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The Monster Appears

The Monster Appears

By S. Dorman

Dressed in buckskin and woolen stockings made by my mother, I was on Jasper Mountain many a day, camping, writing in my diary (especially when staying in the old hermit's camp), a failed young poet of eighteen winters in a harsh setting with privation. I comforted myself with the thought that at least I wasn't gone off on a Whaler—to get caught by the mad King and pressed into service in what was fast becoming the greatest naval empire ever known to man... unless Napoleon had anything to say of it. But then I recalled that over to home the harness was frayed, the ax wanted a new handle and the scythe needed sharpening. Instead, I was writing in my journal, learning to live off what I could find in the woods, and making notes on medicinals. My path on one of these forays crossed that of Victor Besiegt. He was skeletal and wild, but half alive.

Victor Besiegt and I knew one another as children, but as mere acquaintances, me the younger by several years; for the town was large and wild and its hamlet, only, central. Our schools were perforce far-flung. Jasper Mountain was, as it is now, great in the Town's midst but it was easy for a man to become lost, bewildered, in such a place as Gott'im was in those days. The town remained undeveloped except for what a settler could do with his own hands. One who suckled maple syrup along with his mother's milk (she was not the first to offer a breast dipped in syrup), was Victor Besiegt, who grew a studious child and became schoolmaster in the Town. Victor was ambitious not for worldly fame or fortune, perhaps, but desirous to study in secret and bring forth copious invention.

It was a curious thing: almost simultaneous with seeing Victor huddled in the roots of a great white pine, I looked up and saw a white robin singing against the dusty green of its boughs. I'd never seen such a thing before. I'm not sure I'd have noticed him if it weren't for that. Yes, it was an authentic robin for it had a robin's breast, though the rest shone white, and its song was unmistakable. Not the lovely liquid song you hear from its homelier sister the wood thrush, but a hopeful unmelodious chirping. Truly, these two creatures, one above the other, had me doubting my eyes and thinking I'd gone mad.

It took me a while to realize that this was the selfsame Victor Besiegt of Gottheim. I roused him, reassured him, made shavings, struck flint and had a little fire going right there among the rocks. Then I went off to get my pouch full of medicinals and the cooking pot. On my way back to him I slung some shot to fetch down three gray squirrels. By nightfall he was taking broth and thanking me by name.

"Then, are you—by chance, you are Mr. Besiegt? Victor Besiegt? Of the Twombly Road, east of Gott'im?" His hair was dark and wild, a beard of some days grown. "The schoolmaster..." It was spring, cold spring, and his suit of clothes was in tatters. The woolen blanket I gave him (fully aware that it was lousy), fire and broth, had stopped him shivering. He nodded. His brows were knit tight, and his eyes desolate. At that moment I was thinking that perhaps I might return into less wild environs and take up schoolmastering for I was turning wild-like and did not want to come to this.

I did not pester him with my curiosity. Instead, I began telling something of my thoughts and times in those wilds. Truly, I was grateful to have someone whose mind was cast a bit like mine to talk with... providing he wasn't woods queer. His true state would be revealed when his strength returned. I don't remember what I told him, having solely a glimpse in my mind of the firelight playing over his features as he lay resting, listening, sometimes with eyes closed, to my talk. When at last I discerned he slept, I ceased, and sat there scratching and meditating what had become of him.

#

Jasper Mountain is a powerful mysterious place. People often have scant conception of its mysteries. Studying the gaunt features of my sleeping acquaintance, I had no doubt of his respect for the great granite nether regions; for its grand sometimes glistening bald pate which gathered weather to it as though a cloak for

its mystery. It was easier to die on Jasper Mountain than to live there. When I first came to its wilder parts I had no thought that I should change, but as time went on I found myself susceptible to its influence and could not remain the same. Then I wanted above all to mature, find direction and achieve some sort of merit. I hoped not to enhance my humanity, but to repay it. Otherwise, I would not *be* fully human. Woods queer is a definite proposition for the hermit in the wild. I'm not sure it can be avoided, but the setting and solitude promote introspection, I've no doubt, and that is a sure way to self-absorption. Vacancy, absence of mind, withdrawal are all symptoms: How do you fit back into that community of your fellows?

