

“The Wind in the Woods”

By Bessie Kyffin-Taylor

To say I was an artist would be giving myself too high-sounding a name, yet my days were spent in trying, and at times succeeding, in depicting scenes as I saw them—not people! I never attempted portraits, for the expression on human faces more often irritated me, than interested—every nine out of ten wore such a worried, harassed look, as if, in the race for gain, or pleasure, they had lost sight of all things conducive to rest or repose; I had no wish to paint such things, nor did I wish them to come and pose in their best garments, with a smile such as one and all would, I knew, adopt.

Fortunately for me, I was not dependent upon my efforts with brush and pencil, though I confess I made quite a nice income by them; but it was always joy to me to remember, if I did not want to paint, I need not, for my meals were forthcoming, whether I made the price of them or not.

I was the owner of a charming flat in London. This was my anchorage, and here I was looked after and cared for by an old family servant, a woman well on in years, who had been for long years a faithful friend and servant in my family, and now, in her later years, had constituted herself my factotum, ruling my small domain, and incidentally myself, with a firm hand, never by any chance seeming to realize that I really was grown up, but bestowing the same thought upon the changing of my socks on a wet day as she had done when I was nine or ten. Her name was “Merry”—Mrs. Merry. As children, we had all adored her; as a middle-aged man, I respected and looked up to her, glad to ask and take her wise advice on many issues of the day.

Mrs. Merry was well used to my vagabondish ways, though at times she was wont to say I should be much happier if I married and settled down! I always laughed at her, for my only love-story was buried fathoms deep in the dust-heap of forgotten things; and the very words “settle down” sent a cold shiver down my spine—it, the “settling down” process, would mean a wholesale giving up of all those ways I held so dear. No more sudden trêkngs at a moment’s notice, or coming home any day or any hour, as sure of welcome as I was sure of being safe from questions as to my doings. Mrs. Merry *never* questioned, though she was always delighted when told where I had been, or what I had done. Sometimes I had sketches to show to her, but as often I had none; in either case, she was convinced of my talent and ability, and her faith and loyalty never wavered.

It was early in July when a sudden desire for trees, rivers, and growing things caused me to drop the work I was on, call Mrs. Merry, and request a small Gladstone bag should be packed as quickly as possible, that I was going away. The old lady looked at me keenly, remarking—

“You don’t look-ill!”

I laughed.

“Nor am I,” I said; “but it is hot in the town; also, I feel as if I must see trees instead, of people for a while.”

“That will mean strong boots and knickers, I suppose, sir?” was her next remark.

“Yes, Merry, dear, it will; also plenty of pipes, baccy, books, and a stick. I may paint, or I may not; in any case, expect me back a month from to-morrow, for sure, unless I send you word; and if you don’t hear, why then,” I added, laughing—“some one had better begin to look for me.”

“I do wish you would settle down, Mr. Wilfred,” was the old dame’s parting shot, as she went out to do my behests.

Settle down, I mused, filling a much-used old briar, never, now, though my thoughts went back to those days of joy, when I and a sweet-faced girl with dark eyes and a little fair head just reaching to my shoulder, talked in, twilight hours of a home that was to be. If she had passed to the “Great Beyond,” I could have borne it better than the tale of treachery and cunning, which ended in my dark-eyed love leaving me on the morning, which should have been my wedding-day, merely announcing, by wire, that she had married my best chum, Kirk Compton, in London, that morning.

Trouble of that kind takes one of two lines, it either sends a man, or woman, to the bad—that is, to drink, gambling—anything of a wild, riotous kind of existence to, as they think, help them to forget—or it sends them into themselves, to more or less live a life of solitude, finding companionship in books or hobbies, fearful of making friends, lest they, too, should prove unfaithful; one’s faith in goodness shattered, it is years, if ever, before one comes into one’s own, realizing that there is infinitely more in life than the shallow so-called love of one girl. And so, as I was not addicted to drink or cards, I became a recluse, or almost. I had a few friends, was voted a good chap, but a cynic, and gradually left to my own devices. I was happy as the years went on, finding my books and work all sufficient, while my fervent love of nature proved the healing of my sore, and I was content.

July 20th stared me in the face from a large lettered calendar, as I woke for my early cup of tea, on the day I was starting for a whole month, somewhere in Wales.

There is not any object in making a mystery of my destination, except the small fact that my chosen haunt was a very well-known district, within only an hour’s journey from a large manufacturing town; therefore, it is possible that there are people who might recognise and locate the district if I gave more than a mere hint of its place on the map. It has been for years a very favourite corner of mine; the hills which surround it are not so high as to be unclimbable, they are heather clad, though here and there one came upon an oasis of spongy turf and golden bracken—what I call, in my own mind, “kind hills”—high enough to lift one up from life’s little worries, but not high enough to be awe-inspiring, or to frown down upon us puny mortals. The rivers are fishable after rain, otherwise one can inspect the stones, which form the beds of these mountain streams, and decide among the dry stones which place might best conceal a trout, when the next rain comes; personally, I am quite willing to believe that once there were fish in plenty in the stream, but that lean years had driven the farm folks to catch them the best way they could.

Perhaps the chief beauty of the place lay in the charm of its many and varied woods—at least, this was to me the magnet which drew me here generally once or twice in a year.

Up on the hillsides the woods seemed to open out, one into another, ever revealing fresh beauties of trees, from the tender green of the sappling birch to the hoary old beech or oak of many years old; beneath their green arms, the ground was carpeted with soft tiny wild thyme, wild mint, and little flowers of many kinds whose names were unknown to me. Most of my hours were spent deep in the heart of these woods, which never failed to hold me entranced with their ever-varying lights and shades.

