

The Hidden Beast

By J. D. Beresford

His house is the last in the village. Towards the forest the houses become more and more scattered, reaching out to the wild of the wood as if they yearned to separate themselves from the swarm that clusters about the church and the inn. And his house has taken so long a stride from the others that it is held to the village by no more than the slender thread of a long footpath. Yet the house is set with its face towards us, and has an air of resolutely holding on to the safety of our common life, as if dismayed at its boldness in swimming so far it had turned and desperately grasped the life-line of that footpath.

He lived alone, a strange man, surly and reticent. Some said that he had a sinister look; and on those rare occasions when he joined us at the inn, after sunset, he sat aside and spoke little.

I was surprised when, as we came out of the inn one night, he took my arm and asked me if I would go home with him. The moon was at the full, and the black shadows of the dispersing crowd that lunged down the street seemed to gesticulate an alarm of weird dismay. The village was momentarily mad with the clatter of footsteps and the noise of laughter, and somewhere down towards the forest a dog was baying.

I wondered if I had not misunderstood him.

As he watched my hesitation his face pleaded with me. "There are times when a man is glad of company," he said.

We spoke little as we passed through the village towards the silences of his lonely house. But when we came to the footpath he stopped and looked back.

"I live between two worlds," he said, "the wild and . . ."—he paused before he rejected the obvious antithesis, and concluded—"the restrained."

"Are we so restrained?" I asked, staring at the huddle of black-and-silver houses clinging to their refuge on the hill.

He murmured something about a "compact," and my thoughts turned to the symbol of the chalk-white church-tower that dominated the honeycomb of the village.

"The compact of public opinion," he said more boldly.

My imagination lagged. I was thinking less of him than of the transfiguration of the familiar scene before me. I did not remember ever to have studied it thus under the reflections of a full moon. An echo of his word, differently accented, drifted through my mind. I saw our life as being in truth compact, little and limited.

He took up his theme again when we had entered the house and were facing each other across the table, in a room that looked out over the forest. The shutters were unfastened, the window open, and I could see how, on the further shore of the waste-lands, the light feebly ebbed and died against the black cliff of the wood.

"We have to choose between freedom and safety," he said. "The individual is too wild and dangerous for the common life. He must make his agreement with the community; submit to become a member of the people's body. But I"—he paused and laughed—"I have taken the liberty of looking out of the back window."

While he spoke I had been aware of a sound that seemed to come from below the floor of the room in which we were sitting. And when he laughed I fancied that I heard the response of a snuffling cry.

He looked at me mockingly across the table.

“It’s an echo from the jungle,” he said. “Some trick of reflected sound. I can always hear it in this room at night.”

I shivered and stood up. “I prefer the safety of our common life,” I told him. “It may be that I have a limited mind and am afraid, but I find my happiness in the joys of security and shelter. The wild terrifies me.”

“A limited mind?” he commented. “Probably it is rather that you lack a fire in the blood.”

I was glad to leave him, and he on his part made no effort to detain me.

It was not long after this visit of mine that the people first began to whisper about him in the village. At the beginning they brought no charge against him, talking only of his strangeness and of his separation from our common interests. But presently I heard a story of some fierce wild animal that he caged and tortured in the prison of his house. One said that he had heard it screaming in the night, and another that he had heard it beating against the door. And some argued that it was a threat to our safety, since the beast might escape and make its way into the village; and some that such brutality, even though it were to a wild animal, could not be tolerated. But I wondered inwardly whether the affair were any business of ours so long as he kept the beast to himself.

I was a member of the Council that year, and so took part in the voting when presently the case was laid before us. But no vote of mine would have helped him if I had dared to overcome my reluctance and speak in his favour. For whatever reservations may have been secretly withheld by the members of the Council, they were unanimous in condemning him.

We went, six of us, in full daylight, to search his house. He received us with a laugh, and told us that we might seek at our leisure. But though we sought high and low, peering and tapping, we found no evidence that any wild thing had ever been concealed there.

And within a month of the day of our search he left the village.

I saw him alone once before he went, and he told me that he had chosen for the wild and freedom, that he could no longer endure to be held to the village even by the thread of the footpath.

But he did not thank me for having allowed the search of his house to be conducted by daylight, although he knew that I at least was sure no echo of the forest could be heard in that little room of his save in the transfigured hours between the dusk and the dawn.