Before falling asleep by the embers, I found myself drifting, thinking speculatively about the white robin I'd seen earlier in the day, surprised that I had forgotten it. *How could you forget a thing like a white robin?*

#

In dim morning robin song woke me from somewhere above. It was no white robin, for I would have seen its illumination; instead, I but heard its squealing song. I lay staring into the branches as day lightened, thinking of my determination to do well. I was confident now that I still wanted to work with my mind, but from the impetus of my heart, freely. Not dryly, not analytically. (...As opposed to farming the field or birching the backsides of recalcitrant school children.) But not as a poet, either. That had to be given over.

I propped myself on an elbow upon my heap of pine twigs and scrutinized Victor. His breathing indicated a healthy sleep. A deep sleep, but that notwithstanding I began to think that I would be caring for him some days. He too lay on pine needles to keep him against the damp. He wore my coat and was wrapped to the chin in one of my wool blankets made by Aunt Anna. I had the other, which I now threw aside. I squatted to the fire and began remaking it with what lay at hand before going to fetch more sticks.

It was two days before he could give an account of himself. In that time I had built a rude shelter right there, a ridge pole wedged in the crotch of a sapling and laid with poles lashed together, these in their turn overlaid with fir boughs, and latched tight with some buckskin strips. During the times of strengthening I spoke often, even sang to him, thinking that to do so might help restore his soul, even as his body gained. I remember singing "American Taxation," one of the ballads of the American Revolution:

*While I relate my story, Americans give ear,
Of Britain's fading glory you presently shall hear;
I'll give a true relation, attend to what I say,
Concerning the taxation of North America.*

I could not remember above six stanzas but it were well for both him and me: It was a monster of composition, upwards of 30 stanzas. I sang also "Springfield Mountain,"

*Down to the mountain for to mow
He mowed, he mowed all around the field
With a poisonous serpent at his heel,*

the story of Timothy Myrick of Massachusetts who was bitten by a snake and died while mowing the hay of his hillside farm. I even sang some sweet and sentimental parlor songs just then coming into vogue. But perhaps all this noise just vexed him. At first he seemed rested, then encouraged, but later I deem it all wearied him. Then I saw he was preoccupied, then troubled. Finally I forbore no longer and asked him outright what was wrong.

Having eaten nearly a whole roast of spring partridge, he was sitting up under the tree, lying against the hoary bark of the same white pine, there in the crooks where I'd found him. He shifted his gaze from his inwardness toward me, swiftly. I could see him working whether or no to unburthen himself. Idea and sensation passed through his countenance: of horror, of the pensive, of grief or regret, all this swiftly as he considered.

Then, without spirit, he said, "I scarcely know where to begin, Abner." He stopped and looked about, his dark eyes helpless in his beard-darkened face. At last he said, "This place is very harsh, this Jasper Mountain. It has tried to kill me, and I am sorry it has failed." He looked at me then, almost accusingly. But his glance softened and he looked away. In some exhaustion, softly he said, "But I thank you, pioneer youth. Abner."

On one impetus I wanted both to relieve him and yet lead him to continue. So I said, "May be you could start with your clothes. Tatters they are, but discernibly tailor-made. You've been in the city, Cambridge, was it? I know you are no longer teaching school in the Town." I could not keep the eagerness from my voice as I asked about these things. He had come out of himself enough to notice.

"Yes, I have been in the college. Would you aspire to such a place, such learning? If so," he looked at me with penetration, "take care, Abner. Even a little learning can make one mad. I'm not sure but what 'a little' may be, in some instances, more dangerous than much learning.... I have uncovered much that was secret—yet now I feel I've learned little if anything of importance... but solely how to *deepen* the curse natural to us. Take care, pioneer youth."

I lowered my eyes, despairing: There is no pain *like* wounded pride, such as I had come out into Jasper Mountain wilderness to assuage.

Now I was more desirous than ever to press him for what had happened, still I held back. "What did you study, how did you live?"

He hesitated. His gaze dropped to the crooks in which he sat. He picked up a scale of thick bark and began pulling it to pieces. "I studied galvanism, electricity. So as not to burden my father, and to earn my bread, I worked for the undertaker. I lived and studied in the top of his establishment. And my work both here and in the college laboratories put me in touch with all things needful for my true... work." He seemed to suppress a shudder. Victor Besiegt sat quietly, watching me. Assessing me, I thought.

