

# “The Star Inn”

By Bessie Kyffin-Taylor

“What do you say to a change and a bit of a rest, old lady?”

“I’m with you every time, dearly beloved,” was my reply.

After this exchange of brilliant remarks, my brother and I sat and gazed at each other in silence; but silence was not an unusual thing between us, we were so essentially two of those people—alas! that they are so rare!—who can contentedly pass long silences in perfect accord and happiness. We were neither of us exacting, and each was sure of the other—sure that no call could be made that would not be answered if possible—sure that if either had a burden, heavy to be borne, the other was waiting and ready to lighten it. Circumstances prevented our being much together, but long absences never wore any thinner The strong link of affection that bound us together; but when, as now, opportunity came for us to spend a few days in each other’s society, we were not slow to grasp it.

After his preliminary remarks, my brother puffed complacently at his old much-blackened pipe, while I waited, with a hundred plans flying to my mind.

“Not too long a journey,” he next vouchsafed, in answer to my unspoken query, “but somewhere alone—where people cannot find us.”

“And telephones cease from ringing,” I murmured.

Then he smiled, and the rough-coated dog, stretched at my brother’s feet, smiled too. He surely did, for my brother stopped to pat him, with the remark—

“You too of course, old boy.” You may not believe me, most likely you won’t, but a deeper glow shone in the loving brown eyes of the old dog! Understood? Of course he understood; it is we, poor, ignorant humans, who do not understand, and are deaf and blind to the sensitiveness~devotion and love lavished upon us, whether worthily or not, by our four-footed pals.

“And now to get our idea into train,” said my brother, hauling himself out of the depths of his easy chair, and taking up a position on the corner of the table. “I suppose you don’t much care where?” he asked.

“Not a bit,” I replied.

Then, said he, “let’s open a time-table and race through it for places not more than an hour or two away.”

The search ended in our stopping, abruptly, at a station called “Pine Side.” Why we selected it we were never quite clear. Dick always said it was the pine that attracted me, but I think both of us imagined a place with a name like that would be a very different spot to the one we subsequently proved it to be. However, we decided upon it, and stuck to it, and in our usual rather erratic way, made up our minds to journey there without even finding out whether it was town, village, hamlet, or, indeed, anything beyond a station.

“There is sure to be an inn, and that will do for one night anyway,” said Dick; and I, as ever, acquiesced.

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There was an inn. Oh! yes; and I for one am not likely to forget it. But to return to our beginning, we parted that night, far into the night indeed, watched and followed with faithful persistence by

Timothy's brown eyes—he poor doggie, refusing supper or bed lest we should slip away with our boxes on our backs and leave him behind. We were not likely to, for he had too warm a corner in both our hearts for us willingly to be without him.

At last our belongings were ready and labelled, and when I finally put into my box Timothy's feeding bowl and rug, his satisfaction was complete, for then, and then only, did he curl up on Dick's bed, and heaving a sigh of relief, settled himself to sleep and dream, perhaps of bunnies, which he raced with and chased—perchance, only to, sleep with one eye and keep the other in ever watchful care upon his master.

Next morning we drove to our nearest station and asked for tickets for Pine Side; obviously, it was little known, for the booking clerk had to go through that ever tedious business of writing tickets.

“So far, so good,” whispered Dick. “It isn't a much-sought-after place, anyway.”

“How many changes have we?” I asked a weary-looking porter.

“Dunno,” he replied; “three or four, I expect.”

“And what time do we get there?” I went on.

“That depends,” said he. “Sometimes you're early, often as not, late—sometimes very late—it depends on the market.”

“The market!” I said. “Where? What market?”

“Pine Side, of course,” he answered, looking with an expression that seemed to put me down as a poor ignorant kind of soul, and then he slunk off, leaving me standing with a bundle of sticks in one hand, a bag in the other, and murmuring “market” to myself.

