken by sunlight even on the brightest day. Over the entire valley there is little sign of life, though there are reclusive dwellers on some of the broken-down farms; even the hawks which soar high overhead never seem to linger long, and the black hordes

of crows only cross the valley and never descend to scavenge or forage. Once, long ago, it had the reputation of being a country in which Hexerei — the witch-beliefs of superstitious people — was practiced, and something of this unenviable reputation lingers about it still.

It is not a country in which to linger overlong, and certainly not a place in which to be found by night. Yet it was night in that summer of 1927 when I made my last trip into the valley, on my way from delivering a stove not far from Dunwich. I should never have chosen to drive through the region north of that decayed town, but I had one more delivery to make, and, rather than follow my impulse to go around the valley and come in from the far end, I drove into it at late dusk. In the valley itself the dusk which still prevailed at Dunwich had given way to a darkness which was soon to be profound, for the sky was heavily overcast, and the clouds were so low as almost to touch upon the enclosing hills, so that I rode, as it were, in a kind of tunnel. The highway was little traveled; there were other roads to take to reach points on both sides of the valley, and the side-roads were so overgrown and virtually abandoned in this place that few drivers wanted to take the risk of having to use them.

All would have been well, for my course led straight through the valley to the farther end, and there was no need for me to leave the state highway, had it not been for two unforeseen factors. Rain began to fall soon after I left Dunwich; it had been hanging heavy over the earth throughout that afternoon, and now at last the heavens opened and the torrent came down. The highway was soon agleam in the glow of my headlamps. And that glow, too, soon shone upon some thing other. I had gone perhaps fifteen miles into the valley when I was brought up short by a barrier on the highway, and a well-marked directive to detour. Beyond the barrier I could see that the highway had been torn up to such an extent that it was truly impassable.

I turned off the highway with misgivings. If I had only followed my impulse to return to Dunwich and take another road, I might be free of the accursed nightmares which have troubled my sleep since that night of horror! But I did not. Having gone so far, I had no wish to waste the time it would take to return to Dunwich. The rain was still coming down as a wall

of water, and driving was extremely difficult. So I turned off the highway, and immediately found myself on a road which was only partially surfaced with gravel. The highway crew had been along this way, and had widened the detour a little by cutting away overhanging limbs which had all but shut off the road before, but they had done little for the road itself, and I had not gone very far before I realized that I was in trouble.

The road on which I traveled was rapidly worsening because of the rain; my car, though one of the sturdiest of Fords, with relatively high, narrow wheels, cut deep ruts where it passed along, and from time to time, splashed into rapidly deepening puddles of water, which caused my motor to sputter and cough. I knew that it was only a question of time before the downpour would seep through the hood of the car and stop my engine altogether, and I began to look around for any sign of habitation, or, at least, some cover which would afford shelter for the car and myself. Indeed, knowing the loneliness of this isolated valley, I would have preferred an abandoned barn, but, in truth, it was impossible to make out any structure without some guidance, and thus I came at last to a pale window square of light shining not far off the road, and by a lucky chance found the driveway in the fading glow of my headlamps.

I turned in, passing a mailbox on which the owner's name had been crudely painted; it stood out, fading now: Amos Stark. The headlamps' glow swept the face of the dwelling there, and I saw that it was ancient, indeed, one of those houses which are all of a piece — house, ell, summer kitchen, barn, all in one long structure, under roofs of various heights. Fortunately, the barn stood wide open to the weather and, seeing no other shelter, I drove my car under that cover, expecting to see cattle and horses. But the barn wore an air of long-time desertion, for there were neither cattle nor horses, and the hay which filled it with its aroma of past summers must have been several years old.

I did not linger in the barn, but made my way to the house through the driving rain. From the outside, the house, as much as I could see of it, had the same appearance of desolation as the barn. It was of but one storey, with a low verandah out in front, and the floor of that verandah was, as I

discovered just in time, broken here and there, with dark gaps to show where there had once been boards.

I found the door and pounded on it.

For a long time there was no sound but the voice of the rain falling upon the roof of the porch and into the water gathered in the yard just beyond. I knocked again and raised my voice to shout, "Is anybody home?"

Then a quavering voice rose from inside. "Who be ye?"

I explained that I was a salesman seeking shelter.

The light began to move inside, as a lamp was picked up from where it stood. The window grew dim, and from under the door a line of yellow grew stronger. There was the sound of bolts and chains being withdrawn, and then the door was opened, and my host stood there, holding a lamp high; he was a wizened old man with a scraggly beard half covering his scrawny neck. He wore spectacles, but peered out at me over them. His hair was white, and his eyes black; seeing me, his lips drew back in a kind of feral grin, exposing the stumps of teeth.

"Mr. Stark?" I asked.

