

The Bad Lands

John Metcalf

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It is now perhaps fifteen years ago that Brent Ormerod, seeking the rest and change of scene that should help him to slay the demon neurosis, arrived in Todd towards the close of a mid-October day. A decrepit fly bore him to the one hotel, where his rooms were duly engaged, and it is this vision of himself sitting in the appalling vehicle that makes him think it was October or thereabouts, for he distinctly remembers the determined settling down of the dusk that forced him to drive when he would have preferred to follow his luggage on foot.

He decided immediately that five o'clock was an unsuitable time to arrive in Todd. The atmosphere, as it were, was not receptive. There was a certain repellent quality about the fore autumn air, and something peculiarly shocking in the way in which desultory little winds would spring up in darkening streets to send the fallen leaves scurrying about in hateful, furtive whirlpools.

Dinner, too, at the hotel hardly brought the consolation he had counted on. The meal itself was unexceptionable, and the room cheerful and sufficiently well filled for that time of year, yet one trivial circumstance was enough to send him upstairs with his temper ruffled and his nerves on edge. They had put him to a table with a one-eyed man, and that night the blank eye haunted all his dreams.

But for the first eight or nine days at Todd things went fairly well with him. He took frequent cold baths and regular exercise and made a point of coming back to the hotel so physically tired that to get into bed was usually to drop immediately into sleep. He wrote back to his sister Joan, at Kensington, that his nerves were already much improved and that only another fortnight seemed needed to complete the cure. "Altogether a highly satisfactory week."

Those who have been to Todd remember it as a quiet, secretive watering-place, couched watchfully in a fold of a long range of low hills along the Norfolk coast. It has been pronounced "restful" by those in high authority, for time there has a way of passing dreamily as if the days, too, were being blown past like the lazy clouds on the wings of wandering breezes. At the back, the look of the land is somehow strangely forbidding, and it is wiser to keep to the shore and the more neighbouring villages. Salterton, for instance, has been found quite safe and normal.

There are long stretches of sand dunes to the west, and by their side a nine-hole golf-course.

Here, at the time of Brent's visit, stood an old and crumbling tower, an enigmatic structure which he found interesting from its sheer futility. Behind it an inexplicable road seemed to lead with great decision most uncomfortably to nowhere. . . . Todd, he thought, was in many ways a nice spot, but he detected in it a tendency to grow on one unpleasantly.

He came to this conclusion at the end of the ninth day, for it was then that he became aware of a peculiar uneasiness, an indescribable malaise.

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This feeling of disquiet he at first found himself quite unable to explain or analyse. His nerves he had thought greatly improved since he had left Kensington, and his general health was good.

He decided, however, that perhaps yet more exercise was necessary, and so he walked along the links and the sand dunes to the queer tower and the inexplicable road that lay behind it three times a day instead of twice.

His discomfort rapidly increased. He would become conscious, as he set out for his walk, of a strange sinking at his heart and of a peculiar moral disturbance which was very difficult to describe. These sensations attained their maximum when he had reached his goal upon the dunes, and he suffered then what something seemed to tell him was very near the pangs of spiritual dissolution.

It was on the eleventh day that some faint hint of the meaning of these peculiar symptoms crossed his mind. For the first time he asked himself why it was that of all the many rambles he had taken in Todd since his arrival each one seemed inevitably to bring him to the same place the yellow sand dunes with the mysterious looking tower in the background. Something in the bland foolishness of the structure seemed to have magnetised him, and in the unaccountable excitement which the sight of it invariably produced, he had found himself endowing it with almost human characteristics.

With its white nightcap dome and its sides of pale yellow stucco it might seem at one moment to be something extravagantly ridiculous, a figure of fun at which one should laugh and point.

Then, as likely as not, its character would change a little, and it would take on the abashed and crestfallen look of a jester whose best joke has fallen deadly flat, while finally, perhaps, it would develop with startling rapidity into a jovial old gentleman laughing madly at Ormerod from the middle distance out of infinite funds of merriment.