Below, nearer to the river, there were woods also, but of quite a different nature, there, high pine trees of sombre hue towered above you, each one seeming to say: “Let me stretch up to the blue sky and leave the gloom of this wood beneath me.” For gloom there undoubtedly was, yet I have liked that gloom; sometimes, on a hot summer’s day, I have enjoyed lying on a soft, dry heap of pine needles, listening to the gentle coo of wood-pigeons, nesting high above me. “Silent

Wood,” as I called it, was always sheltered from wind, for the pine trees were close together, and beyond a soft sighing wind in the tree tops I never remember feeling the wind from any quarter. The sunlight seldom penetrated the “Silent Wood,” save only in single shafts between the pines, or, maybe, in some clear patch where a tree had fallen or been cut down; but, even lacking sunshine, it was always warm and dry.

One side of the wood was bounded by a path, the other side by the stream—at least in autumn and winter it was—for in summer it dried up or trickled away to re-appear a mile or so further on, as if it had tumbled into some old mine shaft; and later, changed its course and returned.

“Silent Wood” was *not* my favourite, but it had a fascination for me, difficult to describe; and on this July morning, when I bid farewell to dear old Merry, and started for my holiday, “Silent Wood” was much in my mind as a quiet place to rest in, before I tackled longer, steeper walks, or began to think of taking canvas and paints with me.

My journey was long, also suffocatingly hot, dusty, and tedious; many people were travelling, and my compartment was well packed with bundles and packages, as well as people, so I hailed my last change with a sigh of relief, for soon the hills and trees would surround me instead of the bricks and mortar I had grown so tired of.

A broken-down trap, drawn by a fat Welsh pony, met me at my station; from thence we crawled up four long miles of hill ere I reached my favourite quarters, an old farmhouse in which I was always a welcome guest, and where two cheery rooms were always at my disposal. The peacefulness of that first evening will linger in my memory for many a day. To be able to gaze around, seeing nothing but hills, fields, trees, and sky, instead of houses, chimneys, motors, and people, was pure joy to me; when, after a simple meal, I lit my pipe, I felt intent to linger in the warm, hay-scented air indefinitely.

There are those to whom the contemplation of such a holiday, as the one I thought lay before me, would have been a dire penalty, those to whom solitude and nature would spell boredom and weariness; and I pity all those natures, for they know not what they miss.

I passed a gloriously restful night, and was up early, with a long day of golden sunshine ahead of me. I had never been here in July before, early spring or September had been my usual seasons; but to be here in July, in radiant warmth and beauty, was a treat I was prepared to revel in.

Day by day slipped away, in almost complete idleness, until a week had vanished, almost unnoticed by me, for calendars had been left behind me, and I, more often than not, forgot to wind up my watch—I had no use for time. I ate when I felt hungry, and slept when I was tired; but the end of this week found me thinking of brush and canvas, so I decided to take lunch in my pocket, trusting to luck for some tea if I desired it, and prepared for a long day’s sketching.

“Which way do you think of going, sir?” asked my hostess, more, I fancy, from politeness than from any real interest in my goings and comings.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I answered, “but probably I shall wander to the woods.”

“Which, sir?” she next enquired, a little to my surprise.

“Probably the shadiest,” I replied, smiling, “the one below with the pine trees, and silence, is the one I most fancy to-day.”

“The higher woods are nicer, sir, don’t you think?” was her next remark.

“No, I don’t,” I said. “I like the pine woods, they are always so intensely silent; one never feels any wind there, and there is a breeze to-day.”

“That is true, sir,” said Mrs. Hughes. “There isn’t any wind there—as a *rule*.”

“As a rule?” I echoed. “Why, I’ve never felt it there, not even in autumn.”

“No, sir, you wouldn’t then, but you may now; and I’d go to the upper woods if I were you.”

Now Mrs. Hughes had never, to my knowledge, taken the slightest interest in my doings previously, and her persistence this morning simply had the effect of making me feel perverse, as is the way of men; so, smilingly, I bade her good morning, determined, in my own mind, that “Silent Wood” should be my destination for that day. The good lady ventured no further remarks, but turned away to busy herself with farm duties, leaving me to set off without further questioning.

There was a slight breeze, just enough to make walking more pleasant, but rather more than I liked for sketching purposes, so I was glad when I dipped down from the path by the river-side to the edge of my pet woods. They were, as ever, still, dark, and airless, just as I had pictured them many, many times as I smoked my pipe beside my studio fire while busy London surged on, beneath my windows.

In those woods, I have always felt as if I must tread softly. I do not remember ever to have sung or whistled there; yet, there was never anything to disturb, for I have never seen even a rabbit, it seemed too sombre a place for animal life; moreover, there was nothing but dry pine needles for them to eat. I don’t remember ever *seeing* the wood-pigeons I occasionally heard above my head; so, lacking animal life, the place was even more silent than deep woods usually are.

It suited me in my present mood, however, and in the intense silence lay its greatest charm. Somewhere in the world there are a few kindred spirits, I have no doubt, to whom such perfect silence and freedom from every jar would appeal, as it appeals to me—those who often crave for just one hour’s unbroken silence, and who find it one of the most difficult things to attain; those to whom the incessant opening and shutting of doors, clattering of things, ringing of bells, voices, and the coming and going of people have to be endured with a smile, though every nerve may be on edge, and the aching for quietness is almost—more than can be borne—those people, and those only, will enter into and; fully understand the intense charm to me of “Silent Wood.”