A sudden bustle announced the arrival of our train, and we and our belongings were soon comfortably settled in a compartment, and off on our vague journey. The journey itself was nothing out of the ordinary, except as to the changes of which there were five! and each subsequent train we entered seemed slower than the last. It is unnecessary for me to give the direction of our destination except to say that we travelled north, and that our spirits rose as we drew nearer and nearer to higher hills and purer air.

It was growing dark as our slowest of engines laboriously grunted itself to a full stop at an odd-looking junction. I say odd-looking, because the platform was full of crates of hens and ducks, calves in sacks, with just their sad little faces outside the sack, pigs tied by the leg and squealing their way through the crowds of people; men in big boots, gaiters and rough cord garments with coats of antique pattern; women in clogs, wearing short, bunched skirts, flapping hats tied under their chins with gay ribbons; most of them also enveloped in large blue and white check aprons, and carrying baskets poised on one hip; many of them leading an animal or carrying a fowl.

I wondered, idly, whether the animals and people travelled together, and my unspoken question was speedily answered by the door of our compartment being suddenly opened, and two stout women entering; or rather, they rolled in, treading on my toes, falling over my brother's legs, and calling forth a decidedly snappish bark from Timothy, who was lolling on a seat to himself, nose between his paws and brown eyes fixedly regarding every movement made by my brother. The arrival of our fellow-passengers necessitated Tim's removal from his seat, which was promptly crammed with bundles and packages, and crowned by two live fowls tied together by a bit of string, heads down, and gurgling as if every breath would be their last. Tim's interest centred in them for the moment, and he eyed them with an unholy grin on his lips, and the wickedest twinkle in his eyes. I wondered much, if he could restrain his well-known passion for anything feathered, so far as to keep his paws off them; and I know it was only the restraining glance he got from time to time from his master that made him appear the demure dog he looked. Once he

raised himself—I waited breathlessly, but a murmured word, which he apparently understood perfectly, made him at once adopt an expression seeming to say: “I am utterly indifferent to fowl, or any other beast, just now!”

The two women eyed us curiously, the fatter one of the two gave me an affable smile, as she remarked—

“Oneymoon, my dear?”

“No,” I replied, “nothing like that, just a pleasant holiday with my brother.”

“Oh!” she said, “where, my dear?”

“Pine Side,” I said. “What is it like?”

“Pine Side!” she exclaimed. “Why, whit in ’eaven s name will you find to do, my dear, and where will you stay?”

“We shall walk,” I answered; “and shall stay at the inn!”

“Lord-a-mussy!” she almost shrieked, “ye’ll stay at the inn?” At which the other woman nudged her violently in the ribs, and muttered—

“Leave ’em be, Kate; leave ’em be. They’ll be all right seeing they know nought—”

I looked the questions I did not ask, would that I had. The train with many grunts drew up to a wooden platform, and, with a bob and a muttered “afternoon,” the two women bundled out trailing their many belongings after them, hurried by Tim, who gleefully snatched a feather from one of the birds and laid it with intense devotion at his master’s feet.

“Well, girl we have arrived,” and, with a prolonged stretch of his long limbs, my brother got up, shook out his pipe and began to lift our numerous belongings from the rack, and proceeded to alight from the train on to the platform of Pine Side Station—we knew it was the station, because a broken-down board said so—but it was a melancholy spot, and except for the market folks and their animals of all sorts, was utterly devoid of all the usual look and life of a station. We stood for a moment and, looked at each other, and then at our surroundings, and then both laughed, for after all, we were together, and little else mattered.

“Hold Tim while I unearth and interview the station-master,” said Dick; and, leaving me in the midst of our goods and chattels, he tramped off to emerge within five minutes from a dingy-looking corner, followed by a dried-up little man, apparently the station-master signalman and porter, for we saw no other official. He and my brother were talking in a low tone as they approached me, and I caught the words, “You can but try, sir, and say nothing.”

