

The Voice in the Night

By W. J. Wintle, F.Z.S.

John Barron was frankly puzzled. He could not make it out at all. He had lived in the place all his life—save for the few years spent at Rugby and Oxford—and nothing of the sort had happened to him before. His people had occupied the estate for generations past; and there was neither record nor tradition of anything of the kind. He did not like it at all. It seemed like an intrusion upon the respectability of his family. And John Barron had a very good opinion of his family.

Certainly he was entitled to have a good opinion of it. He came from a good stock: his ancestry was one to be proud of: his coat of arms had quarterings that few could display: and his immediate forbears had kept up the reputation of their ancestors. He himself could boast a career without reproach: the short time he had spent at the bar was marked by considerable success and still more promise—a promise cut short by the death of his father and his recall to Bannerton to take up the duties of squire, magistrate and county magnate.

In the eyes of his friends and of people generally, he was a man to be envied. He had an ample fortune, a delightful house and estate, hosts of friends, and the best of health. What could a man wish for more? The ladies of the neighbourhood said that he lacked only one thing, and that was a wife. But it may be that they were not entirely unprejudiced judges—the unmarried ones, at any rate. But up till the time of our story John Barron had shown no sign of marrying. He used to boast that he was neither married, nor engaged, nor courting, nor had he his eye on anyone.

And now this annoyance had come to trouble and puzzle him! What had he done to deserve it? True, he might take the comfort to his soul that it was no immediate concern of his. The affair had not happened to any member of his family or household. Why then should he not mind his own business? But he felt that it was his business. It had happened within the bounds of his manor and almost within sight of his windows. If anything tangible could be connected with it, he was the magistrate whose duty it would be to investigate the matter. But up till the present there was nothing tangible for him to deal with.

The whole business was a mystery: and John Barron disapproved of mysteries. Mysteries savoured of detectives and the police court. When unravelled they usually proved to be sordid and undesirable; and when not unravelled they brought with them a vague sense of discomfort and of danger. As a lawyer he held that mysteries had no right to exist. That they should continue to exist was a sort of reflection on the profession, as well as upon the public intelligence.

And yet here was the parish of Bannerton in the hands of a mystery of the first water. As a magistrate, John Barron had officially looked into the matter; and, as a lawyer, he had spent some hours in carefully considering it; but entirely without any practical result. The mystery was not merely unsolved: it had even thickened!

This was the history with which he was faced. A fortnight before, the occupants of a cottage on the outskirts of the village—a gardener and his wife—had left their little daughter of three years old in the house while they went on an errand. The child was soundly asleep in its cot; and they locked the door as they went out. They were absent about twenty minutes; and were nearing the house when they heard the screams of a child. The father rushed forward, unlocked the door, and the two parents entered together.

The child's cot was in the living room into which the front door opened. As they went in, the screams ceased and a terrible gasping sound took their place. Then they saw that the cot was

hidden by some dark body that seemed to be lying on it. This they hardly saw, though they, were quite clear that it was there, for it seemed to melt away like a mist when they rushed into the room. Certainly it was nothing solid, for it completely disappeared without a sound. It could not have dashed out through the door, for the parents were hardly clear of the door when it vanished.

They had returned only just in time to save the life of the child. At first it was doubtful if they were in time, for the doctor held out little hope. But after a day or two, the child took a turn for the better, and was now out of danger. It had evidently been attacked by some kind of savage animal, which had torn at its throat and had only just failed to sever the arteries of the neck. In the opinion of the doctor and of John Barron himself, the wounds suggested that the assailant had been a very large dog. But it was strange that a dog on such size had not done far worse damage. One might have expected that it would have killed the child with a single bite.

But was it a dog? If so, how did it enter the house? The door in front was locked, as we have seen; that at the back was bolted; and all the windows were shut and fastened. There was no apparent way by which it could possibly have got into the house. And we have already seen that its way of going was equally mysterious.

