

A Beacon in the Gloom

By Danny Cove

It was late in the summer when my wife and I found ourselves walking along the edge of a forest in a small rural village. We'd been backpacking for a month, "touring the countryside at the cost of a dime," my wife would often say. We moved from village to village, town to town, exploring shops and trekking across great expanses of countryside, then propping our tent up on the outskirts when no other shelter made itself available, and we would watch the brilliant colors of the sunset bring forth the coolness of night, which was more often than not an enjoyable relief from the exposure of the season's heat.

Despite the enjoyments of our journey, we'd become uncomfortable in the past few days, traveling through villages which appeared on no maps and whose residents spoke dialects and languages that we'd never before heard. When approached, they would stare at us oddly, then turn their backs and walk away, muttering in their strange tongues. As a result, we'd decided to bypass the next unknown village and continue following our map toward a town that we *did* recognize not far away.

It was at least a two-day walk to our destination, however, and so we found ourselves at last choosing to enter the woods that sprawled beside us, following an open path into the gloom. Through the tops of the trees, we could see the sun beginning to dip down, assuring us that we needed to find shelter for the night. As we searched for a clear space to set up our tent, we were surprised to find the woods parting in the wake of a small cottage, sitting alone and dark in the center of a miniature clearing. It was perfectly circular, with a small, thatched roof and windows shimmering black against the shadows.

Cautiously, I knocked on the door. We waited a moment, then I knocked again, four more raps upon the worn wood of the door. At last, I pushed the door and it swung inward, letting in what little light was left from outside. The cottage was indeed small, with only one room containing a table and a bed with a counter on the opposite side below the far window. I stepped inside, my feet shuffling across the dirt floor, but my wife stayed outside, keeping one of my hands in hers so that I couldn't take more than two steps inside. "I don't think we should," she told me. "We don't know who lives here."

"Are you afraid it might be a witch?" I asked, trying to scare her a little bit. "Maybe she's planning to lure us in and gobble us up!"

"Don't be stupid," she told me. "Do these walls look like they're made of candy?"

I couldn't argue with that logic. "Well it's nearly dark now," I told her. "Why don't we stay here and keep a light on. No surprises that way, and it'll only be one night." With a sigh, she relented and followed me inside, closing the door behind her. With our shelter taken care of, I propped our lantern on the table and lit it so that we could see the food we'd brought. There was little left, and it had a strange taste to it, but I attributed that to the fact that we were eating it in such a strange place. When we'd finished our dinner, I left the lantern on as we both climbed into the bed, which was unusually comfortable. Then, to the muffled sound of the forest outside the window, we both drifted off to sleep beneath a heavy sheet of wool.

I awoke when it was still dark and I rolled my head around, trying to see. There was very little that was visible, and so I first tried listening to the sounds of the forest, only to find that it was completely silent. Then I realized why it was so dark: the lantern had gone out. Trying not to awaken my wife, I carefully climbed out of bed and walked over to the table to find the lamp

cold and dark. I moved past this and looked out the window, my vision now adjusting to the night. Outside the window was a more profound gloom than I'd ever seen, as if some dark fog had rolled in between the trees and pressed itself against the sides of the cottage. There were strange swirls and motions in that fog, as if strange forms were moving within it, following patterns that conformed to nothing I'd ever seen in this world. Some of the forms looked almost human, and every now and then, my eyes would lock onto dark sockets in cold shapes, which vanished like wisps almost the moment I spotted them. Others seemed to spread in many directions at once, as if taking over the forest. After making sure that the window was latched shut, I moved quickly back to the bed, still trying not to wake my wife.

I was startled when I looked down and couldn't see my feet. A glance at the door revealed that the mist was sweeping in beneath it, the floor of the hut appearing to vanish below it. The darkness was becoming unbearable and my heart began to race. I jumped at a rustling sound behind me, realizing a moment later that it was only the movements of my sleeping wife. Trying to calm myself, I crawled back into bed beside her, pulled the blanket up to cover us both, then closed my eyes and prayed for the sun to return and banish away the strange shadows.

By the time the light of the sun first peered through the leaves of the canopy, my wife and I were dressed, packed, and ready to leave. The mist had begun to dissipate, and as we reached the edge of the clearing – our packs strapped firmly to our backs – we turned around to see that the clearing in which we'd spent the night was empty, with barely a stone out of place as the last gloomy wisps of mist were conquered by the light.

The two of us rarely speak of that time in our travels. We tell the stories of the charming villages which welcomed us, but of the strange people and the cottage that had left, we always

skipped. Never again had we found those towns or even that forest; it was as if they only existed in our dreams of that one, gloomy night. And in those dreams, I've become convinced that we'd had never truly stopped that evening. We'd kept moving, taken by the cottage into a world between worlds, where only ghosts and darker things walked, things only glimpsed in the imaginations of the mad. Whatever those things had been which I'd seen, I find relief in the fact that they'd taken nothing with them but the light of our own lantern, the single beacon in that unknown realm. Perhaps there's solace in giving that to them, a gift from the living to the lost.