“Even’, Miss,” said the worthy official, touching his cap. “Hope you’ll have a pleasant holiday, and be no worse for it.”

“Worse for it?” I said, smiling, “that is not possible, I’ll be all the better.” And he looked at me with keen little gimlets of eyes, from under shaggy white brows, and went back to his dingy room without any further words.

“Come on, Pat, I know where to go,” announced my brother, grabbing a bag and rugs and leaving me the rest of the things. My name, I might mention, was Patricia, but “Pat” was the nearest to it my brother ever got, so “Pat” I remained.

“Where are we to go to?” I asked.

“The Star Inn,” he replied, with a grin; and we set off.

“How far?” I next enquired.

“Wait and see” was his only answer, as we trudged down the narrow muddy lane leading from the station, and so out into the main street. I should say *only* street, for one could scarcely call the many straggling lanes we passed by the dignified name of street.

“Broad Street” was the name of the one and only; it certainly was broad, though rough, the middle of it being paved with big cobbles. Small compact little houses lined it on each side, and what struck me was the sameness of them and the cleanliness; each had its strip of garden divided from the next house by a low white railing; each had its spotless white step and brass knocker on a dull green door; each roof was composed of some sort of large flag—they were not slates or tiles—the windows were the only thing in any way different from each other, and they showed a decided individuality; some had scarlet blinds, some white, some had pots of flowers, and one or two had singing birds in gilt cages. There was an entire absence of people, so I surmised they lived in the back premises, and the front rooms were for show. Presently, my brother stopped under a dull red lamp.

“Here we are,” he said. “This is the ‘Star.’ ”

“Oh, is it?” I said.

A low rambling building with a similar roof and very neat windows, most of them full of scarlet geraniums. Blackened oak beams seemed to support two big gabled windows, a long verandah reaching nearly the entire length, and a white cat on the step washing its face. Such was my first impression of the “Star Inn.”

I looked at Dick, and Tim looked at the cat; presumably they spoke, for the cat after one scornful glance, fled precipitantly, and we rang the bell. A little old woman answered it. She had a face like a russet apple, snow-white hair, eyes like little blue beads, and not any teeth; she was dressed in a lavender print frock, and wore clogs.

“Well, what do you want?” she asked.

“We want two bedrooms and a sitting-room, some food and a wash, and we want to stay here for our holidays,” was my brother’s terse reply.

“Well, I never did!” quoth the old dame; “I never did!”

“Neither did we, I’m sure of that.”

“Come in, come an,” she said. “Visitors for me after so long!” and, muttering amiably to herself, she led us into a sort of parlour. It was spotlessly clean and uncomfortable, rigid chairs with starched antimacassars, a horse-hair sofa, some bright wool-work mats, a case of decrepit-looking stuffed birds, a shining polished mahogany table with a large Bible on it, a stone floor with a deep border of whitening round it, and a grate stuffed full of coloured paper! I shivered and looked beseechingly at my brother; he had taken it all in, and then said to the old dame—

“Haven’t you any other sitting-room? This is a bit small.”

She looked at him, then snapped—

“No, I haven’t.”

“I’ll pay double for; bigger one,” he went on, and the blue beads of her eyes glittered—greed was evidently the old woman’s besetting sin, for without further demur, she said—

“You can see it, anyway,” and led us along a stone passage, up a flight of stairs to an old oak door. This she opened with a key hung from her waist by a long steel chain. We entered, and stood enthralled, delighted.

“Light the fire, this is ours,” said Dick; and, delightedly, I sank into a big old chair and gazed about me.