The most careful examination of the room and of the premises generally failed to yield the smallest clue. Nothing had been disturbed or damaged, and there were no footprints. The only thing at all unusual was the presence of an earthy or mouldy odour which was noticed by the doctor when he entered the room and also by some other persons who were on the scene soon afterwards. John Barron had the same impression when he went to the cottage some hours later, but the odour was then so faint that he could not be at all sure about its existence.

By way of embroidery to the story came two or three items of local gossip of the usual sort. An old woman near by said that she was looking out of her window to see the state of the weather a little earlier in the evening, when she saw a huge black dog run across the lane and go in the direction of the cottage. According to her tale, the dog limped as if lame or very much tired.

Three people said they had been disturbed for two or three nights previous by the howling of a dog in the distance; and a farmer in the parish complained that his sheep had apparently been chased about the field during the night by some wandering dog. He loudly vowed vengeance on dogs in general; but, as none of the sheep had been worried, nobody took much notice. All these tales came to the ears of John Barron; but to a man accustomed to weigh evidence they were negligible.

But he attached much more importance to another piece of evidence, if such it might be called. As the injured child began to get better, and was able to talk, an attempt was made to find out if it could give any information about the attack. As it had been asleep when attacked, it did not see the arrival of its assailant; and the only thing it could tell was, "Nasty, ugly lady bit me!" This seemed absurd; but, when asked about the dog, it persisted in saying, "No dog. Nasty ugly lady!"

The parents were inclined to laugh at what they thought a mere childish fancy; but the trained lawyer was considerably impressed by it. To him there were three facts available. The wounds seemed to have been caused by a large dog: the child said she had been bitten by an ugly lady; and the parents had actually seen the form of the assailant. Unfortunately it had disappeared before they could make out any details; but they said it was about the size of a very large dog, and was dark in colour.

The local gossip was of small importance and was such as might be expected under the circumstances. But, for what it was worth, it all pointed to a dog or dog-like animal. But how could it have entered the closed house; how did it get away; and why did the child persist in her

story of an ugly lady? The only theory that would at all fit the case was that supplied by the old Norse legends of the werewolf. But who believes such stories now?

So it was not to be wondered at that John Barron was puzzled. He was rather annoyed too. Bannerton had its average amount of crime; but it was in a small way and could generally be disposed of at the petty sessions. It was not often that a case had to be sent to the assizes, and the newspapers seldom got any sensational copy from the quiet little place. He reflected with some small satisfaction that it was lucky the child had not died; for in that case there must have been an inquest and the inevitable publicity. If his suspicions were well founded, the case would have yielded something far more sensational than generally falls to the lot of the local reporter.

But a day or two later he had more to ponder over. Things had developed—and in a way that he did not like. The farmer had again complained that his sheep had been chased about the field during the night; and this time more damage had been done. Two of the sheep had died; but the strange thing was that they had hardly been bitten at all. Their wounds were so slight that their death could only be attributed to fright and exhaustion. It was very curious that the dog—if dog it was—had not mauled them worse and made a meal of them. The suggestion that it was some very small dog was negated by the fact that what wounds there were must have been made by a large animal. It really looked as if the animal had not sufficient strength to finish its evil work.

But John Barron had another item of evidence which he was keeping to himself for the present. During each of the two past nights he had woken up without any apparent reason soon after midnight. And each time he had heard the Cry in the Night. It was a voice borne on the night air which he never expected to hear in England; and least of all in Bannerton. The voice came from the moor that stood above the little hamlet; and it rose and fell on the silence like the cry of a spirit in distress. It began with a low wail of unspeakable sadness; then rose and fell in lamentable ululations; and then died away into sobs and silence.

The voice came at intervals for more than an hour: and the second night it was stronger and seemed nearer than the first. John Barron had no difficulty in recognising that long-drawn cry. He had heard it before when travelling in the wilder parts of Russia. It was the howling of a wolf!

But there are no wolves in England. True, it might have been an escaped animal from some travelling menagerie; but such an animal would have made worse havoc of the sheep. And if this was the assailant of the little child, how did it get in; how did it get away; and why did the child still persist in saying that it was not a dog but a lady who bit her?

