

DISPATCHES FROM BEYOND THE PALE

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Dispatches from Beyond the Pale:

Journeys and Experiences West of the Mississippi

By Jasper Willis Marsh



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Forward

My journeys beyond the border of the Great River brought me a great many adventures and a great many stories to tell. This book serves as but an introduction to some of the more interesting. Some more generous folk may call my stories a collection of folklore and tall-tales. Others, less charitable, may call them fabrications and label me a “fraud.” No matter, what I lay before is the truth as I encountered it, at the time and place of my experience.

For my success in my journey, I would be remiss if I neglected to mention, and to thank, my companion, Dorothy “Spirit Walks with Rain” Tomlinson for her invaluable assistance in guiding me through some of the pitfalls that presented themselves along my path. Not only is Dorothy a talented guide and tracker, but a born philosopher and loyal friend.

For those that still wish to share in my experiences in what some are coming to term “the Weird West,” I invite you to read further. Some of the journeys are mundane. Others, decidedly not so. But I think you will be rewarded for your efforts.

—Joshua Willis Marsh

St. Louis, Missouri

1865

Chapter 8: On the Harrowed

Gentle Reader, I beg you to open your mind and read these next passages with an accepting heart, for what I am about to reveal is not only the God's Honest Truth, but, if accepted, should chill your bones to the marrow.

As I traversed the many trails and wagon roads of the West, I encountered, more than once, tales of a creature that some have taken to calling "The Harrowed", as in "dragged forth from the earth." The name is apt, as these creatures, are indeed, dragged forth from the graves that previously bore them and walk the earth again.

Read that again, Gentle Reader.

Indeed, these creatures are the dead come risen again to complete some business upon this earth.

I have to admit, I felt a certain curiosity as to the veracity of these tales, so I took to seeking them out as I traveled. As such, I began to notice certain commonalities between them, even with hundreds of miles and even languages serving as barriers to corroboration. Thus, came my slow descent into Belief.

And then came my own encounter with such a being.

It was early 1864, in Colorado, as I was traveling across the

border from Kansas. My companion, Dorothy, and I were tired, as were our mounts and she was guiding us to a switch station for the Butterfield Overland Despatch stage line where we could rest ourselves and our poor beasts.

The station was small and rustic, but suited our needs at the time. We put our animals up in the small barn, which was attached to a corral, and walked over to the switch house. The door swung open easily at my touch, which, in hindsight, should have been my first signal that something was awry.

Inside, the switch house was quiet, though occupied. There was an older fellow, bearded, and dressed in dungarees and a beat up old hat. Dorothy nudged me and pointed to the double-barreled scattergun he had ready to hand. He sat in one of the plush chairs by the central fireplace.

Behind the counter of the dispensary was a skinny fellow in overalls who was sweating profusely. He appeared to have a permanent lump in throat about the size of an apple. His eyes flicked nervously from us, to the old man, and to the other occupant of the switch house.

The other occupant was a tall, lanky fellow with a long, weather-beaten duster. He wore a black, wide-brimmed western-style hat with a silver hat band. It was hard to see the man's face beyond the shadow cast by his hat, but his hands were gaunt—parchment skin stretched tight over delicate bones. He drummed his fingers steadily on the small table he sat

behind, staring toward the old man, the two seeming to be in some sort of test of wills against each other.

The room smelled strongly of wood smoke, though there was, faint beneath that pleasant perfume, the stench of rotting meat.

I turned to the skinny man behind the counter and asked if he had any tobacco. He just blinked at me as if I had spoken to him in Mandarin. The old man, without looking at us, called out.

“Why don’t you folks take a seat for a spell. My business is almost done and Zeke will be more disposed for helpfulness then.”

I looked at my guide and she nodded, so we made our way inside and found some chairs.

“So, Dalton. What’s it gonna be? You anteing up? Or do you go back to your hole where you belong?” the old man said to the man in the duster.

The other man, for his part, cocked back his hat to reveal a face I still see in my nightmares. It was gaunt and sallow, like his hands. His nose had rotted away, leaving just two holes where his nostrils used to be. A long, jagged scar ran down his face from his left eye to his jawline. His eyes were the color of midnight and I swear, glittered like stars. And there was a puckered bullet hole in the center of the man’s forehead. No blood leaked from the wound, but there it sat, defying you to deny its existence.

“Jenkins, you been following me around, pestering me, for a year. My answer is always the same. Why are you in an all-fired hurry?”

The...creature’s...voice was gravely and harsh, a song of sandpaper and dust. I’m not ashamed to say that the sight of such a thing unnerved me. I lost my breath and my legs turned to water. Thank God I was already seated or I would have collapsed.

The old man, Jenkins, said, “The time is gonna come when you have to make a choice. Might as well be now. If I don’t think I can count on you, I’ll put you right back where I found you.”

The creature, Dalton, chuckled. The laugh of a demon before he toys with your soul. “I’ve learned a thing or two in the past year, hoss. I think you might find that to be a harder proposition than you...”

And the old man had already taken up the scattergun and blew Dalton’s head into goose-down-sized chunks. I’m not expert, but it seems to me there should have been more blood than there was.

“Damn fool. I asked a direct question and expected a direct answer,” the old man said, as he reloaded the spent barrel of his scattergun with a shell from his pocket.

I blinked, my poor mind still reeling from all of these events. My companion, Dorothy, seemed to take it all in as implacably as ever. She walked over to the chair where the nearly-headless corpse lay and

peered at it closely, almost as if she were reading a trail.

“Will he stay this way?” she asked the old man, pointing at the corpse.

“I reckon so. You don’t get that many second chances. Not on-ery cusses like Dalton Furlough. Even with a Reckoning going on,” Jenkins said.

I, my friends, continued to gape like a fish.