I was keen to ask him about these strange subjects but his scarcely suppressed agitation checked me. "Were you all alone? Had you no friends?" I wondered if it were possible to go woods queer in the midst of many people—as if, among so many, one could be subject as though in a type of wilderness. I had read of Boston and New York, and been to fledgling Bangor for a day. My experience led only to surmise what it might mean to live *en masse*. I imagined what it must be like for a moose to wander into the city.

"I—have a dear friend, Henry Clairson, a fellow student. At first we saw one another regularly and supped almost nightly at a tavern in the square. I did not see many of my fellow natural science students, but was attracted to those in the Classics, liberal studies, and the fine arts. There was a wonderful school for the latter nearby. Clairson was a grammarian and had studied the poets copiously. I had another friend in the medical school, Percy Blake, and often we had fascinating conversations on human anatomy. He could draw well. His diagrams were astonishing.... You are a poet, Abner? There is little harm in it."

To fail at it may be, I thought, but said nothing of that. "What great learning you have encountered! Anatomy, galvanism, electricity." I was not repulsed by his handling of the dead. In those days in Gottheim we thought nothing of undertaking, having not yet acquired a man or woman of that profession for preparing the dead in the hamlet. This was something we did for one another in our homes, washing, dressing, and laying out the dead, waking, and attending the graveside service. My Aunt Anna kept an abundant supply, fresh in season, dried without, of rosemary and tansy to ward off unwholesome airs should the burying be untimely. I had borne the coffin for three or four elders and many babes in my time and helped to lower them into the rocky earth.

Bluntly he said, "That is a leading statement, Abner."

I stared at him, staying my course.

He stared at me.

Here might be a good place to remind the reader of certain characteristics of Yankee temperament derived from the Anglo-Saxons, with a nice overlay of Puritanism. Which of the two of us were to feel the more guilt, the more shame in his nature? Now writing this account, I know almost the whole of the story of Gott'im's monster. I know what part Victor Besiegt played in its creation. But when I found him in the wilderness, he was at first in no shape, and then soon *unwilling*, to reveal much of anything of what he had done. For another thing, you must know the nature of insular Gott'im and how its primary form of

entertainment, in the most casual way, and almost continually, is gossip. Its formal aspect springs out of the soil of character and pride whenever and wherever at least two people meet: oral, superficially fraternal, judgmental, reckless and frequently gleeful. The truth is, most of us don't even realize we are doing it. How casually and on what scant grounds we destroy the reputations of others. How could Victor, especially not knowing me well, share such a monstrous secret with me and trust that it would go no further; no matter how great the pressure on him to disclose, to unburthen? Here you have for my part no knowledge of what he had done. But we both knew what I had just done. I lowered my gaze and turned away.

Notice the tension between the desire for friendship, intellectual and emotional kinship, and fear of the baser qualities that are part of the natural man. A monster of another sort had really come between us despite our need and my nursing of him, and we were helpless in those moments to work together to fend it off. We began to speak of other things.

"Have you seen a white robin?" I asked at last. The dim afternoon had waned and I had to make up the fire. I blew on the embers and glanced up through the small kindling flames. "There was one chirping in the branches up above you when I found you. I'm not sure, but it may be that I would not have noticed you there had I not seen it first."

"No. No, I haven't seen it." His gaze was again listless and absent. Then, perhaps to make up for his former hardness, he would confess at least something: "I haven't seen much of anything... since being so occupied... as you've apprehended. Abner, I'm chasing a monster."

I looked at him. Ridiculously, I think. I must have gawped. *Woods queer.*

He shut his eyes. "I can say no more."

#

I left him there and went off to check my snares in the half light, turning his conversation over in my mind. I now believed he was touched in some manner I could not clearly discern. Victor was lucid, normal in every way except for his nerves—and that last telling sentence about chasing monsters.

I stooped to one of my snares and found it had gone off but was empty. Whatever he had done he should confess, no matter the price to himself, for only then (I thought) would he regain his balance. I mused, can his friends have played a role in it? He must keep his secret. No matter how I have helped him, no matter my own desire for a friend (which he must plainly see), he will keep his secret. For whatever it is he has done he has done in secret.