I entered it, as usual, on this morning as on many previous ones, walking softly as if not wanting to disturb its peace by so much as a snap of a dry twig, and as I walked deeper and deeper into the shadows it seemed to grow stiller and more silent. The scent of the pines was soothing, and the warm, dry air seemed to draw it out and intensify it.

About the centre of the wood I paused to look and. Listen. Not a sound broke the stillness, save only the faintest cooing of the wood-pigeons; so there, in the patch of sunlight, I drew together heaps of pine needles to form a couch, stretching myself on it in complete enjoyment, canvas and brushes idle by my side.

The natural outcome of such an environment and such quiet calm was to fall soundly asleep—a glorious, restful sleep—knowing that there could not be any early knocking at my door, no engagements to keep, nothing, no one for whom I need wake until I had slept all I desired. I woke at long length, with the softest of breezes blowing gently on my face; so softly as to make me wonder, in my half-asleep state, if it also were part of my dreams; but no! there it was again, soft and cold, and this time a little stronger. I opened my eyes. Surely it must be night! I thought. How many hours had I slept? It seemed dark, yet high up between the pine-tree tops I could catch a glimpse of blue sky. Then it is not late, I thought, but how dark it is here under the trees. I must see the time, and shake myself into a more reasonable state of mind, for, truly, I feel almost nery! So my thoughts ran as I raised myself from my pine-needle couch, and stood up.

I glanced round and could scarcely believe it was my beloved “Silent Wood,” it seemed so chill and dark, not the soft gloom I was accustomed to there, but an eerie darkness as of a

gathering storm; but ever and anon a little moaning wind swept past me, each just seeming more chill and dank.

“Horrible!” I murmured, fastening up my coat before preparing to pick up my little knapsack of odds and ends, “horrible! I never thought the place could be so chilly; I’ll get out as speedily as I can for it must be late.”

I peered at my watch, which was difficult to see in the gloom, to find I had, as usual, forgotten to wind it.

“It is probably about four!” I said aloud, “but it’s like night!”

I spoke aloud, and my voice seemed to come back to me in mocking echo from the far side of the wood, “like night”

“I never knew there was an echo,” I thought. “I’ll try again to-morrow,” I said clearly, and back from the distance came the echo—“to-morrow”—and a hoarse laugh came with it.

I started, I had not laughed! Then, who?

“Oh, you idiot,” I murmured, giving myself a shake, “it’s some country yokel answering you back, making a fool of you; pull yourself together and get off home—you require your tea.”

So, with a last look round, I turned my face towards home, and tea, but my feet seemed weighted, and seemed as if I could not leave the wood, eager as I was to reach the daylight.

I seemed to have already dragged myself double the distance I had to go ere I found myself at the edge of the wood, shivering in every limb, chilled to the bone, unnerved, as I could not believe possible, over—nothing at all! In the warmth of the sun I speedily recovered, and was ready to laugh at my own stupidity; to prove this to my own satisfaction, I gaily shook my fist at the woods behind me, calling back—“to-morrow,” and, far away in the distant darkness, I fancied—for it could only have been fancy—I heard a mocking echo and a faint sound of laughter, as if the word “to-morrow” floated back to me; fancy or not, it served to hasten my steps, and the farm kitchen with its cheery tea-table, which I hurried to reach, quickly dispelled any lingering fear I might have felt.

For the first time, since my holiday began, I passed a restless night, burdened, when I slept at all, by dreams of mocking voice and laughter. My first thought on waking was one of dire vengeance, on some one, for causing me to lose a night’s precious sleep. I would repay them, I vowed, as I sprang up, preparing to dress as rapidly as possible.

“Will you be in, sir, for lunch, or will you take it out?” asked my hostess as soon as I had finished a wonderful breakfast of home-cured ham, fresh eggs, scones, and home-made jam.

“I will take it out, please, Mrs. Hughes,” I replied. “Some of that fine ham, and some bread and butter, if you will be so good. Don’t make it into those abominations called sandwiches though, it would utterly spoil both bread and ham. I never can enjoy food done up in that way, the bread tastes of ham and the ham only tastes of bread, and both are dry and worn out by the time you want your lunch; so separately, please—if you love me.”

Mrs. Hughes eyed me as if uncertain whether to laugh or scold at what she termed my oddities—the laugh triumphed, and she went off chuckling over the ways of faddy men-folks. Presently, the good lady reappeared with a neat parcel, which she handed to me, with the remark—

“There you are, sir, *separately*, and I hope you will enjoy your lunch. Which way will you be going, sir?”

So again my destination seemed to be of interest to the worthy dame, but this time I wasn’t going to let her off so easily.

“Why do you ask, Mrs. Hughes?” I enquired.

“Well, sir, it’s Tommy, it’s Tommy,” she said hesitatingly. “Seems like the lad likes to be on the look-out for you, sir, and always pesters me to say which way you’ve gone, sir.

As the good lady was speaking she edged nearer and nearer the door, and her final words were uttered as the door closed between her and myself, leaving me looking rather blankly at the door, and quite unable to reconcile Tommy’s present anxiety as to my whereabouts, seeing the lad had not apparently noticed my existence up to now.

However, they were none the wiser—no one, save myself, know whither I was bound, and if I changed my mind, no one would know, or care.