Jenkins rose from the chair and walked over to the dispensary counter and left some golden eagles on the top. “For the mess,” he said as he strolled out of the switch house.

It was only later that put together the stories we had been hearing with the reality of Dalton Furlough. This was one of the Harrowed.

Soon thereafter, I began comparing notes from the various stories and pursuing the truth of the matter. Though the tales are plentiful, finding actual Harrowed individuals is much more difficult. Also a challenge was finding witnesses actually willing to speak to me. Most would deny ever seeing the creature, even though all of their friends or family members would try to prompt them to remember.

Nevertheless, friends, I persevered. Below is the summation of my experience with the lore and reality of the Harrowed:

The Manitou

According to the lore of the Lakota, for which I rely on my companion, Dorothy “Sprit Walks With Rain” Tomlinson, the Harrowed are chosen by malignant spirits they call *Manitou* to act as hosts. They shunt aside the spirit that of the person and use the body to do harm on the earth. But the spirit within constantly does battle with the Manitou for dominance of the body in hopes of using it for good—or at, least, to maintain the balance.

The Living Corpse

Based on the stories I have heard, and, again the tales told to me by my boon companion, the Manitou (which is as good a word for it as anything—you could use *spirit* or *daemon* or *djinn* for all it matters to me) keeps the body from furthering in its decay. Old wounds remain, but new ones will heal quickly, restoring the Harrowed to its original state. As one of the newly “un-dead,” (which term I use, as the Harrowed is nether—or is he both—dead or alive), the only sustenance he requires is meat. This is to sustain the rotting flesh, which smell never quite dissipates.

Faith

Because the body is possessed by a malignant spirit, many of the stories relate that the Harrowed is subject to the power of the miracle of Faith. High church exorcisms could expel the Manitou and end the

prolonged existence of the Harrowed. Divine protection would apply to the bearer of such a spirit. Such rituals only work for the strong of spirit or those versed in their intricacies.

Existential Dread

It should come as no surprise that the presence of such a creature is enough to unnerve even the most stalwart frontier soul. Nevertheless, it should be noted that many of my collected experiences note that it may be *purpose* of the Manitou to spread this existential dread as far and wide as possible. What manner of fell purpose this serves, it is impossible to say. To the Manitou feed off of fear? Do they simply enjoy the strife it instills in mankind? Nevertheless, merely being in the presence of one of these creatures, regardless of its demeanor or current actions, is enough to chill the blood and quail the heart. Even beasts such as horses and dogs sense the spirit of the Manitou.

Supernatural Powers

Finally, the Harrowed gain access, from their Manitou, to a whole host of strange and exotic abilities that are as varied as the spirits that ride within them. Here is a catalog of some of those abilities based on the lore I have gathered:

Burrowing beneath the earth; the ability to gaze into a man's soul; radiate the chill of the grave; grow their fingers into cruel, talon-like claws; send their severed limbs out to do their bidding; climb walls and

ceilings like insects; place bad luck on target of their ire; carry and distribute diseases; mask their rotting features with a phantasm of their former self; lend their powers to chosen minions; deliver a life-ending eulogy to a living victim; the “evil-eye”; walk across water; walk through walls; control fire; summon the winds of Hell; appear in the dreams of its victims; possess victims; put victims to sleep; eat a victim’s soul; and cause a young man to grow old before his time.

Origins & Connections

Near as I can tell, while folklore dates back to when Methuselah had teeth, these stories of the Harrowed began cropping up only a few years ago—I can find nothing before 1863. Not only are we seeing the dead rise, but abominations out of legend are appearing all over the West. Strange creatures are populating the frontier. Some even say that “magic” and “sorcery” have returned to the world.

So why are we seeing this phenomenon now? What has changed?

“And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.” (Revelations 20:13). Are we seeing the end of times now? Are the dead being released to be judged according to what they had done in life? Or is it we, the living, who have been judged and found wanting?

Dorothy tells me of a story among the Sioux. According to their lore, there have always been monsters, abominations, that have dwelled upon the earth. Beyond the pale, in the spirit realm, or the Hunting Grounds, as the Sioux term it, are the evil Manitou and the more balanced nature spirits. The abominations born of despair, cause fear in the world, which is reaped by the Manitous, and siphoned back to the *kaga tanka* (The Great Demon), which sends more abominations into the world, and thus the circle turns.

Over time, there was too much fear, too much despair, too many monsters. The Earth and the People could not sustain the cycle. So the Old Ones gathered, wise elders of all the People, called a sacred council and reasoned that the abominations were too many and they, too few. But if they were to ensure the Manitou could not reap their fear, then fewer abominations would be born.

So it was that the Old Ones asked the spirits of nature to war against their evil cousins, the Manitou. The spirits agreed, but their price was high. The Old Ones would have to join them in their war.

The Old Ones wove their magic together and opened a door into the Hunting Grounds. They stepped through and began a long battle with the Manitou. The Old Ones eventually defeated the Manitou, though as they are spirits, they could not be fully destroyed. The Old Ones held them in check with a sacred bond—as long as the Old Ones remained in the Hunting Grounds, the Manitou could not meddle in the affairs of the

People. The horrors of the world abated. The price the Old Ones paid was high, but they had won.

But now, things have changed. Dorothy, too, thinks something has happened to tip the balance and cause the Manitou to break their sacred bond with the Old Ones.

Regardless of your faith, be it for a Jewish carpenter's son who died a Savior, or for a Great Spirit that presides over all, it is clear that something is happening in the West—in the world! I am a traveler and collector of tales, not a theologian, but I would not be very surprised that there are provisions in all faiths for the return of Evil to the world. It is my belief that the Harrowed are but a symptom in a more sinister malaise that afflicts our very existence.



A rendition of a Harrowed that terrorized the community of Silver City, Idaho

