

The Werewolf

William Faulkner

Introduction by Dean Faulkner Wells

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Dean Faulkner Wells, who has put down here William Faulkner’s ghost story “The Werewolf” as he told it to her and her cousin Jill (Mr. Bill’s daughter) and her cousin Vicki and the other children of Oxford, is Mr. Bill’s niece. She was named after her father Dean, who was Mr. Bill’s youngest and favorite brother. Ten years separated the two brothers, but they were very close and enjoyed one another’s company in many moods and moments. Dean Swift Faulkner was killed in an airplane crash when he was only twenty-eight.

His daughter, Dean, describes Rowan Oak, and the “Pappy” of her childhood, with a rare eye, and with the Faulkner care and genius for words, and with the emotion of love. Rowan Oak today remains just as she pictures it—beautiful and serene in the daylight hours, full of dancing shadows and ghostly imaginings at night. Every afternoon I take my big black dog Pete there for his run. Once we found ourselves on the grounds in a wintry twilight. Suddenly, quick as could be, it became dark and forbidding; the magnolias seemed grotesque monsters, and strange sounds rustled in the darkness. Pete, who usually fears nothing, quickened his steps toward the front gate, and then so did I—an adult man and an adult dog getting out of there fast.

Many people have the impression that Mr. Bill was an aloof presence. He put up a PRIVATE sign in his driveway to discourage curious visitors who came to Oxford to have a glimpse of him. But he loved children, and they felt free to play at Rowan Oak whenever they liked and often asked him to tell a story. This was their privilege, because he was their friend.

Dean Faulkner Wells has recaptured the sorcery of her uncle’s story-telling, and the mood and texture of those vanished moments when he told it.

—Willie Morris

The house stands far off Old Taylor Road in Oxford, Mississippi, hidden behind long rows of tall cedar trees. The driveway which leads up to the house is dirt, marred by deep ruts and holes; and on each side grow tangled brambles of honeysuckle and blackberry thickets. The house cannot be seen from the street, but at the end of the driveway, it looms big, and white, and beautiful. It looks as if it has been there forever, its two story wooden frame rising so high that the second story balcony looks into the very tops of the cedar trees.

In daylight, you would love this house. Sunshine streams through the tall windows into the large, airy, high-ceilinged rooms which offer plenty of places to play. There is ample space on the front parlor rug for a dozen children to sit cross-legged in a circle and play card games like “Spit” and “Spoons”; there is an open fireplace in the library, large bedrooms upstairs for spend-the-night parties, secluded places to sit and read and think. The grounds surrounding the house are paradise: the croquet wickets stay in place from late spring until school starts in the fall; a ping-pong table stands under the porte-cochère; in the front yard wild grapevines, some of them as thick as a man’s arm, trail from the tops of the magnolia trees to the ground, providing natural swings. The tall trees and sand gulleys in the uncleared acres that border the house lend themselves to endless Saturday outdoor games—“kick the can” and “capture the flag”—and there are secret mossy glades for a noon meal of Indian cornbread cooked in a black iron skillet over a small campfire.

The house is called Rowan Oak. Pappy, the last owner of the house, gave it this name. He knew the Scottish legend about the magic of the rowan tree, and he believed in its powers, which are that a branch of the rowan tree nailed to the barn door will ward off ghosts and witches and evil spirits. Even though no rowan trees grew on his property, he named his house after the magic tree.

Most of the time, the name alone is enough to guarantee peace and security to all those who live at Rowan Oak. But sometimes, when foxfire dances in the deep woods around the house, when fog swirls around the trunks of the tall cedar trees, when the old house groans in the wind and a loose shutter bangs with a lonely sound, the spell of the rowan tree is not strong enough. It seems then that in the darkness the spirits roam the grounds at will, moving about in the lonely moonlight. And some nights, when the wind is high and an owl calls from the dead oak tree close to the house, and hounds bay at the full moon far off in the woods, you can hear the ghosts of the dead straining at the windows and doors to get inside.

Everything is fine at Rowan Oak, however, as long as it is daylight. When the sun is shining, the walk up the long driveway from the gate to the house is pleasant. The cedars smell good, the packed dirt underfoot feels good, and the sunlight makes dappled, yellow patterns through the leaves onto the grass. But when it starts to get dark, everything changes.