The room was long and narrow; it seemed to be as far as one could judge, almost the entire length of the house, and except for the passage from which we entered, would have been as wide as the house, or rather as deep. The floor was merely white boards, but they were scrubbed as white as snow; the centre of the room was covered with an old Eastern rug, in faded shades of blue and buff; the walls were only coloured a dull blue, all the wood-work was the same well

scrubbed white unpainted wood. There were a few old etchings of coaching scenes on the walls, and one or two old willow-pattern plates. The hearth was modern, with a quite up-to-date well grate and copper fire-irons. On each side of the fire-place stood deep scarlet leather chairs, artistic in a vivid way. A roomy couch piled with real feather pillows, was pulled up across one of the low windows, and a writing table with many drawers, filled the other; a woman's work-basket stood beside one chair, and a smoker's table beside the other. That was all the room contained, except a large feathery fern, fresh and green as if carefully tended. A soft white sheep-skin rug on the floor in front of the fire-place completed the furnishing. This latter article met with the unqualified and instant approval of Timothy, who at once took possession and watched our next proceedings with a satisfied grin.

"You like it, sir?" asked the old dame.

"Certainly we do," answered my brother. "Please let us have a fire, then some tea—a big tea," he added; "we are hungry."

The old dame shuffled slowly away to re-appear shortly with her apron full of logs of wood; these she piled in the grate and set fire to, eyeing them complacently as the flames began to leap up the wide chimney.

"The chimney's cold, sir," she remarked. "It is long since a fire was burning here, but I'm glad to see it," she went on, "and trust you'll be comfortable and warm," she added, as she moved away towards the door with a backward glance at our now blazing fire.

It must have been almost an hour later when I heard a quick knock on my bedroom door, and a voice called—

"Your tea is ready; Miss."

"Thanks," I answered, though thinking it was quite time too, although the hour had given me time to unpack my own and my brother's belongings, tidy my hair, and get rid of the dust of the journey. I speedily left my room, and entered our sitting-room. I smiled to see the happy picture which met my gaze. Dick sprawled in his big chair, before the glowing fire, with Timothy beside him, the old dog's head resting on my brother's knee, and those eyes of his, in which you could see his whole soul, fixed on Dick's face in steadfast and loyal devotion. The tea-table was utterly ignored by them both, they were for the moment sufficient for each other, and were, I firmly believe, intent on a conversation, wordless, but perfectly understood on both sides.

If you two have quite finished airing your views to each other, we will have tea," I remarked. Dick smiled, as he answered—

"We will come, although we were deeply engaged in a problem."

And the problem?" I queried.

"Merely whether in the next world we should be together," he answered.

"And the answer?" I asked.

"We are uncertain, as yet," was his reply, though both of us are inclined to the opinion that heaven would not be heaven to us minus each other.

"Come to tea, goose," I said, and without further remark he came, and the three of us enjoyed the excellent tea of cold ham, scones and honey the old dame had given us. We chatted on many subjects over our meal, and decided that our vague journey had landed us in comfy quarters, and looked forward to our little holiday with much pleasure.

Just as we finished our tea, our old lady appeared, to clear away, first asking us if we would like lights, it struck me then for the first time that there was no gas, or, apparently any mode of lighting, and I asked her what sorts of lights they used.

"Candles," she replied.

“Candles!” I echoed. “We shall want a lot of those to light this room!” She gave me a quick, keen look, but vouchsafed no reply, and went out, returning in a short time with a large and heavy candelabra with five tall candles in it. This she banged down in the centre of the table, and said—

“You’ll light it when you need it,” and departed. The room was getting darker now, so we drew our chairs up to the fire, which we replenished from a wicker-basket full of logs, left for our use.

Curiously enough, with so much to talk about, we had fallen into silence. My brother puffed away at his pipe, and I—as was ever my way—had slipped from my chair and squatted on the rug, at his knee. I always chose to sit on the floor in preference to a chair when there was someone with me who understood. There are not many, and, there are very few people whom it is possible to sit on the floor with. There are lots of people who *say* they like it, but they only do it because others do it; to me, it is, and has always been real rest—the cosy intimate feeling of squatting or lying before the fire on a rug, watching the sparks on the back of the fire-place, until my fancy pictured them as armies advancing, retreating, joining, fighting, until one side or the other is wiped out. And so I sat lost in my dreams, seeing pictures in the fire, until my brother’s voice brought me back to earth again, with the common-place remark—

“Aren’t you cold, Pat?”