In the woods you will frequently find an old stump or small clearing beneath a tree as though showered with acorn husks. Look up into the tree above and if you see a big nest in a crook, you know you are in the right neighborhood. Still, for all the ease of ensnaring these critters (to me far tastier than rabbit which is tough and tasteless), it is sad to see one hanging there on a rigged twig he took for a convenient limb.

Half-light, as the saying goes, is better than no light in the woods but it's the kind of light could play tricks on your eyes, tricks in your mind, tricks along the nerves of even a seasoned trapper. I was working my way along the route I had set up since finding Besiegt and was coming up empty-handed. Not the usual thing. And the little nooses smelled bloodied and were torn. Then I came across the carcass of a squirrel that had been but partly eaten out and left in a ruinous little heap. I picked it up, fascinated, but it was too dark now to learn anything of it.

I looked through the forest of bare branches up toward the great light that was beginning low on this side of the mountain, the great white light of the moon. There, passing over bald rock I saw with complete fascination a sight I have never forgotten. The instant I saw it, I knew it was Besiegt's monster.

#

Trembling, tripping over deadfall, I had made my way back to camp. "Look at this," I said, laying my gruesome find near the fire. I watched him. "Not fit to eat."

Besiegt was awake when I returned. He went up on his knees and stared down at the little torn carcasses in fascination. He looked up at me then. "Yes."

He sat back again against the tree. "I told you."

"So a monster did this." It was my turn to suppress a shudder. I began to pace about the fire. "Victor, I've seen it..." I whispered: "I can scarcely believe I've seen it." I did shudder, I trembled. "Where—where did it come from? How can it be? Oh," I began to babble, "I have heard stories in my life, but never—oh, how did it get in these woods of Gott'im. What is it doing on Jasper Mountain?" I think I raved a bit, before standing silent before him. Perhaps the look I cast on him was a hurt look, an accusing look.

I did not understand until much later the import of many of our conversations to follow in the days to come. Some, even, of the things *I* said in those times remained mysterious to me.

"Will it get into the hamlet, will it hurt anyone there?" The firelight glowed over the opening of the shelter, and remains of his meal, near where I'd set the torn squirrels. I gestured toward their shreds, my gaze still on him.

He had been looking away, silent as I roved to and fro. Now he looked at me. His voice was quiet. "He has been there. He has—not hurt anyone—there."

I gaped at him, wondering if he'd been about to say *yet*, instead of *there*. But absently my hand slipped into my shirt to scratch.

"Sit down, Abner."

I sat down, the small flames between us. Each had his firelit gaze upon the other. Slowly he began: "Being is too much for us, Abner. Too much responsibility in being alive.... not that being human excuses us from responsibility, but it is good, at least, that we understand this truth."

I almost shouted. "Stop with your learned abstractions! Tell me what you've done!"

Silence.

Then, "I made him." It was said very low. His mouth, surrounded by dark whiskers, closed in a firm straight line.

At the time I scarcely noticed his demeanor or mine, however. I could only think of the strangely disjointed monster with hair like a cape; of the hamlet, my family, this happenstance. Happenstance? What was he saying? I continued gawping. "You—?"

"I made him."

My thoughts charged this way and that. I said, "... I heard once of a young ignorant boy who'd grown up in a household of vile people and knew nothing of the written word, of stories. He happened to stray into a hall once and heard a man reading from a book. All ragged and dirty, he went up to that speaker after the reading and demanded to know how he had put those pictures in his head. And not pictures only, but a whole experience. Oh, I hate saying this, Victor, but maybe you've done something of the sort to me. Did I really see that thing?"

"Yes. Abner, I will tell you—but not in instructive detail—how I made him. My words will make no manual. I'll never tell anyone how it was done."

As he began to speak, I recalled with one part of my mind the piece of amber I'd seen among Dr. Kimball's collection of oddities, and my excitement over experiencing its electric properties. You could rub it to produce sparks, you could make your hair stand on end. Victor was speaking, his voice quickening as he continued, his own words galvanizing Victor's thought and his fire-struck countenance and form.

#

My mistake was in letting him blather on about hogwash, mainly esoteric ideas and abstractions, philosophies, and minute details concerning arcane scientific techniques. This went on for some hours despite my protestations until, discouraged, worried for the hamlet and what the two might mean for it, I fell asleep as he talked on. When I woke, Victor Besiegt was gone.