Pappy knew the French phrase for that time of day, for twilight, the brief moments in each day when golden sunlight gives way to red and purple and blue, and the shadows grow long, and darkness is soon at hand, when in the dusk it is difficult to tell the difference between a dog and a wolf. They call it le temps entre chien et loup—the time between dog and wolf, the time of day when all that is natural and familiar and safe changes quickly into the unnatural, the strange, the frightening. Twilight never lasts long at Rowan Oak. The large magnolia trees that grow west of the driveway shut out the sun's rays, and the forbidding shadows lengthen until, all too soon, the driveway is in total darkness.

If you were growing up in Oxford, Mississippi, each time you spent the night at Rowan Oak you would beg Pappy to tell ghost stories, especially on Halloween, because this was the night that the Druids had gathered together in England centuries before, their blue painted faces eerie in the light of bonfires as they danced and howled, beat sticks and drums to keep the spirits of the dead underground. You would come in costume, arriving early to escape the long walk down the driveway after dark. As the sun set, no lights were turned on in the house, so that in the coming darkness, it loomed with an unearthly whiteness. The only lights came from candles placed inside two large jack-o'-lanterns sitting on either side of the front steps.

On this night of the supernatural, Pappy would sit on the steps with you and the other costumed children clustered around him, all eyes wide in the flickering candlelight. He seemed to belong outdoors. His skin was weathered, tan, and slightly wrinkled; and he smelled of horses and leather, cedars and sunshine, pipe tobacco and bourbon. His eyes were brown, so dark that they seemed black, and the fine lines around them were traced by smiles and sadness. His hair was gray, cropped close to his head, his small mouth nearly hidden beneath his mustache. Even on the steps he sat very straight, his shoulders squared, his legs crossed. His hands were still, except for the occasional, deliberate movements of his pipe, when he tapped it against the steps. His voice was low and soft, and he spoke rapidly, so that you would strain to catch his words, even though you knew the story almost as well

as he. You would be drawn to him by the sound of his voice as much as by the magic of his tale.

Sometimes in summertime and in the early fall, you would have gone to Rowan Oak to join the other children that Pappy gathered for hayrides. When you got there, the wagon bed would be filled with hay, and you would scramble up eagerly, ready for the long ride, the bonfire, the picnic supper, and the stories. You would be perfectly content to be on your way, as the wagon rolled down the soft, sandy, rutted road, the sounds of the mules' hooves pacing off your progress. You would listen as Pappy pointed out the constellations. "Look to your right," he would say, "and just about one index finger above the horizon you'll see Orion." Then he would tell you about Halley's comet and other stories of the stars.

Usually the ride took about forty-five minutes. The wagon would creak along over a long, sloping hill, and as it reached the bottom, Pappy would say, "This looks like a good place!" Andrew would drive the team into a clearing, and everybody would pile out of the wagon. Before you could scatter to explore the dark woods, Pappy would have you gathering small sticks for kindling, while the big boys would drag in heavy branches from fallen trees. Soon, a bonfire blazed in the night, lighting your way to find the long, thin, pointed sticks for roasting wieners.

After the picnic, when the fire burned low and everything became quiet, you would watch the red sparks bursting out of the coals and drifting upward like tiny red stars. The only sounds would be the crackling of the logs, the last, harsh cries of the katydids and the nightbirds. Then, when stomachs were full, when feet and knees were warmed by the fire, it would be time for Pappy to tell a story.

The Werewolf

Faulkner's voice:

In a small village in England, the train station was the focal point of the surrounding countryside, the village's lifeline to civilization. The station itself was a tiny, one-room brick building with four windows and a door that faced the tracks.

In the center of the room was a black, pot-bellied stove. Trains came through only twice a day, once at noon and again at four o'clock in the morning.

A young man left London one fall afternoon and traveled to this remote village to see an aging aunt who was sick. Although he had not seen her in years, she was his only living relative and he felt an obligation to make the trip. He had boarded the train in Victoria Station early in the evening and had ridden most of the night, slightly bored and restless at the seemingly endless journey.