Now, I have a distinct dislike to being brought back to earth from my dreams, and am always inclined for a moment to cordially detest the disturber of my visions; indeed, had it been anyone but my beloved brother, I should inevitably have answered crossly—if I answered at all! But Dick was different, and occupied a unique position in my life; he could enter where no one else dare, so I detached myself from my army of sparks, and answered him—

“I wasn’t cold until you spoke, and yet I have been feeling chilly now you mention it.”

“An answer, my dear Pat,” he said, jokingly, “quite in keeping with your usual lucid remarks.”

“Well,” I said, “we’ve got a fire big enough to cook us, so it really does seem absurd to talk of being chilly,” saying which I gathered myself up from my cosy rug and wandered to the now dim outline of the table. “I will light our most magnificent candles,” I said.

“No, I will,” announced my brother. “Girls never get a light from the first six matches at least.”

“Very well, Mr. Superior, light it yourself; but I’ll bet you an ounce of baccy to a box of chocs’ you will not light them with less than three matches yourself,” and I curled myself up in his vacated chair to await results.

He laughed as he struck a match. I did not trouble to turn my head, my armies on the chimney-back were advancing, and I was once again deep in contemplation of their manœuvres. My brother’s voice again aroused me.

“Pat! Come here.”

““What’s the matter now, old worry?” I asked, without moving.

“You have won your bet,” he answered in a voice that struck me as a little queer. “Come here,” he added, “my matches are mad, I think.”

With a sigh, I pulled myself out of my chair, and moved to his side as he stood by the table—in the darkness.

“Light it,” he said.

““Why, Dick, what’s the matter?” I asked, as I took the box from him, “your hand is shaking.”

“Light it,” was his reply, “and be quick.” I struck a match, it flared up, wavered, and went out.

“That’s only one of my six,” I said laughing, as I struck another; again it flared up for an instant, wavered, and went out. “Two!” I said “But you blew that one—” He did not speak, and I struck my third, it burnt well, I leaned over to light the candles, and out it went.

“You *did* blow it,” I said.

“No,” he answered, “all mine did that—there must be a beastly draught from somewhere—try another. I did, and as I held it for an instant, it lighted up Dick’s face, and the extreme whiteness of it struck me. I bent over again, and this time succeeded in lighting one candle.

“There!” I exclaimed, “and only four matches,” but even as I spoke the flame of the candle wavered, flickered, and went out.

There was a moment’s silence, broken by a low whine from Timothy, who was trying to shove his cold nose into my hand.

“What is it, Dick?” I managed to gasp.

“I think the place is draughty,” he answered, turning as he spoke to where an old-fashioned bell-pull dangled on the wall, but ere he reached it, the door opened to admit our old Dame carrying a lighted lamp; she glanced at us and said:

“Maybe this will give a better light.”

“Maybe it will,” Dick answered, as she slowly withdrew and closed the door.

The glow of the lamp showed the room in a new aspect, though it only lit up a part of it, leaving the corners dim and shadowy. Neither of us spoke as we once more drew near to the fire. Dick was the first to break the somewhat long silence, and his remark was addressed to his dog:

“Come here, old boy, I want to talk to you,” he said. But Timothy was deep in slumber, or appeared to be, for he took no notice.

“Well if you won’t, you won’t, so. I’ll smoke instead,” added Dick, pulling out his well-worn pouch and filling his old briar. Whether Tim smelt the baccy or had decided he would join in, I do not know, but at this moment he rose, padded softly to his master and placed his front paws on Dick’s knees, wagging his tough scrap of a tail as if to apologise for his recent neglect.