Now Brent was well aware of the dangers of an obsession such as this, and he immediately resolved to rob the tower of its unwholesome fascination by simply walking straight up to it, past it, and onwards along the road that stretched behind it.

It was on the morning of one of the last October days that he set out from the hotel with this intention in his mind. He reached the dunes at about ten, and plodded with some difficulty across them in the direction of the tower. As he neared it his accustomed sensations became painfully apparent, and presently increased to such a pitch that it was all he could do to continue on his way.

He remembered being struck again with the peculiar character of the winding road that stretched before him into a hazy distance where everything seemed to melt and swim in shadowy vagueness. On his left the gate stood open, to his right the grotesque form of the tower threatened. . . .

Now he had reached it, and its shadow fell straight across his path. He did not halt to examine it, but strode forward through the open gate and entered upon the winding road. At the same moment he was astonished to notice that the painful clutch at his heart was immediately lifted, and that with it, too, all the indescribable uneasiness which he had characterised to himself as "moral" had utterly disappeared.

He had walked on for some little distance before another rather remarkable fact struck his attention. The country was no longer vague; rather, it was peculiarly distinct, and he was able to see for long distances over what seemed considerable stretches of park-like land, grey, indeed, in tone and somehow sad with a most poignant melancholy, yet superficially, at least, well cultivated and in some parts richly timbered. He looked behind him to catch a glimpse of Todd and of the sea, but was surprised to find that in that direction the whole landscape was become astonishingly indistinct and shadowy.

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It was not long before the mournful aspect of the country about him began so to depress him and work upon his nerves that he debated with himself the advisability of returning at once to the hotel. He found that the ordinary, insignificant things about him were becoming charged with sinister suggestion and that the scenery on all sides was rapidly developing an unpleasant tendency to the macabre. Moreover his watch told him that it was now half-past eleven and lunch was at one. Almost hastily he turned about and began to descend the winding road.

It was about an hour later that he again reached the tower and saw the familiar dunes stretching once more before him. For some reason or other he seemed to have found the way back much longer and more difficult than the outward journey, and it was with a feeling of distinct relief that he actually passed through the gate and set his face towards Todd.

He did not go out again that afternoon, but sat smoking and thinking in the hotel. In the lounge he spoke to a man who sat in a chair beside him.

"What a queer place that is all at the back there behind the dunes!"

His companion's only comment was a somewhat drowsy grunt.

"Behind the tower," pursued Ormerod, "the funny tower at the other end of the links. The most God-forsaken, dismal place you can imagine. And simply miles of it!"

The other, roused to coherence much against his will, turned slowly round. "Don't know it," he said. "There's a large farm where you say, and the other side of that is a river, and then you come to Harkaby or somewhere."

He closed his eyes and Ormerod was left to ponder the many difficulties of his remarks.

At dinner he found a more sympathetic listener. Mr. Stanton-Boyle had been in Todd a week when Brent arrived, and his sensitive, young-old face with the eager eyes and the quick, nervous contraction of the brows had caught the newcomer's attention from the first. Up to now, indeed, they had only exchanged commonplaces, but to-night each seemed more disposed towards intimacy. Ormerod began.

"I suppose you've walked around the country at the back here a good deal?" he said.

"No," replied the other. "I never go there now. I went there once or twice and that was enough."

"Why?"

"Oh, it gets on my nerves, that's all. Do you get any golf here?"

The conversation passed to other subjects, and it was not until both were smoking together over liqueur brandies in the lounge that it returned to the same theme. And then they came to a remarkable conclusion.

"The country at the back of this place," said Brent's companion, "is somehow abominable. It ought to be blown up or something. I don't say it was always like that. Last year, for instance, I don't remember noticing it at all. I fancy it may have been depressing enough, but it was not not abominable. It's gone abominable since then, particularly to the south-west!"

They said good-night after agreeing to compare notes on Todd, S.W., and Ormerod had a most desolating dream wherein he walked up and up into a strange dim country, full of sighs and whisperings and crowding, sombre trees, where hollow breezes blew fitfully, and a queer house set with lofty pine shone out white against a lurid sky. .