The farther he traveled away from London, the more desolate the countryside and the intermittent villages became. When he finally reached his destination a few hours before dawn, he was the only passenger to get off the train at this lonely, forbidding stop. He expected someone, a friend of his aunt's perhaps, to fetch him. The village was at least two miles away, he remembered, accessible only by a rough and unclearly marked path. The thought of undertaking this trek alone in the dark, even though the moon was full, was no more tempting than the thought of entering the black and empty station. A vague feeling of uneasiness crept over him, as he paced back and forth on the deserted platform, trying to decide whether to strike out on his own for his aunt's house or to wait there and hope someone came for him. As he stood staring impatiently into the blackness, clouds rolled in, and along with them came the chilling wind and the roiling clouds of fog so dense, so thick, that the full moon which hung over the horizon was quickly obscured.

The young man looked around outside the deserted station, hoping to find an attendant. No one was in sight. From the high ridge on which the station was built, he looked down into the shrouded valley and wondered at its darkness—why, even so late in the night, there should not be a single light gleaming through the fog from a single cottage. Suddenly at his feet a pattern of light fell. A lamp had been lit by unseen hands. Someone was inside the station.

“How nice,” he thought. The night had grown colder now, and he shivered inside his greatcoat. A fire would be fine, and company, while he waited, would make the hours until dawn—or until someone came for him—go faster. He turned and walked into the station. A fire was blazing in the stove, which was so hot that the iron door glowed red. A man sat near the stove. His face was dark, his head bowed so that his thick, curly hair shone in the firelight.

“Good evening, good sir!” the young man said, coming to the stove and stretching his hands toward its warmth. “I'm glad to have company on a night like this.”

The man said nothing. He sat with his heels drawn up beneath the bench, his long forearms and abnormally large hands draped on his knees. "Perhaps he's deaf," the young man thought.

"Good evening!" he said, louder this time. There was still no response. He took a long, appraising glance at the rough, homespun clothes of a woodsman, at the man's rawboned frame; then he moved away, to the far side of the room, and thought that perhaps this fellow might be willing to talk later, or perhaps it wouldn't matter anyway. Somebody would be along soon to take him to his destination.

He settled himself onto a bench under the lamp which hung from a hook on the wall, brought out the newspaper which he already had read twice on the train, and buried himself behind its pages. He found a story that he had missed in his first and second readings and was soon absorbed. A husky, deep voice startled him.

"We've had trouble around these parts. Do you read about it there in your paper?" The woodsman stood up slowly by the stove and stretched himself as though awakening from sleep. The young traveler became aware, with a sudden curiosity, of the man's huge body. His powerful shoulders sloped forward, his arms swung almost to the floor; and, although he had tried momentarily to pull himself erect, his upper torso still leaned forward, bent slightly at the waist. The young man pitied the backwoodsman, who—he imagined—must have grown this way from years of back-breaking labor, or perhaps more likely, as so often happened in remote districts such as this, he had been misshapen at birth, an occasion no doubt unattended by a midwife, much less a physician.

"There doesn't seem to be any news in here about this area," the young man answered. His eyes on the newsprint, he was startled by the sudden shadow that fell over the open pages of his newspaper. Somehow, in spite of the woodsman's hulking form and heavy boots, he had crossed the room with a silent quickness that seemed impossible to the young man. He wondered how the bent and gnarled figure—or any human being, for that matter—could move with such stealth and grace.

The young man recoiled, sliding down the bench, putting distance between him and the strange man, who was beginning to make him feel very uncomfortable. He got up and moved quickly to the window. The room seemed much smaller than it had, moments before.

Struggling briefly with the rusted catch on the window, the young man forced the window open. The wind had risen. He could hear the trees bending before it with creaks and groans. The clouds scudded across the face of the full moon.

“It’s getting warm in here,” he said over his shoulder. As he turned, the cold wind that rushed into the room extinguished the flickering lamp by the door. In the semi-darkness, lit now by the glow from the fire, he felt himself quite alone. “Could he have gone?” he thought. “Slipped out the door while my back was turned? What a strange creature he is.”

As his eyes searched the darkness, he heard a low, guttural sound that chilled his bones. “Where are you!” he exclaimed, his voice rising in panic. “Are you here?” He stepped backward, bracing his shoulders against the wall. “Speak up, man!”