I debated a few moments as to whether to burden myself with sketching materials or not, and, finally, a happy thought struck me, I would take my kodak, it was ready loaded with new and highly-sensitive films, so, if I liked, I could take special bits and later, if I wished, sketch or enlarge from them in the quiet of my studio. So with my camera on my shoulder, my lunch in a handy pocket, I set off, prepared for another happy peaceful day in “Silent Wood.” Yet now I had started, I wondered if it really would give me the pleasure I had anticipated to fulfil my vow of vengeance on Him, Her, or It, who had mocked me the previous day. I was *quite* determined, on one point, that I would discover the hiding place of my mocking friend, and rid myself of the disturber of my sanctuary. To begin with I would not enter the woods by my usual path, I had a fancy to inspect the far side of it, which was as yet unknown to me, and which I had often thought of exploring, but so far had been too lazy to do so; it had been sufficient for me to get into the still warmth, and there to stay—resting, dreaming, or reading; but to-day I felt energetic, braced up, ready for anything, so instead of taking the lower path by the river to the woods, I struck off higher up, crossed a few fields and some tiresome fences, heavily loaded with barbed wire as if to keep out some invading enemy and not the three or four cows it guarded. My plan had led me higher than the woods, which now lay stretched below me in a triangle, thick and dense, possibly half-a-mile in length, not more, I shouldn’t think; looked at from where I stood it appeared quite an insignificant patch of dark trees surrounded by fields of waving corn, or haycocks, late in being carted home. Here and there, men and women were working in the fields; I could hear a reaper busy somewhere, and voices of children at play sounded clearly in the distance.

It was gloriously sunny, not a breath of wind stirred the leaves or grasses, yet, in spite of its beauty and brilliance, the dark trees lying below seemed to call me. I could see the waving branches of the pine trees, as if they were arms beckoning me to come, to rest in their shade. I knew I had to go; I knew in my heart I wanted to go, yet I lingered, drinking in the beauty of fields and sunshine as I strolled along, until, descending gradually, I found myself near the edge of the woods, at exactly the opposite corner from my usual point of entrance.

One more fence, a thick one of briars, thorns, and undergrowth, and I was in my beloved woods. It wasn’t quite so dark on this side as the other, let it felt more desolate, more cheerless somehow, possibly fewer people came this way, which might account for it; anyway, here I was, and now to explore. First, I quietly skirted the wood for a little way, but this proved uninteresting, so I struck in under the pines, and almost at once was conscious again of the warm scenty feeling of the air.

“Glorious,” I murmured; “how peaceful, how still, but I will not rest yet, I want to look round first.” Presently, I caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a building. Funny place for a house, I thought; I wonder if anyone lives there, if so, my friend of the mocking laughter is now unearthed; so, with a smile at my own smartness, I marched on until I reached the building, at least what I thought was a building—now, alas! a ruin. Two ends and one side were almost

intact, the rest, except one chimney, was just piles of rough, grey stones. It had every appearance of having been deserted many years, for the tumbled-down stones were moss-grown, with here and there little ferns protruding between the crevices; the spot must once have been a lonely corner, though now it looked utter desolation.

Laying my camera and lunch down, I strolled to have a nearer inspection of the lonely ruin before I sat down. There was not any trace to be found of how many rooms the cottage had once contained, though probably three or four was the limit; what must once have been a fire-place faced me as I entered, and on one side, about two yards from the ground, were five stone stairs; evidently there had been a stone staircase or steps leading to an upper room or rooms; though no sign of any floor above remained now. I couldn't imagine a stone house falling to pieces so completely, it gave one the impression more of having been hurled down stone after stone, nothing else would have demolished it so utterly.

There being nothing more to inspect, I strolled back to my belongings, but the sight of my camera reminded me that, after all, I could get a picture of so battered a domicile without the fag of sketching it; it would be interesting, I thought, to have a photograph of those five curious stone steps, and battered walls, so I quickly found my focus, taking the picture from a little distance to get a big pine in as well. It was a curious tree, at least half of it had apparently been shattered at some time. I then went closer, focussing for the stone steps only. It was shady within the walls so I gave a little longer time, and hoped for success, though I felt sorry I had not even yet succeeded in getting exactly the point of view I wanted. I had one film left; I would wait until the sun lit up the far side, and would take that also. That was enough for now, and I had earned both lunch and rest.

Somehow, my moss cushion did not give me the comfort I liked, though to try to say why, was beyond me, apparently it left nothing to be desired, my back was against a pine as I faced the deeper shade the woods in front of me. There was not any wind to disturb me, and no sound of any kind, all was quiet, serene, peaceful, and yet—

Again, and yet again, I found myself involuntarily turning to look over my shoulder at the heap of grey stones behind me. I didn't *want* to look at it, I had seen enough of it, yet turn I must and did, I was getting fanciful, for I could have sworn I saw a shadow of some person flit past the onetime doorway. Surely I had not missed a part of the place in my search, and there was someone hiding there. I would make sure. To this end I walked right round the place, looking well among the old bushes and holly trees—no sign of life—so I went back to my cushion and my rest.

One pipe I smoked, falling asleep ere I had finished it, to wake with a violent start, springing from my seat, sure, positive then, as I shall always be, that someone had laid a hand on my face. I tried to imagine a crawling thing had wandered over my face, I imagined a leaf falling, even tried the effect by closing my eyes and dropping a leaf on to my cheek, it was useless, no amount of thinking could make me believe that touch was aught but a hand.