“One minute, boy, till I get a light,” said his master, “then I will talk.” And he struck a match, ready to light his pipe. One second it remained a steady bright light and then went out. At the same instant, Timothy gave a low growl which ended in a whine, as he slowly drew himself backwards from his master’s knee, and still keeping his eyes fixed on him, slowly backed until he was pressing heavily against my skirt. I, too, was watching Dick, and saw his face grow still paler, and the hand that held his pipe trembled.

“You old villain,” he said, in a voice he strove to keep steady. “You blew that out, grunting like that. Come here,” but Tim only cowered back.

“What is wrong, Dick?” I managed to stammer at last.

“I don’t know,” he answered, “but I think we are all over-tired, and bed is the best place. Come along, dear, I’ll see you to your room. It is a little early, but you are tired,” so, putting his arm over my shoulders he quietly pulled me out of my chair and led me away, Timothy now quite himself again, gleefully trotting at his side.

My bedroom, quaint, clean, and cosy, and lit by a small brass lamp, looked all that I could desire, and bidding “good night” to my dear old brother and his faithful pal, I locked my door and was quickly in bed and almost as quickly asleep, my last waking impression being of a faint, soft, indescribably-sweet scent wafting over my face. “Lavender!” I murmured, drowsily, “how nice!” And I knew no more, until I was awakened by a thump at any door, and I heard my brother sing out:

“Time you were awake, lazy bones. Tim and I have been out for an hour.”

“Shan’t be long,” I called, and I bathed and dressed in record time.

Our day was spent in prowling round and exploring the quaint sleepy little town, with its old-world people most of whom, stared at us with interest, but seemed too busy with their own little

lives to trouble much over the doings of the strangers in their midst. We wandered back to the Inn for lunch, which was excellent in a plain, simple way, and beautifully cooked and served. About an hour later we went out again, and this time went further afield where the country grew more hilly and rough, and was chiefly wild uncultivated land with very few trees.

"I don't think much of it," I ventured to remark, as we stood to rest a minute.

"Nor I," answered Dick, "except that it is quiet, the air ripping, and Timothy is having a great time."

"It may be," I said, "but I want my tea. Shall we try and get some here in a cottage? There is a light over there," pointing, as I spoke, to what appeared to be a cottage window.

"Very well, let's try," said Dick. So together we descended the hill and approached the cottage. Our knock at the door was answered by a gruff voice bidding us enter.

"Doesn't sound promising," whispered Dick, but we obeyed the voice and entered a tiny kitchen, spotlessly clean, but evidently poverty-stricken. Two people sat before the fire, a grey-haired man in rough clothes, smoking a long clay pipe, and a pretty fair-haired girl of about eighteen.

"We wondered," began my brother, "if we might ask you to make us a cup of tea, my sister is tired, and we are a long way I think, from the inn.

"Welcome, Mister. Put the kettle on, Isobel, and come you near the fire, Miss," said the man, as the pretty girl rose and did as she was told without speaking, then he looked at us.

"At the inn, be you?" he said.

"Yes," I replied, "it is very comfortable."

He grunted, and mumbled some words, of which I only caught a few about "rather be here than there," and went on smoking. The girl, meanwhile, filled a brown tea-pot, put a loaf and some butter on the table and curtsied, saying:

"That is all we can give you, Miss."

"It is splendid," I said. "I am very grateful to you." And there was no doubt we most thoroughly enjoyed our tea, but it was getting darker each minute now, and we had some way to go, so did not linger by the cosy fire loth as we were to leave it.

Dick offered the old man some silver, but he refused it with much dignity, saying:

"No, Mister, you're very welcome. I wish ye a 'good night,' and if ye're any ways troubled, maybe I can help yer, if yer ask, but I'll not say ought until ye do."

This somewhat vague speech conveyed nothing to us as we smilingly nodded and took our departure.

It was quite dark now as we stumbled along the unfamiliar roads. Even Timothy lagged a little, as if he realised that his mileage was nearly double ours after all the hunting he had done. We were all glad I think, to see the glimmer of the red limps from the inn door come in sight, and our steps were a bit quicker as we covered the last few yards. The old oak door was closed when we reached it, the big white cat was sitting on the mat, as before.

