

Madame Griselda's Reviews: "The Willows" by Algernon Blackwood

Reviewed by Gabrielle Mochizuki, M.D.

My husband, Trevor, has a strong dislike of willow trees. He keeps telling me he wants to cut down this beautiful tree in our backyard. I ask him why, and he says it's messy and sends up shoots all over the place. Finally, the other day, I asked him what the real reason was, and he sheepishly admitted he had read a short story which made him nervous about willows—he says every time he looks at one he feels queasy. This is pretty strange, since he's not usually so imaginative; I mean he's been reading *Moby Dick* for ages, and other than singing a few sea chanties in the shower, he hasn't dressed up like Captain Ahab and gone looking for the whale. It's just not like him to have a story affect him that way. From his description, though, it sounded like something I should review for Madame Griselda while she's off investigating the Nazca Lines in Peru, so I loaded it onto my iPad and got going!

"The Willows," published in 1907, is by Algernon Blackwood. I've read quite a bit of his work, and he's one of my favorite spooky authors. As soon as I started reading it, I was reminded of another of his stories called "The Wendigo." Both of them are set in isolated natural spots, "The Wendigo" in the forests of Northern Canada, and "The Willows" in the shoals of the Danube River outside of Pressburg (Bratislava). They're both about men against the supernatural forces which lie hidden in awe inspiring secluded areas. (I say "men" because it's always men in his stories—I suppose you wouldn't find a woman stupid enough to go out into the wilderness where superpowerful otherworldly forces are at work.)

The story begins with two travelers out on a canoe trip along the river. The unnamed narrator describes the perils and beauties of the trip thus far and how they find themselves among a shoal of low, shifting sandy islets covered by willow bushes. They are delighted with the place; they've had a rollicking good adventure getting there, and they land their canoe on a large islet and begin happily setting up camp. The narrator describes it like this:

“ . . . at length we shot with a great sideways blow from the wind into a backwater and managed to beach the bows in a cloud of spray. Then we lay panting and laughing after our exertions on the hot yellow sand, sheltered from the wind, and in the full blaze of a scorching sun, a cloudless blue sky above, and an immense army of dancing shouting willow bushes, closing in from all sides, shining with spray and clapping their thousand little hands as though to applaud the success of our efforts.”

Little does he know . . .

Soon it becomes apparent that there is more to the island than meets the eye. First there is a strong, incessant gale. Then they see a black shape floating in the water that looks like a dead body. Finally, a single flat bottomed boat passes by at a distance, its lone occupant a peasant shouting incoherently at them and making the sign of the cross like crazy. The narrator becomes impressed with a sense that something is wrong:

“Yet this novel emotion had nothing to do with the wind. Indeed , so vague was the sense of distress I experienced that it was impossible to trace it to its source and deal with it

accordingly, though I was aware somehow that it had to do with my realization of our utter insignificance before this unrestrained power of the elements about me. The huge-grown river had something to do with it too—a vague, unpleasant idea that we had somehow trifled with these great elemental forces in whose in whose power we lay helpless every hour of the day and night. For here, indeed, they were gigantically at play together, and the sight appealed to the imagination.”

Uh-huh . . .

The travelers spend a restless night on the island, the narrator more and more consumed with dread. He thinks that the willow bushes have moved closer to their tent during the night. And a series of mysterious funnel shaped depressions in the sand leaves him shaking. Worse, his companion discovers that a hole has been sliced in the bottom of their canoe and that their steering paddle is missing. They will have to spend another night in that place!

(Personally, I think if you’re traveling in a flimsy canoe to a mysterious island, you’re just asking to have a hole cut in it and your paddles stolen. *I* would have borrowed Madame Griselda’s steam launch—much studier!)

The willow bushes are a constant presence, seeming to take on attributes of motile, sentient beings over the course of the story. So what seems lively and delightful in the play of their leaves in the wind becomes more and more sinister.

There is never any question of other humans working against the protagonists in "The Willows." There is always an otherworldly, dreaded force, something which the narrator and his practical friend at first dismiss and then gradually become subsumed by. What they see could be tricks of the eye, but it becomes increasingly obvious that they have come to a place where which the narrator describes as:

“. . . a spot held by the dwellers in some outer space, a sort of peep-hole whence they could spy upon the earth, themselves unseen, a point where the veil had worn a little thin. As the final result of too long a sojourn here, we should be carried over the border and deprived of what we called "our lives," yet by mental, not physical processes."

So will our heroes make it off the island? Who made the depressions in the sand? And what was that shape in the water? I found the answers both surprising and disturbing. I'm beginning to think Trevor may be right about removing the tree in the backyard!

Blackwood was a premier British author of what were then called "weird tales." H.P. Lovecraft, another weird writer (and I use the term in both senses of the word) lauded him in his study *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Blackwood's primary interest was less in writing graphic dreadfuls of blood and guts and more of expressing the dangers of tampering with the unseen forces that lie outside the normal range of human experience. You can see this interest quite clearly in "The Willows," which I feel is one of the best "weird stories" that I have ever read.

Wilson/Review of “The Willows”/5

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