Ghosts! I didn't believe in, I always looked on yarns of such things as the results of too heavy a supper, or a too vivid imagination, so was inclined to laugh at what I struggled so hard to minimize. I tried to whistle, but if you try to whistle with the corners of your mouth turned down, you will understand that effort ended in failure. I tried to hum a song, which resulted in a species of quavering dirge, I got up, I stamped, I beat the soft, unoffending turf with my stick, I did everything I could think of to shake off a creepy feeling that was fast getting a firmer hold of me, anything to avoid turning round as I felt impelled to do—all was useless, I might as well give in, but had now quite made up my mind I had had enough of the remains of the cottage, I would

leave it to its solitude, first taking one more photo, then I would go on straight through the deep shades I loved, and out at the side I knew best. Just once, I admit it, I looked towards the fence and back down which I had come, almost furtively, I glanced that way, as if in my heart I would rather have returned by the same path, but it was only momentary, for I knew that through “Silent Wood” was the way I should go.

I picked up my camera for my final snapshot, choosing the far side of the ruined place, now in the sunshine, and exposed my film. As the shutter clicked, the sunlight vanished, as if a heavy cloud had suddenly obscured it, and the camera in my hand shook, as if it had been hit—*my* bands were perfectly steady, I am positive of that, yet I had all but dropped my precious toy!

Someone must have thrown a stone I decided, but who the someone was, or where they were, I did not venture to look into, enough for me that I had got my pictures, and was ready to start through the woods, and so home to tea.

I was probably half-way, having long passed out of sight of the ruins, when I remembered my long forgotten ham and bread. I had better eat it, I supposed, so feeling happy again, now I was in the warm gloom of my favourite place, I made for myself another cosy seat, and proceeded with the now somewhat belated lunch. I was just about to bury the paper wrapping, as is my way, when it suddenly whisked away in a sudden gust of wind.

“Wind!” I ejaculated. “Here! Impossible!”

As I spoke, another little gust whirled past me, scattering the pine needles, and whirling a little crowd of dried bits round my feet. It really is most remarkable, I murmured to myself, the times without number I have been in these woods and never felt the smallest breath of wind until yesterday and to-day. I’d best be moving, it may rain, though I’ll be dry enough here if it does, all the same I’ll go. As I rose, another and another draught of cold air swept by me, and then a sudden quietness fell, and all around me seemed to be growing darker, and still darker, little whispering winds seemed chattering above my head, and colder and more chilly it seemed to grow.

I started off hurriedly, only to find, in the gathering darkness, I had missed my way. On and on I plunged, deeper and deeper the blackness grew, colder and colder the wind, now rising almost to a gale, anon, dying away with a moaning sound. Bravely I struggled, wildly endeavouring to locate one familiar tree or stone.

The wind, now icily cold, seemed to lash me, buffeting me, as if I, strong man as I was, had been but a weak puny child.

Suddenly I stopped, determined to find my bearings, determined I would not be driven along as I was. I raised my face; my eyes were streaming with water, in the smarting cold of the lashing wind.

Gloom, black gloom, met me on every side. Pines, once familiar, now seemed twice their original size, standing out rigid, gaunt, and black, no glimmer of light anywhere.

“My God, I am utterly lost.” I said, aloud.

“Utterly lost,” came back a voice from far away, and with the words, making my blood freeze and heart stand still, a shriek of hideous laughter.

With a valiant effort, I steadied my voice, and shouted aloud:

“Who are you? Come to my help.”

“To my help,” rang out the voice, and I shuddered as a shrill peal of laughter followed it.

“Won’t you come?” I cried once more.

“You come,” echoed the voice, and the laughter that came with it seemed of many voices—the gruff, hoarse laughter of a man, the shrill, cackling laugh of women, and even, I was sure, the laughter of children.

On, on, I plunged! gasping now for breath, praying, hoping for deliverance; lost, but blindly struggling to reach some haven of refuge. A more vicious bang of the tearing wind suddenly sent me forward, and I seemed to have reached grass at last. With a sob of relief, I raised my eyes, thinking to see the grass at the edge of the wood, but was frozen stiff with horror and amazement, to find myself on the clearing, with the ruined cottage before me.

“Ruined cottage,” I called it, ruined no longer! To my amazed eyes it appeared intact: a door stood ajar, a window on each side of it, through each of which glimmered a faint light; two windows above, from one of which peered a white, tearful face—a man with an evil, sinister face, stood beneath the lone pine, holding a wailing child by its hair with one hand, and in the other—Oh God, the horror of it!—a long, sharp knife, which glistened as the glimmer from the windows struck it.

I didn’t faint, I didn’t fall, so rooted to the spot was I, I seemed as if made of stone. The wind had all but died away; and, but for the fact that, in my now frenzied brain, I *knew* I had seen the place desolate and ruined, I should have thought I was faced with a workman’s dwelling, peopled by real beings. I *knew* it was NOT so. Fascinated, horrified, I gazed. The man moved, with a muttered curse, dragging the child with him up to the door; as he reached it, the wind redoubled its fury, howling, shrieking, like every evil let loose. I fell on my knees, powerless now to even pray; and hiding my face in my hands, I waited, for some awful thing, I knew, was to come.