"Puss! Puss!" I called, bending down, but the sight of Tim, with bristling hair, must have startled the cat; for, as I bent to pat it, it was no longer there.

"Which way did the beast go, Dicky?" I asked.

"Blessed if I know," he answered, with a laugh, "but Tim is evidently tired, or he'd have been after it, instead of standing growling about it. But come, let's go in," opening the old door as he spoke, putting an arm through mine as we tramped up the stairs together.

Our meal was ready for us, and the fire burning gaily, but there was no other light in the room.

I left Dick, and went off to get tidy; and for the first time really inspected my room, as the previous night I was too tired, and this morning I was hurried out so quickly. It was a much larger room than I had thought, and there were two other doors into it: one, being hidden by a chintz curtain had missed my eye altogether; the other I had noticed vaguely, was studded with heavy nails, and both locked and barred. Well! that was safe, anyway, and the curtained one did not trouble me, since obviously, it was not for use. I moved my lamp and began to do my hair. How quiet it was, I thought, there might be no one else alive in the place; though, as this thought crossed my mind, I heard a murmur of voices close to me.

“Someone else coming to stay,” I thought, and went on placidly doing my hair. Again I heard the voices, and a soft, tinkling laugh reached my ears. I paused, with my hair-brush in the air, to listen, and heard a man’s voice speaking. I could nearly hear the words, the tone at any rate, was clear; a deep domineering note seemed to run through the whole sentence, almost a commanding sound, and then the silvery tinkling laugh. Pretty, I thought, but mocking; then there was silence, and I finished my dressing humming a snatch of a song, and left my room to join my brother. I found him asleep in the depths of his big chair, Tim at his feet, one eye steadily fixed on his master. Evidently the rest of our meal had been placed on the table unheard by Dick, for our coffee-pot was there also, covered with a gigantic scarlet cosy. Softly I bent over my dear lad, and planted a kiss on his forehead. He woke with a start.

“Hello, old girl, that you? I must have dropped off, I suppose, it’s the strong air. I remember hearing you talking to someone, and then I dozed.”

“I wasn’t talking,” I answered, “though someone was in a room next to mine; newcomers I suppose. Come and have supper, but not by firelight only, we’ll light—er—the lamp.”

“I really would like to light the candles,” said Dick, “if they *will* light, but I’m going to put them over here out of any chance of draught,” saying which, he lifted the heavy candelabra from the table and put it gently on the top of an old oak chest at the end of the room furthest from the fireplace, and striking a match, held it high above his head triumphantly.

“There!” he said. “I knew it was a draught.”

“You are six feet tall,” I laughed, “and are holding it quite two feet above your head, so the chances are it is out of a draught.” Laughingly he brought the lighted match down, and suddenly gave a startled exclamation, as, with a quick flicker, the match went out.

“You touched my hand,” he said, “and blew, I felt it.”

I shook my head.

“Don’t bother,” I said, “the lamp will do”; and, reluctantly, Dick moved away, deep in thought, giving his hand a furtive rub as he went.

We did not try again, but had our meal by the light of the lamp, then drew our chairs close to the fire, making a place for Tim between us; but the old dog was uneasily moving about the room, hair on end.

“What’s the matter, boy,” called Dick, “come here.” But Tim only roamed about restlessly.

“I thought I saw the white cat come in,” I said.

“So also did Tim, I should think—look at him!” said Dick, pointing to the dog standing rigidly glaring at the oak chest.

“He gives me the jumps,” I said. “Make him lie down, Dick.”

But Tim was deaf alike to entreaties or commands; and finally, Dick went to him and picked him up bodily, depositing him in the big chair beside him, where the old dog smuggled down with a deep sigh of satisfaction.

Presently the door opened, and old Martha entered, to clear the table.