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On the next day he walked again past the tower and through the gate and along the winding road. As he left Todd behind him and began the slow ascent among the hills he became conscious of some strange influence that hung over the country like a brooding spirit. The clearness of the preceding day was absent; instead, all seemed nebulous and indistinct, and the sad landscape dropped behind and below him in the numb, unreal recession of a dream.

It was about four o'clock, and as he slowly ascended into the mournful tracts the greyness of the late autumn day was deepening into dusk. All the morning, clouds had been gathering in the west, and now the dull ache of the damp sky gave the uneasy sense of impending rain. Here a fitful wind blew the gold flame of a sear leaf athwart the November gloom, and out along the horizon great leaden masses were marching out to sea.

A terrible sense of loneliness fell upon the solitary walker trudging up into the sighing country, and even the sight of scattered habitations, visible here and there among the shadows, seemed only to intensify his feeling of dream and unreality. Everywhere the uplands strained in the moist wind, and the lines of gaunt firs that marched against the horizon gloom pointed ever out to sea.

The wan crowding on of the weeping heavens, the settled pack of those leaning firs, and the fitful scurry of the leaves in the chill blast down the lane smote upon his spirit as something unutterably sad and terrible. On his right a skinny black thorn shot up hard and wiry towards the dull, grey sky; there ahead trees in a wood fluttered ragged, yellow flags against the dimness.

A human figure appeared before him, and presently he saw that it was a man, apparently a labourer. He carried tools upon his shoulders, and his head was bent so that it was only when Ormerod addressed him that he looked up and showed a withered countenance. "What is the name of all this place?" said Brent, with a wide sweep of his arm.

"This," said the labourer, in a voice so thin and tired that it seemed almost like the cold breath of the wind that drove beside them, "is Hayes—in—the—Up. Of course, though, it'll be a mile further on for you before you get to Fennington." He pointed in the direction from which he had just come, turned his sunken eyes again for a moment upon Ormerod, and then quickly faded down the descending path.

Brent looked after him wondering, but as he swept his gaze about him much of his wonder vanished. All around, the wan country seemed to rock giddily beneath those lowering skies, so heavy with the rain that never fell; all around, the sailing uplands seemed to heave and yearn under the sad tooting of the damp November wind. Oh, he could well imagine that the men of this weary, twilight region would be worn and old before their time, with its sinister stare in their eyes and its haggard gloom abroad in their pinched faces!

Thinking thus, he walked on steadily, and it was not long before certain words of the man he had met rose with uneasy suggestion to the surface of his mind. What, he asked himself, was Fennington? Somehow he did not think that the name stood for another village; rather, the word seemed to connect itself ominously with the dream he had had some little time ago. He shuddered, and had not walked many paces further before he found that his instinct was correct.

Opposite him, across a shallow valley, stood that white house, dimly set in giant pine. Here the winds seemed almost visible as they strove in those lofty trees and the constant rush by of the weeping sky behind made all the view seem to tear giddily through some unreal, watery medium.

A striking resemblance of the pines to palm-trees and a queer effect of light which brought the white façade shaking bright against the sailing cloud-banks gave the whole a strangely exotic look.

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Gazing at it across the little valley, Ormerod felt somehow that this, indeed, was the centre and hub of the wicked country, the very kernel and essence of this sad, unwholesome land that he saw flung wide in weariness about him. This abomination was it that magnetised him, that attracted him from afar with fatal fascination, and threatened him with untold disaster. Almost sobbing, he descended his side of the valley and then rose again to meet the house.

Park-like land surrounded the building, and from the smooth turf arose the pines and some clusters of shrubs. Amongst these Ormerod walked carefully till he was suddenly so near that he could look into a small room through its open window whilst he sheltered in a large yew whose dusky skirts swept the ground.

The room seemed strangely bare and deserted. A small table was pushed to one side, and dust lay thick upon it. Nearer Ormerod a chair or two appeared, and, opposite, a great black mantelpiece glowered in much gloom. In the centre of the floor was set the object that seemed to dominate the whole.