The next few days saw the plot thicken. Other people heard the voice in the night, and put it down to a stray dog out on the moor. Another farmer's sheep were worried, and this time one of them was partly eaten. So a chase was arranged, and all the local farmers and many other people banded together to hunt the sheep-killer. For two days the moor was scoured, and the adjacent woods thoroughly beaten, but without coming across any signs of the miscreant.

But John Barron heard a story from one of the farmers that set him thinking. He noticed that this man seemed to avoid a little thicket beside the moor, suggesting that there was a better path at some distance from it; and after some pressing he explained the real reason for this. But he was careful to add that of course he was not himself superstitious, but his wife had queer notions and had begged him to avoid the place.

It seemed that not long before, some wandering gipsies who from time to time camped on the moor, had secretly buried an old woman in the thicket and had never returned to the moor since. Of course there were the inevitable additions to a tale of this sort. The old lady was alleged to have been the queen of the gipsy tribe; and she was also said to have been a witch of the most

malignant kind; and these were supposed to have been the reasons for her secret burial in this lonely spot. It did not seem to occur to the farmer that the gipsies thus saved the expense of a regular funeral. Very few people knew the story, and they thought it well to hold their peace. It was not worth while to make enemies of the gipsies, who could so easily have their revenge by robbing hen-roosts or even by driving cattle; to say nothing of the more mysterious doings with which they were credited.

John Barron began to put things together. The whole business had a distinct resemblance to the tales of the were-wolf in the Scandinavian literature of the Middle Ages. Here we had a woman of suspicious reputation buried in a lonely place without Christian rites; and soon afterwards a mysterious wolf roams the district in search of blood—just like the were-wolf. But who believes such stories now, except a few ghost-ridden cranks with shattered nerves and unbalanced minds? The whole thing is absurd.

Still, the mystery had to be cleared up; for John Barron had not the slightest intention of letting it simply slide into the refuse heap of unsolved problems. He kept his own counsel; but he meant to get to the bottom of it. Perhaps if he had realised the horror that lay at the bottom of it, he would have let it alone.

In the meantime the farmers had taken their own steps to deal with the sheep-worrying nuisance. Tempting morsels, judiciously seasoned with poison, were laid about; but with the sole result of causing the untimely death of a valued sheep-dog. Night after night the younger men, armed with guns, sat up and watched; but without success. Nothing happened, the sheep were undisturbed, and it really seemed as if the invader had left the neighbourhood. But John Barron knew that once a dog has taken to worrying sheep, it can never be cured. If the mysterious visitor was a dog, he would most certainly return if still alive and able to travel: if it was not a dog—well, anything might happen. So he continued to watch even after the general hunt for the dog had ceased.

Soon he had his reward. One very dark and stormy night, he again heard the distant voice in the night. It came very faintly rising and falling on the air, for the breeze was strong and the sound had to travel against the wind. Then he left the house, carrying his gun, and took up his post on rising ground that commanded the road that led from the moor.

Presently the cry came nearer, and then nearer still, till it was evident that the wolf had left the moor and was approaching the farms. Several dogs barked; but they were not the barks of challenge and defiance, but rather the timid yelps of fear. Then the howling came from a turn in the road so close at hand that John Barron, who was by no means a timid or nervous man, could hardly resist a shudder.

He silently cocked his gun, crept softly from behind the hedge into the road, and waited. Then a small, shrivelled old woman came into sight, walking with the aid of a stick. She hobbled along with surprising briskness for so old a woman until a turn in the road brought her suddenly face to face with him. And then something happened.

He was not a man addicted to fancies; nor was he at all lacking in powers of description as a rule; but he could never state quite clearly what it was that really happened. Probably it was because he did not quite know. He could only speak of an impression rather than of certain experience. According to him, the old woman gave him one glance of unspeakable malignancy; and then he seemed to become dazed or semi-conscious for a moment. It could have been only a matter of a second or two: but during that short space of time the old woman vanished. John Barron pulled himself together just in time to see a large wolf disappear round the turn of the road.