It came, with a wild scream of awful horror, the scream from an upstairs window! and then a second, the shrill, awful scream of a child! Agonized, I knelt, and saw the man lurch through the door, reeling, join a group of waiting people hitherto unseen by me. As he came up to them, one of the women spoke to him, and then began to laugh. Oh God! the unspeakable horror of that laugh. One after another of the group spoke to the man, and each, as they moved off, laughed or chuckled, even two small boys who were with them burst into shrill laughter. I cannot describe it, save only in one way, it sounded like fiends from Hell, so vile, so malicious, so diabolical were those awful sounds. As I knelt, unable to move, I struggled to keep a hold of myself, I found I was striving to explain away what I knew in my heart was totally inexplicable. I whispered to myself, “That laughter *is* real, *is* human, hideous as it is,” but I knew it was neither real nor human. Always, to my dying day, it will ring in my ears, laughter such as no human creature could be responsible for.

Quite suddenly, there came a lull in the wind, a stillness in the air, the laughter died away. Could I, dare I move, rise, and venture to look? But even as I thought of it, the wind, with redoubled fury, broke forth again, causing me to crouch still lower as it swept over me. An awful crash sounded, a crash that echoed and re-echoed through the woods. The wind had seized and felled, as if with giant hand, the pine that had been standing at the far side of the cottage. So terrific was the blow that the end of the cottage, where it hit, fell like a house of cardboard! To demolish the rest of it seemed but child’s play, as, with one whistling shriek, the wind tore beneath the now shattered roof, ripping it off, and almost the remainder of the walls, with a deafening roar, high above which rang out peal after peal of hideous laughter! until it, too, died away as now the wind was dying, dying fitfully, with an angry gust, and then a sobbing wail, until at length a long low wail seemed to pass through the woods and fade into silence, a long silence.

At last I moved, raised my head, looked, listened. Nothing, no sound broke the stillness; the ruined cottage was as I had first seen it, just a worn, weather-beaten heap of grey stones, a semblance of a fire-place, five stone stairs, that was all. I ventured nearer, trying to persuade myself I had dreamed the horrible scene. I must have dreamed it, for it had been dark, pitch dark, when the wind had begun to rise, and yet, by what light then had I witnessed this awful thing, for light of some kind there surely had been. Who were those people I had seen, from whom came that awful laughter? I was trembling yet, shaken, feeling desperately ill, no dream had brought me to this pass—then what?

Visitants from “Beyond”? But to what end, for they and their works were evil? I turned abruptly, with one thought in my head, to get out of the wood, and home. I glanced at my watch, having made a point this time of winding and setting it right—only five o’clock. I must be mad, I had gone through hours of dark night; how could it possibly be but five! I supposed, long afterwards, when I reviewed these hours, that it was the knowledge that it was only five o’clock, and not perhaps, as I expected, many hours later, that gave me the fillip of courage, which led me to linger still another moment near the ruins, and gaze, as if to print the thing on my mind. I stood possibly three yards from the ruined doorway, and said aloud “It was a murder!” Away through the woods came the mocking answer “A murder.” “Oh God!” I gasped, “not again, for they are fiends from Hell!”—“From Hell!” came back the answer, and again the awful sound of laughter of many voices—

I turned and fled, holding my hands over my ears as I strove to run. I remember knocking violently against something, and falling, falling, falling, endlessly, or so it seemed, and then nothingness—until I opened my eyes three weeks later, to find myself in bed in my quaint room at the farm, and beside my bed, placidly knitting, sat Mrs. Merry.

“Merry!” I whispered, and the sound, or want of sound, in my own voice startled me.

“Yes, it’s me, sir,” answered the dear soul, “and high time too; but we are not talking, sir, if *you* please, it is medicine time and then you’ll sleep.”

I only too gladly obeyed, unquestioningly, as I obeyed for many weeks, the quiet, though firm, commands of Mrs. Merry. I was far too weak to fight, even had it been of the slightest use; indeed, it was very little less than six weeks ere I was permitted to ask a question or have my own way in anything; but at length a day came when I was allowed to sit in a chair by the window, from which the view was something only expressed by colour, words could not do it. I gazed for a long time in silence, then said:

“I am well now, Merry, tell me what brought you, what has been wrong with me, where was I, everything—I must know.”

She looked at me, then put her glasses on—she always did that if she meant to talk severely, then she said abruptly:

“You’d been missing for two days when they found you.”

“Missing for two days?” I asked, incredulously, “But where was I?”

“You were at the bottom of an old lead mine,” she answered, “on a big heap of dead leaves and ferns. Luckily, it wasn’t one of the deep mines, and also the leaves and ferns saved you, though how they got there is a mystery,” she added.

“But how on earth—” I began.

“Quite so, sir,” she went on, “that’s what we all ‘want to know, how on earth, unless you were mooning along and wandered into a weak place in the ground above the mine. That’s where you were, anyway, in one of the small shafts close to the oh ruined cottage. You were quite

unconscious; you must have had your camera in your hand, sir, because it was beside you, though how it wasn't broken is another mystery."

"Bring me my camera, Merry dear," I said.

"Very well, sir," she answered. "That can't do you no harm"; and off she went, to return presently, gingerly holding my kodak, as if fearful of it.

She was right. By some marvel it was unharmed; moreover the number of the film had last turned to stood clearly forth. I would have them developed at once. I felt curious, but I had not yet asked all my questions:

"Who found me, Merry?" I next asked.

"Tommy Hughes, sir."

"Tommy Hughes!" I said. "What made him look for me?"

"Well, sir," answered the old lady, "they do say as he found another gentleman once in the same place, and when you didn't come home, he set off to look for you."

"Was the other chap hurt, Merry?" I asked.