"Storm ketched ye, eh?" he greeted me. "Come right in the haouse an' dry off. Don't reckon the rain'll last long naow."

I followed him into the inner room from which he had started away, though not before he had carefully bolted and locked the door behind us, a procedure which touched me with a faint unease. He must have seen my look of inquiry, for, once he had set the lamp down on a thick book which lay on a round table in the center of the room to which he led me, he turned and said with a dry chuckle, "This be Wentworth's day. I thought yew might be Nahum."

His chuckle deepened into the ghost of a laugh.

"No, sir. My name is Fred Hadley. I'm from Boston."

“Ain’t never been ta Boston,” said Stark. “Never been as fur as Arkham, even. Got my farm work ta keep me ta home.”

“I hope you don’t mind. I took the liberty of driving my car into your barn.”

“The caows won’t mind.” He cackled with laughter at his little joke, for he knew full well that no cow was in the barn. “Wouldn’t drive one a them newfangled contraptions myself, but yew taown people are all alike. Got ta hev yer automobiles.”

“I didn’t imagine I looked like a city slicker,” I said, in an attempt to meet his mood.

“I kin tell a taown man right off — onct in a while we get one movin’ into the deestrick but they move out suddent; guess they daon’t like it here. Ain’t never been ta no big taown; ain’t sure I want ta go.”

He rambled on in this fashion for such an interminable time that I was able to look around me and make a kind of inventory of the room. In those years the time I did not spend on the road I put in at the warehouse in Boston, and there were few of us who could be counted better at inventory than myself; so it took me no time at all to see that Amos Stark’s living room was filled with all kinds of things that the antique collectors would pay well to get their hands on. There were pieces of furniture that went back close to two hundred years, if I were any judge, and fine bric-a-brac, whatnots, and some wonderful blown glass and Haviland china on the shelves and on the whatnots. And there were many of the old handiwork pieces of the New England farm of decades before — candle-snuffers, wooden-pegged cork inkwells, candle-molds, a book rest, a turkey-call of leather, pitchpine and tree gum, calabashes, samplers — so that it was plain to see that the house had stood there for many years.

“Do you live alone, Mr. Stark?” I asked, when I could get a word in.

“Naow I do, yes. Onct thar was Molly an’ Dewey. Abel went off when he war a boy, an’ Ella died with lung fever. I bin alone naow for nigh on ta seven years.”

Even as he spoke, I observed about him a waiting, watchful air. He seemed constantly to be listening for some sound above the drumming of the rain. But there was none, save one small crepitant sound, where a mouse gnawed away somewhere in the old house — none but this and the ceaseless rune of the rain. Still he listened, his head cocked a little, his eyes narrowed as if against the glow of the lamp, and his head a gleam at the bald crown which was ringed round by a thin, straggly tonsure of white hair. He might have been eighty years old, he might have been only sixty with his narrow, reclusive way of life having prematurely aged him.

“Ye war alaone on the road?” he asked suddenly.

“Never met a soul this side of Dunwich. Seventeen miles, I figure.”

“Give or take a half,” he agreed. Then he began to cackle and chuckle, as with an outburst of mirth that could no longer be held within. “This be Wentworth’s day. Nahum Wentworth.” His eyes narrowed again for a moment. “Yew been a salesman in these parts long naow? Yew must a knowed Nahum Wentworth?”

“No, sir. I never knew him. I sell mostly in the towns. Just once in a while in the country.”

“Might near everybody knowed Nahum,” he went on. “But thar weren’t none knowed him as well as I did. See that thar book?” He pointed to a well thumbed paper-covered book I could just make out in the ill-lit room. “That thar’s the Seventh Book a Moses — it’s got a sight more larnin’ in it than any other book I ever seen. That thar was Nahum’s book.”

He chuckled at some memory. “Oh, that Nahum was a queer one, all right. But mean — an’ stingy, too. Don’t see as haow ye could miss knowin’ him.”

I assured him I had never heard of Nahum Wentworth before, though I admitted privately to some curiosity about the object of my host’s preoccupation, insofar as he had been given to reading the Seventh Book of Moses, which was a kind of Bible for the supposed hexes, since it purported to offer all manner of spells, incantations, and charms to those readers who

were gullible enough to believe in them. I saw, too, within the circle of lamplight, certain other books I recognized — a Bible, worn as much as the textbook of magic, a compendious edition of Cotton Mather's works, and a bound volume of the Arkham Advertiser. Perhaps these, too, had once belonged to Nahum Wentworth.

"I see ye lookin' at his books," said my host, as if he had indeed divined my thoughts. "He said as haow I could have 'em; so I took 'em. Good books, too. Only that I need glasses, I'd a read 'em. Yew're welcome ta look at 'em, though."

I thanked him gravely and reminded him that he had been talking of Nahum Wentworth.