Naturally enough, he was somewhat confused by his startling experience. But there was no doubt about the presence of the wolf. He only just saw it; but he saw it quite clearly for about a second of time. Whether the wolf accompanied the old woman, or the old woman turned into a wolf, he neither saw nor could know. But each supposition was open to many obvious objections.

John Barron spent some time next day in thinking the thing out; and then it suddenly occurred to him to visit the thicket by the moorside and see the grave of the gipsy. He did not expect that there would be anything to see; but still it might be worth while to take a look at the place.

So he strolled in that direction early in the afternoon.

The thicket occupied a kind of little dell lying under the edge of the moor and was densely filled with small trees and undergrowth. But a scarcely visible path led into it; and, pushing his way through, he found that there was a small open space in the middle. Evidently this was the site of the gipsy grave.

And there he found it: but he found more than he expected. Not only was the grave there, but it lay open! The loose earth was heaped up on either side, and had the appearance of having been scraped out by some animal. And, sure enough, the footprints of a very large dog or wolf were to be seen in several places.

John Barron was simply horrified to find that the grave had been thus desecrated—and apparently in a manner that suggested an even worse horror. But, after a moment of hesitation, he stepped to the edge of the grave and looked in. What he saw was less appalling than he feared. There lay the coffin, exposed to view; but there was no sign that it had been opened or tampered with in any way.

There was evidently only one thing to be done, and that was to cover up the coffin decently and fill in the grave again. He would borrow a spade at the nearest cottage on some pretence and get the job done. He turned away to do this; but as he went through the thicket he could have sworn that he heard a sound like muffled laughter! And he could not get away from the notion that the laughter had some quality closely resembling the howling of a wolf. He called himself a fool for thinking such a thing—but he thought it all the same.

He borrowed the spade and filled the grave, beating the earth down as hard as he could; and again, as he turned away after completing the task, he heard that muffled laugh. But this time it was even less distinct than before, and somehow it sounded underground. He was rather glad to get away.

It may well be imagined that he had plenty to occupy his thoughts for the rest of the day; and even when he sought to sleep he could not. He lay tossing uneasily, thinking all the time of the mysterious grave and the events that certainly seemed now to be connected with it. Then, soon after midnight, he heard the voice in the night again. The wolf howled a long way off at first; then came a long interval of silence; and then the voice sounded so close to the house that Barron started up in alarm and he heard his dog give a cry of fear. Then the silence fell again; and some time later the howling was again heard in the distance.

Next morning he found his favourite dog lying dead beside his kennel; and it was only too evident how he had met his end. His neck was almost severed by one fearful bite; but the strange thing was that there was very little blood to be seen. A closer examination showed that the dog had bled to death; but where was the blood? Natural wolves tear their prey and devour it. They do not suck its blood. What kind of a wolf could this be?

John Barron found the answer next day. He was walking in the direction of the moor late in the afternoon, as it grew towards dusk, when he heard shrieks of terror coming from a little side lane.

He ran to the rescue, and there he saw a little child of the village lying on the ground, with a huge wolf in the act of tearing at its throat.

Fortunately he had his gun with him; and, as the wolf sprang off its victim when he shouted, he fired. The range was a short one, and the beast got the full force of the charge. It bounded into the air and fell in a heap. But it got up again, and went off in a limping gallop in the way that wolves will often do even when mortally wounded. It made for the moor.

John Barron saw that it had received its death wound, and so gave it no further attention for the moment. Some men came running up at his shouts, and with their assistance he took the wounded child to the local doctor. Happily he had been in time to save its life.

Then he reloaded his gun, took a man with him, and followed the track of the wolf. It was not difficult to follow, for blood-stains on the road at frequent intervals showed plainly enough that it was severely wounded. As Barron expected, the track led straight to the thicket and entered it.

The two men followed cautiously; but they found no wolf. In the midst of the thicket lay the grave once more uncovered. And there beside it lay the body of a little old woman, drenched with blood. She was quite dead, and the terrible gunshot wound in her side told its own story. And the two men noticed that her canine teeth projected slightly beyond her lips on each side—like those of a snarling wolf—and they were blood-stained.