"No, sir—at least not hurt, sir, because he was lying on ferns and leaves just the same. Oh no! he wasn't hurt, sir, not his body!"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Tell me, please."

"Oh, dear sir, how you do worry, and it's time for your soup, anyway."

"Tell me first, Merry," I said.

She glanced at me, to see if I was in earnest, and then, seemingly, decided that for the moment, at least, I was boss.

"His body was all right, sir, it was his head, at least his wits, sir; he's been in a lunatic place ever since, so they say," she amended, with a sniff which, I knew, meant utter disbelief in gossip or village yarns.

I did *not* so entirely disbelieve, for, as the fragments of memory began to join together, I shuddered as I recalled my experience, and could only too readily believe that a very, little weaker minded individual than I would very easily lose his reason if he went through all I had done. I would, however, leave further questioning until the next day, for I had observed the snap with which my dear old Merry had closed her lips.

The following day my doctor paid me a visit, one of his many, but this time he came in less professional manner, in fact he had every appearance of spoiling for a gossip, I could have wagered my last sou on it, so wasn't surprised when he accepted my offer of tea, and a smoke, with alacrity. The tea disposed of, he did not beat about the bush, but asked me if I could give him any light at all on my accident.

"I am curiously interested," he said, "because you are not my first case to have a very similar accident."

"Did your other patient make as good recovery, doctor?" I asked, instead of, as politeness demanded, answering his question.

"No, he did not," he replied. "He never recovered and never will in my opinion. He is mentally deranged, though all searching has failed to reveal a cause. He is quiet generally, and peaceable, but in a high wind he becomes frenzied, utterly distraught, his attendants are unable to cope with him, often he shrieks and yells, for the most part unintelligible rubbish. One night, in a furious gale, a man was blown over in the grounds, and the attendants were laughing about it when, without apparent reason, the poor insane chap fell on the luckless attendant and half-killed him, shouting all the time:

“Stop laughing, will you!” It’s always the same if the wind blows. They take him to a more sheltered room when it blows hard now.

“Tell me, will you, what preceded your fall—there must be some sort of link between the two, because, in your delirium, you raved of the wind, though we’ve had no wind to speak of since your arrival.”

“I’ll tell you the story, doctor, though you will be inclined to put me with your other patient, *unless* I can convince you, and this I may perhaps do, if my camera depicts what I saw.

I told him my experiences during two days in the woods I loved, I gave him every detail, even to the taking of the snapshots of the place, and he listened, silently puffing at his pipe, until I ended by telling him of how I struck something violently and fell, remembering nothing more until I found myself in my room.

There was a long pause as I finished, he seemed unable to speak, so I asked him how Mrs. Merry came upon the scene.

“She arrived after you had lain long unconscious, saying you had said if you were not home in a month to come and look for you—not hearing, she came and found you, as I have said, and has since nursed you devotedly.

“What does it all mean, doctor?” I then said.

His answer disconcerted me.

“I do not know, though I have heard strange stories told of the pine woods, which you are pleased to call “Silent,” but I confess I have hitherto put them down to an extra glass or two of beer. Now, for the first time, I am bound to think more seriously of them, having on my hands first, the strange maniac, and then you, found in the same spot, under similar conditions, and—strangest of all—on *the same day* of the year!

“I don’t know the tale, but no doubt your worthy host does, ask him; and, meanwhile, develop your snapshots, though I do not hope for much in the way of proofs from them.”

“I will look in to-morrow, you had better rest now,” and my matter-of-fact materialistic doctor picked up his hat and departed.

I sat at my window for a long time, thinking much, hearing again, in fancy, the roar of wind, the laughter of fiends, the crash of the tree. As ft grew dark, I was possessed with the desire, at all costs, to develop those films, so, calling Mrs. Merry, I told her I was tired, and was going to bed, that there was nothing I required, so, bidding her “Good night,” I made my rough and ready preparations, lacking all the essentials of a proper dark room, but in these days, tabloids of developers, a jugful of water, a candle-lamp, with a crimson silk scarf tied round it, would serve me very well.

The first negative came up beautifully, just an ordinary common or garden broken-down cottage.

The second was a different story, and I watched it fearfully. There was distinctly, unmistakably, a form of a man going into the door-way!

The third film, taken from the other side of the cottage, showed me a lower window, more or less unbroken, in the frame of which was the face of a man—so much I could see, but to me that meant much, for *I knew* that I was alone, horribly alone at that moment of taking the photo.

Next morning, I was up earlier than had been permitted for some time, and a very few minutes sufficed to print a rough print from each negative. I stared at them, stared, with my eyes nearly starting from my head. They were good photos, clear, sharply defined, no woolly-looking details, so easily mistaken for other than the actual things I intended to take, except the figure, and the face. Those I neither saw, nor intended to portray, yet there they were, and, as is so often the

case, the camera lens depicted what the human eye did not see. The figure, tall, gaunt, seemed as if going into the house, but the face! the *face* in the frame of the window was unmistakably the face of the man who passed me, who entered the house, from which issued those screams of agony, the man who later joined the group of people to whom he spoke, the people who made the air hideous with their horrible laughter.