“Should’ve been in the paper,” the deep, husky voice spoke from the darkness. “Look down in to the village.”

Unwilling to turn his back on this frightening presence, the young man twisted his head to look out the window. Moonlight suddenly flooded the station, and the railroad tracks gleamed white; but no lights could be seen in the distant village. It was getting close to dawn, he reasoned, and lamps should have been lit on some of the farmers’ cottages. He stared into the dark valley below. The village seemed to have vanished.

“Where is it?” he asked of the woodsman. “It can’t have disappeared.”

“They’re there, all right,” came the reply from the darkness. “They’re there behind barred doors and shuttered windows. At least, the women and their little ones. Their menfolk are climbin’ the hills, didn’t you hear ’em? They left by the north road, over fifty of ’em, just after you got here.”

“What extraordinary hearing!” the young man thought in amazement. The other voice continued.

“They been waitin’ for this night, they have, for a month or more. They think they’ll get him this time.”

“Get who?” the young man exclaimed.

“First it was just a few sheep,” the woodsman said, as if the young man had not spoken. “Then a few head of cattle. They said it was a wolf. The throats of the beasts was torn, the marks was right. It looked, indeed, like a wolf gone mad, separated from his pack. Then they found the shepherd boy in the hills above his father’s cottage. He’d gone out that night to recover a lost sheep, could hear it bleatin’ in the distance. He carried his staff and his father’s huntin’ knife. The moon was full. He had small trouble findin’ his way. The sounds of the cryin’ lamb led him to a high, open place in the pines. The sheep was down. The black wolf was at its throat. Whilst the boy watched, the cries stopped. The boy stood still, gatherin’ his courage. The wolf turned to him. It started circlin’ the boy. When he raised his staff, the wolf was upon him. He had not the time to cry out.”

The young man still could not see the craggy face behind the voice. He had the chilling sense that, in the shadows, the woodsman had begun to pace back and forth, unseen, without making a sound. The voice continued.

“They had thirty days grace from the wolf’s attacks. Then at the next full moon, it struck again, this time much closer to the village. There have been four since that time—the old couple on the road after dark; the young woman, fetchin’ water from the stream behind her cottage. And the doctor, tendin’ the sick. The horse brought him home lyin’ in the bottom of the carriage, his throat torn like the rest. But the wolf had not fed on him or any of the others, not even the sheep. Now the men of the village go out every full moon, armed with their guns and axes ... lookin’”

“Though they’ve hit him with their bullets, they failed to bring him down, but they think they’ll get him tonight. They’ve seen his tracks, they say.”

“Then why don’t they send for outside help?” the young man demanded. “Why don’t they organize a constabulary force?”

“Because they know who they’re lookin’ for.” The voice moved closer to the young man. “They know what they be after. They got his print, and they know what kind of wolf he is. The print is always the same, you see. He’s missin’ a joint on his right front paw. They’ve made their preparations. Their guns are loaded special. But they may not get him in time.”

At his back the young man thought he heard something move outside the window. He turned to shut it, suddenly relieved to be inside, reassured that he was not alone. The woodsman might be strange, but he was certainly of a size to protect them both from what prowled outside in the darkness. He thought he heard a soft rustling of leaves outside the window, as if a large animal was stealing close. In his sudden terror he had wrenched the window in its tracks so that it became jammed.

“Help me!” he cried. He felt his arms weaken from fear. His mind conjured up the image of a huge wolf hurtling its bulk at him through the window, its teeth and claws bared, half-man, half-beast, “Help me!”

A form loomed up over him. Hands grasped the window and forced it down. Breath came hot against his neck. He stared with horror at the hand beside his own. The first joint of the right index finger was missing.

When Pappy stopped talking, you and the other children around the fire would remain silent and still. You couldn't help feeling the wolf at your back. A log would crackle loudly, and, as if he knew that you could not stand much more, Pappy would suggest that everyone put out the fire, get back into the wagon, and head for home. As always, he would make you clear the campsite so thoroughly that, when the wagon rolled toward home, except for the blackened pieces of firewood, nothing was left lying in the empty field to show that anyone had been there at all.