

The Messenger

by Algernon Blackwood

I have never been afraid of ghostly things, attracted rather with a curious live interest, though it is always out of doors that strange Presences get nearest to me, and in Nature I have encountered warnings, messages, presentiments, and the like, that, by way of help or guidance, have later justified themselves. I have, therefore, welcomed them. But in the little rooms of houses things of much value rarely come, for the thick air chokes the wires, as it were, and distorts or mutilates the clear delivery.

But the other night, here in the carpenter's house, where my attic windows beckon to the mountains and the woods, I woke with the uncomfortably strong suggestion that something was on the way, and that I was not ready. It came along the by-ways of deep sleep. I woke abruptly, alarmed before I was even properly awake. Something was approaching with great swiftness—and I was unprepared.

Across the lake there were faint signs of colour behind the distant Alps, but terraces of mist still lay grey above the vineyards, and the slim poplar, whose tip was level with my face, no more than rustled in the wind of dawn. A shiver, not brought to me by any wind, ran through my nerves, for I knew with a certainty no arguing could lessen nor dispel that something from immensely far away was deliberately now approaching me. The touch of wonder in advance of it was truly awful; its splendour, size, and grandeur belonged to conditions I had surely never known. It came through empty spaces—from another world. While I lay asleep it had been already on the way.

I stood there a moment, seeking for some outward sign that might betray its nature. The last stars were fading in the northern sky, and blue and dim lay the whole long line of the Jura, cloaked beneath still slumbering forests. There was a rumbling of a distant train. Now and then a dog barked in some outlying farm. The Night was up and walking, though as yet she moved but slowly from the sky. Shadows still draped the world. And the warning that had reached me first in sleep rushed through my tingling nerves once more with a certainty not far removed from shock. Something from another world was drawing every minute nearer, with a speed that made me

tremble and half-breathless. It would presently arrive. It would stand close beside me and look straight into my face. Into these very eyes that searched the mist and shadow for an outward sign it would gaze intimately with a Message brought for me alone. But into these narrow walls it could only come with difficulty. The message would be maimed. There still was time for preparation. And I hurried into clothes and made my way downstairs and out into the open air.

Thus, at first, by climbing fast, I kept ahead of it, and soon the village lay beneath me in its nest of shadow, and the limestone ridges far above dropped nearer. But the awe and terrible deep wonder did not go. Along these mountain paths, whose every inch was so intimate that I could follow them even in the dark, this sense of breaking grandeur clung to my footsteps, keeping close. Nothing upon the earth—familiar, friendly, well-known, little earth—could have brought this sense that pressed upon the edges of true reverence. It was the awareness that some speeding messenger from spaces far, far beyond the world would presently stand close and touch me, would gaze into my little human eyes, would leave its message as of life or death, and then depart upon its fearful way again—it was this that conveyed the feeling of apprehension that went with me.

And instinctively, while rising higher and higher, I chose the darkest and most sheltered way. I sought the protection of the trees, and ran into the deepest vaults of the forest. The moss was soaking wet beneath my feet, and the thousand tapering spires of the pines dipped upwards into a sky already brightening with palest gold and crimson. There was a whispering and a rustling overhead as the trees, who know everything before it comes, announced to one another that the thing I sought to hide from was already very, very near. Plunging deeper into the woods to hide, this detail of sure knowledge followed me and laughed: that the speed of this august arrival was one which made the greatest speed I ever dreamed of a mere standing still...

I hid myself where possible in the darkness that was growing every minute more rare. The air was sharp and exquisitely fresh. I heard birds calling. The low, wet branches kissed my face and hair. A sense of glad relief came over me that I had left the closeness of the little attic chamber, and that I should eventually meet this huge New-comer in the wide, free spaces of the mountains. There must be room where I

could hold myself unmanacled to meet it... The village lay far beneath me, a patch of smoke and mist and soft red-brown roofs among the vineyards. And then my gaze turned upwards, and through a rift in the close-wrought ceiling of the trees I saw the clearness of the open sky. A strip of cloud ran through it, carrying off the Night's last little dream... and down into my heart dropped instantly that cold breath of awe I have known but once in life, when staring through the stupendous mouth within the Milky Way—that opening into the outer spaces of eternal darkness, unlit by any single star, men call the Coal Hole.

The futility of escape then took me bodily, and I renounced all further flight. From this speeding Messenger there was no hiding possible. His splendid shoulders already brushed the sky. I heard the rushing of his awful wings... yet in that deep, significant silence with which light steps upon the clouds of morning.

And simultaneously I left the woods behind me and stood upon a naked ridge of rock that all night long had watched the stars.

Then terror passed away like magic. Cool winds from the valleys bore me up. I heard the tinkling of a thousand cowbells from pastures far below in a score of hidden valleys. The cold departed, and with it every trace of little fears. My eyes seemed for an instant blinded, and I knew that deep sense of joy which seems so 'unearthly' that it almost stains the sight with the veil of tears. The soul sank to her knees in prayer and worship.

For the messenger from another world had come. He stood beside me on that dizzy ledge. Warmth clothed me, and I knew myself akin to deity. He stood there, gazing straight into my little human eyes. He touched me everywhere. Above the distant Alps the sun came up. His eye looked close into my own.

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