"Oh, that Nahum!" he replied at once, renewing his chuckle. "I don't reckon he'd a lent me all that money if he a knowed what was ta happen ta him. No, sir, I don't reckon he would. An' never ta take a note fer it, neither. Five thousand it was. An' him tellin' me he didn't have no need fer a note or any kind of paper, so thar warn't no proof I ever had the money off'n him, not a-tall, jest the two of us knowin' it, and he settin' a day five years after fer him ta come fer his money an' his due. Five years, an' this is the day, this is Wentworth's day."

He paused and favored me with a sly glance out of eyes that were one and the same time dancing with suppressed mirth and dark with withheld fear. "Only he can't come, because it warn't no less'n two months after that day that he got shot out huntin'. Shotgun in the back o' the head. Pure accident. O' course, thar was them that said as haow I done it a-purpose, but I showed 'em haow ta shet up, 'cause I druv in ta Dunwich an' went straight ta the bank an' I made out my will so's his daughter — that's Miss Genie — was ta git all I die ownin'. Didn' make no secret of it, either. Let 'em all know, so's they could talk their fool heads off."

"And the loan?" I could not forbear asking.

"The time ain't up till midnight tonight." He chuckled and cackled with laughter. "An' it don't seem like Nahum can keep his 'pointment, naow,

does it? I figure, if he don't come, it's mine. An' he can't come. An' a good thing he can't, 'cause I ain't got it."

I did not ask about Wentworth's daughter, and how she fared. To tell the truth, I was beginning to feel the strain of the day and evening's drive through the downpour. And this must have been evident to my host, for he ceased talking and sat watching me, speaking again only after what seemed a long time.

"Yew're peaked lookin'. Yew tired?"

"I guess I am. But I'll be going as soon as the storm abates a little."

"Tell yew what. Thar's no need a yew a-settin' here listenin' ta me jaw yew. I'll get ye another lamp, an' yew kin lie down on the couch inside the next room. If it stops rainin', I'll call ye."

"I'm not taking your bed, Mr. Stark?"

"I set up late nights," he said.

But any protest I might have made would have been futile. He was already up and about, lighting another kerosene lamp, and in a few moments he was conducting me into the adjoining room and showing me the couch. On the way in, I picked up the Seventh Book of Moses, impelled by curiosity inspired by decades of hearing talk of the potent wonders between its covers; though he eyed me strangely, my host made no objection, and returned to his wicker rocking chair in the next room again, leaving me to my own devices.

Outside, the rain still came down in torrential gusts. I made myself comfortable on the couch, which was an old-fashioned leather-covered affair, with a high headrest, moved the lamp over close — for its light was very feeble — and commenced to read in the Seventh Book of Moses, which, I soon found, was a curious rigmarole of chants and incantations to such "princes" of the nether world as Aziel, Mephistopheles, Marbuel, Barbuel, Aniquel, and others. The incantations were of many kinds; some were designed to cure illness, others to grant wishes; some were meant for

success in undertakings, others for vengeance upon one's enemies. The reader was repeatedly warned in the text of how terrible some of the words were, so much so, that perhaps because of these adjurations, I was compelled to copy the worst of the incantations which caught my eye — Aila himel adonaij amara Zebaoth cadas yeseraije haralius — which was nothing less than an incantation for the assemblage of devils or spirits, or the raising of the dead.

And, having copied it, I was not loath to say it aloud several times, not for a moment expecting anything untoward to take place. Nor did it. So I put the book aside and looked at my watch. Eleven o'clock. It seemed to me that the force of the rain had begun to diminish; it was no longer such a downpour; that lessening which always foretells the end of a rain storm within a reasonably short time had begun. Marking the appointments of the room well, so that I would not stumble over any object of furniture on my way back to the room where my host waited, I put out the light to rest a little while before taking to the road once more.

But, tired as I was, I found it hard to compose myself.

It was not alone that the couch on which I lay was hard and cold, but that the very atmosphere of the house seemed oppressive. Like its owner, it had about it a kind of resignation, an air of waiting for the inevitable, as if it, too, knew that sooner rather than later its weatherbeaten siding would buckle outward and its roof fall inward to bring an end to its increasingly precarious existence. But there was something more than this atmosphere of so many old houses which it possessed; it was a resignation tinged with apprehension — that same apprehension which had caused old Amos Stark to hesitate about answering my knock; and soon I caught myself listening, too, as Stark did, for more than the patter of the rain, steadily diminishing now, and the incessant gnawing of mice.