I kept my own counsel, hiding the photos also, until late in the afternoon, the doctor made his appearance. He studied them carefully, and then said:

“I should have laughed at your story, my friend, laughed at your photos of your so-called empty cottage, last evening, but to-night I cannot. I made a few enquiries after I left you, and the outline of what I gleaned was this:

“The cottage was built when the lead mines were working, for the use of the men, and was subsequently taken possession of by a foreman. He was a glum, taciturn brute, given to drink and gambling. He brought with him to the cottage, known as Leadmine Cottage, a very pretty young girl as his wife, though gossips say she was not. He seemed passionately attached to the girl, and also to a little child of three, said to be his niece’s child. The man, by name Woodrow, led an almost double life, one half of which was spent with a gang of men and women, with whom he was said to drink and gamble; and who used to jeer at him for what they spoke of as his milksop life, in the company of his so-called wife. When with her, he was simply a devoted husband, and when sober always refused to associate with the gang who other times attracted him. Finally, the gang of criminals—I can call them nothing better—tried to embitter him against the girl, whom they thought was getting a firmer hold on him. One or other of them started to fill his mind with suspicions of the girl, telling him that chance visitors found Leadmine Cottage attractive. They used to follow him home, for the fiendish joke of hearing him abuse the girl and threaten her with worse things if she was untrue to him. These fiends finally plotted, and eventually sent a young doctor out there, saying someone was ill in the cottage. The unsuspecting doctor called late one evening, and Woodrow was persuaded to hide in the trees and watch. It was, I am told, a wild, stormy evening, one of those sudden storms that come in these mountain districts in summer, and break down corn, lash rivers to fury, and hurl trees and branches to the ground.

“Woodrow watched, and saw the doctor enter, saw him speak to the girl, saw her smile at him, and laughing, give him her hand as she might do to a doctor, who desired to feel her pulse; though this was apparently not the construction put upon her innocent action by her husband, goaded to madness by drink, as well as by his uncontrollable jealous nature. He waited until the doctor had gone, and then entered the cottage, murdered his wife and child, afterwards rejoining his fellow-criminal, whom, it is said, received his news with jest and laughter, glorying in the success of the vile plot which they guessed would give him wholly back to them and their evil ways.

“The cottage and all trace of the crime was effaced, so ’tis said, by the sudden rising of the wind, bringing down a tree, which fell athwart the house, shattering it to bits. The gang are believed to have fled the country, all but one, who later died in hospital after giving the story to a medical man there, whom, by a curious coincidence, if indeed there be such things, wrote it to a colleague of mine, whom I met last night at a dinner. It is a strange story, and one, in the light of your recent experience, not to be gainsaid. The story goes on to say, that in the same month every year, the murder takes place, with every detail complete, even to the rising wind; and that those who know the story and the wood, shun it as the plague, during that month. At any other time, I believe, it justifies our name for it of ‘Silent Wood.’

“That is the story, my friend, make of it what you will. I have also taken the liberty of asking an aged miner to look in this evening. I want you to be good enough to start chatting casually of the wood, your fall, etc., and show him your photos. Don’t give him any other lead. Now, I will see if he has come. He is very old, but can see pretty well. His little grandchild is bringing him to see me here, to save time, and the old boy wants a dose for a cough.”

With this, the doctor vanished, to return almost at once, leading an old man by the arm.

They tell me folks live long up here, and surely it must be so if this is a specimen, for the old man looked ninety, and hale at that, though bent and withered. I gave him a chair and baccy, but instead of filling his pipe, he stared at me with clear, penetrating eyes, and mumbled:

“So you’re the gent that fell down the mine.”

“Yes,” I said, “I’m that unfortunate man.”

“Did you fall, or were yer put there?” he questioned, sniggering to himself.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“No, my boy, but *I* do,” he wheezed, pointing a claw-like finger at me. “I do, yer were put there, my lad, put there, look you, and so will others be, if they do not keep away from the pines in July!”

“I took a picture of it,” I said, after a pause.

“A picture—whatever—” answered the aged being, “show me the picture. I once worked there.”

“Hurry,” whispered the doctor, “he quickly fails.”

I handed him the picture, holding a powerful magnifying glass over it as I did so.

“Aye, aye! there’s Johnny Woodrow’s house,” he muttered, “all in a heap, all in a heap.”

“This is another,” I said.

“My God!” burst from his shaking lips. “My God, there’s Johnny Woodrow, Johnny Woodrow, my old pal. Why, I thought him was dead, he is dead, I knows he’s dead, how could he live after murdering his wife and little child—murdered them, he did, in the cottage by the pines, and them as interferes with the cottage, he’d put ’em down the mine—he said he would put ’em in the mine to starve, if they move a stone or meddle with wot ’e calls her grave. He told me he’d do it afore he went away, ’is very words were ‘Living or dead, I’ll do it, Bob,’ and wot Johnny says he’ll do, he *will* do.”

His old head fell forward on his breast as he finished speaking, so we did not speak, save in a whisper.

“He sleeps,” said the doctor. “Presently he will wake, but will not remember. We will leave him. Mary will take him home, and I’ll send him some stuff in the morning. The old boy is nearly through,” he added, “but I am glad he was here to give you what you wanted—proof!” though proof of what, or for what reason, I cannot pretend to fathom.

We parted a little later, my doctor and I—he to go on with his work for sick humanity; I, on the morrow, to return to my studio in London, back to the turmoil of town, back to live among the haunts of men, to leave the beauty of hills and rivers; but in some quiet hour in my studio, maybe during some winter night of wind and storm, I shall hear again the hideous laughter, shall dream of the scent of the pines—nay, perhaps I shall even try to forget the horror of all I went through, and may memory, sometimes kind, only recall the peace, the scent, the perfect still quietness of the woods I loved best, when I knew them only as

“Silent Wood.”