This was a large and cumbrous spinning-wheel of forbidding mien. It glistened foully in the dim light, and its many moulded points pricked the air in very awful fashion. Waiting there in the close stillness, the watcher fancied he could see the treadle stir. Quickly, with beating heart, beset by sudden dread, he turned away, retraced his steps among the sheltering shrubs, and descended to the valley bottom.

He climbed up the other side, and was glad to walk rapidly away down the winding path till, on turning his head, it was no longer possible to see the evil house he had just left.

It must have been near six o'clock when, on approaching the gate and tower, weary from his walk and anxious to reach the familiar and reassuring atmosphere of the hotel, he came suddenly upon a man walking through the darkness in the same direction as himself. It was Stanton-Boyle.

Ormerod quickly overtook him and spoke. "You have no idea," he said, "how glad I am to see you. We can walk back together now."

As they strolled to the hotel Brent described his walk, and he saw the other trembling.

Presently Stanton-Boyle looked at him earnestly and spoke. "I've been there too," he said, "and I feel just as you do about it. I feel that that place Fennington is the centre of the rottenness. I looked through the window, too, and saw the spinning-wheel and " He stopped suddenly.

"No," he went on quietly a moment later, "I won't tell you what else I saw!"

"It ought to be destroyed!" shouted Ormerod. A curious excitement tingled in his blood. His voice was loud, so that people passing them in the street turned and gazed after them. His eyes were very bright. He went on, pulling Stanton-Boyle's arm impressively. "I shall destroy it!" he said. "I shall burn it and I shall most assuredly smash that old spinning-wheel and break off its horrid spiky points!" He had a vague sense of saying curious and unusual things, but this increased rather than moderated his unaccountable elation.

Stanton-Boyle seemed somewhat abnormal too. He seemed to be gliding along the pavement with altogether unexampled smoothness and nobility as he turned his glowing eyes on Brent.

"Destroy it!" he said. "Burn it! Before it is too late and it destroys you. Do this and you will be an unutterably brave man!"

When they reached the hotel Ormerod found a telegram awaiting him from Joan. He had not written to her for some time and she had grown anxious and was coming down herself on the following day. He must act quickly,

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before she came, for her mind in this matter would be unsympathetic. That night as he parted from Stanton–Boyle his eyes blazed in a high resolve.

"To–morrow," he said, as he shook the other's hand, "I shall attempt it."

The following morning found the neurotic as good as his word. He carried matches and a tin of oil. His usually pale cheeks were flushed and his eyes sparkled strangely. Those who saw him leave the hotel remembered afterwards how his limbs had trembled and his speech halted.

Stanton–Boyle, who was to see him off at the tower, reflected these symptoms in a less degree.

Both men were observed to set out arm–in–arm engaged in earnest conversation.

At about noon Stanton–Boyle returned. He had walked with Ormerod to the sand dunes, and there left him to continue on his strange mission alone. He had seen him pass the tower, strike the fatal gate in the slanting morning sun, and then dwindle up the winding path till he was no more than an intense, pathetic dot along that way of mystery.

As he returned he was aware of companionship along the street. He looked round and noticed a policeman strolling in much abstraction some fifty yards behind him. Again at the hotel–entrance he turned about. The same figure in blue uniform was visible, admiring the houses opposite from the shade of an adjacent lamp–post. Stanton–Boyle frowned and withdrew to lunch.

At half–past two Joan arrived. She inquired nervously for Ormerod, and was once addressed by Stanton–Boyle, who had waited for her in the entrance hall as desired by Brent. "Mr. Ormerod,"

he told her, "is out. He is very sorry. Will you allow me the impropriety of introducing myself? My name is Stanton–Boyle. . . ."

Joan tore open the note which had been left for her by Ormerod. She seemed to find the contents unsatisfactory, for she proceeded to catechise Stanton–Boyle upon her brother's health and general habit of life at Todd. Following this she left the hotel hastily after ascertaining the direction from which Ormerod might be expected to return.