My host did not sit still. Every little while he rose, and I could hear him shuffle from place to place; now it was the window, now the door; he went to try them, to make sure they were locked; then he came back and sat down again. Sometimes he muttered to himself; perhaps he had lived too long alone and had fallen into that common habit of isolated, reclusive people, of talking to himself. For the most part what he said was

indistinguishable, almost inaudible, but on occasion some words came through, and it occurred to me that one of the things which occupied his thoughts was the amount of interest that would be due on the money he owed Nahum Wentworth, were it now collectible. "A hunderd an' fifty dollars a year," he kept saying. "Comes to seven-fifty" — said with something akin to awe. There was more of this, and there was something more which troubled me more than I cared to admit.

Something the old man said was upsetting when pieced together; but he said none of it consecutively. "I fell," he muttered, and there followed a sentence or two of inanities. "All they was to it." And again many indistinguishable words. "Went off — quick-like." Once more a round of meaningless or inaudible words. "Didn't know 'twas aimed at Nahum." Followed once again by indistinct mutterings. Perhaps the old man's conscience troubled him. Certainly the brooding resignation of the house was enough to stir him to his darkest thoughts. Why had he not followed the other inhabitants of the stony valley to one of the settlements? What was there to prevent his going? He had said he was alone, and presumably he was alone in the world as well as in the house, for had he not willed his earthly possessions to Nahum Wentworth's daughter?

His slippers whispered along the floor, his fingers rustled papers.

Outside the whippoorwills began to call, which was a sign that in some quarters the sky was beginning to clear; and soon there was a chorus of them fit to deafen a man. "Heer them whippoorwills," I heard my host mutter. "Callin' fer a soul. Clem Whateley's dyin'." As the voice of the rain fell slowly away, the voices of the whippoorwills rose in volume, and soon I grew drowsy and dozed off.

I come now to that part of my story which makes me doubt the evidence of my own senses, which, when I look back upon it now, seems impossible of occurrence. Indeed, many times now, with added years, I wonder whether I did not dream it all — yet I know it was not a dream, and I still have certain corroborating newspaper clippings to adduce in proof that mine was not a dream — clippings about Amos Stark, about his bequest to Genie Wentworth, — and, strangest of all — about a hellish molestation of a grave half forgotten on a hillside in that accursed valley.

I had not been dozing long when I awoke. The rain had ceased, but the voices of the whippoorwills had moved closer to the house and were now in thunderous chorus. Some of the birds sat immediately under the window of the room in which I lay, and the roof of the shaky verandah must have been covered with the nocturnal creatures. I have no doubt that it was their clamor which had brought me out of the light sleep into which I had fallen. I lay for a few moments to collect myself, and then moved to rise, for, the rain having now come to an end, driving would be less hazardous, and my motor was in far less danger of going out on me.

But just as I swung my feet to the floor, a knock fell upon the outer door.

I sat motionless, making no sound — and no sound came from the adjoining room.

The knock came again, more peremptorily this time.

“Who be ye?” Stark called out.

There was no reply.

I saw the light move, and I heard Stark’s exclamation of triumph. “Past midnight!” He had looked at his clock, and at the same time I looked at my watch. His clock was ten minutes fast.

He went to answer the door.

I could tell that he set down the lamp in order to unlock the door. Whether he meant to take it up again, as he had done to peer at me, I could not say. I heard the door open — whether by his hand or by another’s.

And then a terrible cry rang out, a cry of mingled rage and terror in Amos Stark’s voice. “No! No! Go back. I ain’t got it — ain’t got it, I tell yew. Go back!” He stumbled back and fell, and almost immediately after there came a horrible, choking cry, a sound of labored breathing, a gurgling gasp...

I came to my feet and lurched through the doorway into that room — and then for one cataclysmic moment I was rooted to that spot, unable to move,

to cry out, at the hideousness of what I saw. Amos Stark was spread on the floor on his back, and sitting astride him was a mouldering skeleton, its bony arms bowed above his throat, its fingers at his neck. And in the back of the skull, the shattered bones where a charge of shot had once gone through. This I saw in that one terrible moment — then, mercifully, I fainted.

When I came to a few moments later, all was quiet in the room. The house was filled with the fresh musk of the rain, which came in through the open front door; outside, the whippoorwills still cried, and a wan moonlight lay on the ground like pale white wine. The lamp still burned in the hall, but my host was not in his chair.

He lay where I had seen him, spread on the floor. My whole impulse was to escape that horrible scene as quickly as possible, but decency impelled me to pause at Amos Stark's side, to make sure that he was beyond my help. It was that fateful pause which brought the crowning horror of all, that horror which sent me shrieking into the night to escape that hellish place as were all the demons of the nether regions at my heels. For, as I bent above Amos Stark, ascertaining that he was indeed dead, I saw sticking into the discolored flesh of his neck the whitened finger bones of a human skeleton, and, even as I looked upon them, the individual bones detached themselves, and went bounding away from the corpse, down the hall, and out into the night to rejoin that ghastly visitor who had come from the grave to keep his appointment with Amos Stark!