

The Barton Wood Mystery



by William Jeffrey Rankin

“ The weather had turned: Dark storm clouds were overhead as I closed the forest gate. As I walked along the path, I could hear the first patter of rain on the leaves above. The closeness of the forest was palpable, undoubtedly made worse by the approaching storm. There was little wind, and beyond the comforting sound of rain the wood was abnormally silent and still.

The Barton Wood Mystery
The Carnacki Casebook, Case No. 02

The Barton Wood Mystery (Sample)

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“The sun was beginning to sink behind the wood when the three of us left The Bowman. Douglas and Calista continued on the road to the southeast while I proceeded in the opposite direction. ‘I’m returning by the forest path.’

“The two stopped, trading looks of concern. ‘Are you sure that’s wise, Mr. Carnacki? Should you like us to come with you?’ asked Douglas.

“‘Don’t worry, and no need, I’ll be careful,’ I replied, ‘and I’ll see you later tonight or tomorrow morning.’ I reached the northern gate to the wood not long after. The sun had fully sunk behind the trees and the forest was all dark green and shadow. Taking a deep breath, I left the road, opened the gate, and took to the path.

“The air wasn’t as close as it had been earlier in the afternoon, but the silence had become uncanny. Not a breath of wind, no birdsong, and even the omnipresent buzz of flying insects had ceased. The darkness grew more dense as I continued, and I was just able to make out the path and reach the hollow. The old oak atop the knoll stood before me as dusk fell upon the wood. I took a seat upon the bench and waited: for what, I was not yet sure. I sat for some time and it had become quite dark, the only source of light the stars above. I was about to light my pipe when my attention was caught by rustling sounds coming from directly in front of, and slightly above, my position on the bench. I remained motionless and steadied my breathing. The sounds continued for several seconds, then ceased. It was utterly quiet again. Not daring to light a match, I put my pipe back in my jacket. Then, I saw something: Slow and stealthy movement atop the knoll and near the old oak. It was something large and low to the ground. As it moved out of the deeper darkness of the oak and into the starlight, I caught a glimpse of what seemed to be its head: A silvery-white dome and deep-set eye sockets filled with shadow. The thing stopped moving and immediately became one with the darkness and undergrowth, although I could still see the head and vacant eyes gazing in my direction. It recommenced its stealthy movement, in almost complete silence but for a gentle padding of its invisible feet. The thing’s head moved to the left, then to the right, and then up, as if it were trying to detect the scent of something. I remained utterly quiet, but ready to spring into action. I knew it was aware of me.

“Without warning, the thing sprang forward from the shadows and was upon me. I didn’t have time to react. It knocked me to one side—I felt something rough scrape against my face and neck—as it disappeared into the darkness of the forest. I remained, motionless, on the bench for another moment, my heart pounding, listening for the sound of the thing’s return. But the forest was again

silent. I had to consider what I should do: I was in the midst of the wood, in the darkness, and had either to take the northern path and return to the road, or take the direct southern path to the house. Reasoning that either way my journey would take me through the wood, I resolved to take the direct and shorter southern path. With only the starlight to guide me, and the constant fear the thing would be upon me again, it seemed the longest walk of my life. I kept my mind occupied by trying to square what I'd just experienced with the facts of the case. That there was an Outside force at work in the wood and the estate, it was now plain. But what was its precedent and object (if it even had one)? It had only manifested since the spring, well after the Morgans had taken up residence. Why then, and what had happened? And how was I to rid Barton Wood of this thing?

“As I carefully traced the path in the near-darkness, I became aware of pain coming from my face and neck. I withdrew a handkerchief from my coat and held it to my face, I could feel the lacerations and the stickiness of blood. To my relief, the lights of the Morgan home were visible through the trees. I was but a short distance away from safety. As I increased my pace, I became aware of the sound of steps behind and to my right. I stopped to listen, and the steps stopped as well. I resumed a brisk pace, and at the same moment the thing came bounding at me again. Ignoring the path, and heedless of the branches that tore at my hands, face, and clothing, as well as the fallen trees I tripped over in the darkness, I made directly for the lights of the house with all the speed I could muster. The thing was at my back, and I was sure it would overtake me at any moment.”