Stanton–Boyle waited. The moments passed, heavy, anxious, weighted with the sense of coming trouble. He sat and smoked. Discreet and muffled noises from within the hotel seemed full somehow of uneasy suggestion and foreboding. Outside, the street looked very gloomy in the November darkness. Something, assuredly, would happen directly.

It came, suddenly. A sound of tramping feet and excited cries that grew rapidly in volume and woke strange echoes in the reserved autumnal roads. Presently the tumult lessened abruptly, and only broken, fitful shouts and staccato ejaculations stabbed the silence. Stanton–Boyle jumped to his feet and walked hurriedly to the entrance hall.

Here there were cries and hustlings and presently strong odours and much suppressed excitement. He saw Joan talking very quickly to the manager of the hotel. She seemed to be developing a Point–of–View, and it was evident that it was not the manager's. For some time the press of people prevented him from discovering the cause of the commotion, but here and there he could make out detached sentences: "Tried to set old Hackney's farm on fire " "But they'd seen him before and another man too, so " "Asleep in the barn several times."

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Before long, all but the hotel residents had dispersed, and in the centre of the considerable confusion which still remained it was now possible to see Ormerod supported by two policemen.

A third hovered in the background with a large notebook. As Stanton–Boyle gazed, Brent lifted his bowed head so that their eyes met. "I have done it," he said. "I smashed it up. I brought back one of its points in my pocket . . . Overcoat, left hand . . . as a proof." Having pronounced which words Mr. Ormerod fainted very quietly.

For some time there was much disturbance. The necessary arrangements for the temporary pacification of the Law and of the Hotel had to be carried through, and after that Ormerod had to be got to bed. It was only after the initial excitement had in large measure abated that Stanton–Boyle ventured to discuss the matter over the after–dinner coffee. He had recognised one of the three policemen as the man whom he had noticed in the morning, and had found it well to retire from observation until he and his companions had left the hotel. Now, however, he felt at liberty to explain his theories of the situation to such as chose to listen.

He held forth with peculiar vehemence and with appropriate gestures. He spoke of a new kind of terre–mauvaise, of strange regions, connected, indeed, with definite geographical limits upon the earth, yet somehow apart from them and beyond them. "The relation," he said, "is rather one of parallelism and correspondence than of actual connection. I honestly believe that these regions do exist, and are quite as 'real' in their way as the ordinary world we know. We might say they consist in a special and separated set of stimuli to which only certain minds in certain conditions are able to respond. Such a district seems to be superimposed upon the country to the south–west of this place." A laugh arose. "You won't get the magistrate to believe that," said someone. "Why, all where you speak of past that gate by the dunes is just old Hackney's farm and nothing else."

"Of course," said another. "It was one of old Hackney's barns he was setting alight, I understand. I was speaking to one of the policemen about it. He said that fellow Ormerod had always been fossicking around there, and had gone to sleep in the barn twice. I expect it's all bad dreams."

A third spoke derisively. "Surely," he said, "you don't really expect us to believe in your Bad Lands. It's like Jack–in–the–Beanstalk."

"All right!" said Stanton–Boyle. "Have it your own way! I know my use of the term 'Bad Lands' may be called incorrect, because it usually means that bit in the States, you know but that's a detail. I tell you I've run up against things like this before. There was the case of Dolly Wishart, but no, I won't say anything about that you wouldn't believe it."

The group around looked at him oddly. Suddenly there was a stir, and a man appeared in the doorway. He carried Ormerod's overcoat.

"This may settle the matter," he said. "I heard him say he'd put something in the pocket. He said "

Stanton–Boyle interrupted him excitedly. "Why, yes," he said. "I'd forgotten that. What I was telling you about the spinning–wheel. It will be interesting to see if " He stopped and fumbled in the pockets. In another moment he brought out something which he held in his extended hand for all to see.

It was part of the handle of a patent separator an object familiar enough to any who held even meagre acquaintance with the life of farms, and upon it could still be discerned the branded letters G. P. H.

"George Philip Hackney," interpreted the unbelievers with many smiles.