“Have other visitors come, Martha?” I asked.

“Yes, Miss—no—I don’t know,” she answered, confusedly. “I only have to look after you, Miss. Good night,” and she passed out more swiftly than I had seen her move.

“I know there are people—I heard them,” I went on.

“Well, and if there are, said my brother, “do you wish for other company?”

“Never, while I have you, dear,” was my reply. “I was only curious, it seems such an out-of-the-world corner for anyone to come to. There I hear people speaking again; listen!” I said, and as we listened, we distinctly heard voices.

“We are not alone that’s sure,” said Dick, “our solitude is invaded.”

“But this room is our own anyway,” I answered, “and we will be comfy, but I must just run and get my knitting; don’t go to sleep till I come back.” And I went off to my room. It was in darkness, and I had to grope round for my knitting which I knew I had left on the bed. I was just about to put my hand where I thought I had left my work, when I heard again the silvery tinkling laugh, but so close to me, I thought someone had mistaken the room.

“Is anyone there?” I asked.

There was no reply, though I heard the soft swish of a silken dress, the quick tap of high-heeled shoes, and a door softly shut.

“Stupids!” I thought, “they might have answered whoever they were.” And then, having discovered my matches, I lit one, and glanced round. I had just time to see the chintz curtain over the hidden door softly swaying, when my match went out.

“Um,” I remarked, “I’ll settle that door before I sleep.” And forgetting my knitting, I groped my way to the door, bent on reaching Dick and the light without further delay.

As I closed my bedroom door, I felt someone brush past me in the darkness; I felt really annoyed at the stupidity of country people and their very sparing illumination.

I opened our sitting-room door softly, and went in. I was half-way across the room, when Tim suddenly sat up, and gave vent to a long moan, and then a series of short, sharp barks, and fixing his eyes beyond me, glared, snarling and growling.

I turned quickly to see why all this fuss, but there was nothing, no one, and I told the dog to lie down, and not to be foolish. I might have spared my breath, for Tim continued to snarl and growl, glaring always beyond me.

“He must hear these new people about, I think,” I said, in answer to Dick’s questioning look, “there was someone in my room, evidently mistaking the room, for they must have gone out by another door I have, for I saw the curtain which covers it, moving when I struck a match.”

“Oh! but that won’t do, old girl, I can’t have mistakes of that sort happening. Come, and I’ll fasten it,” said Dick, rising from his chair, shaking himself free from Tim’s too loving embrace.

So together we returned to my room carrying the lamp, followed by Tim, who came as if under protest, growling all the way.

Setting the lamp on the dress-table, Dick glanced round.

“Where’s the door?” he asked. “I’ll jolly soon settle mistakes.”

“There it is,” was my response, “there under that chintz curtain.”

“Why, you small cuckoo!” he said, laughing, “you must have had forty winks, for I dare bet it’s many moons since that door opened, it’s fairly rusted up; look at the lock and bolts, they are fast shut, and the key turned too.

I looked, but unconvinced, shook my head, saying:

“That door *was* opened, dear boy, and I intend to open it again, so help me.”

“You are foolish,” he said, “it isn’t meant to open.”

“Open it, there’s a dear,” I pleaded, “I must see through it.”

It took us working together, a good half-hour to wriggle those bolts back and turn that rusty key, and though I was now ready to admit I was mistaken, I was quite determined to see that door opened. At last the key turned and Dick, exerting his whole strength, leant on the door. It creaked, moved, and finally, after one more terrific push, yielded slowly moving back on its rusty hinges. A rush of damp, musty air greeted us, and the sound of skurrying mice, or even rats, made us draw back, to grab the lamp, holding it aloft as we peered into the room beyond us.

Amazed, speechless, we gazed.

The room was empty! carpetless! cold! grim! reeking of damp mould. Only one chair stood there, an old black carved oak chair, with a high back, faded blue velvet cushion moth eaten and hanging in rags. Long blue velvet curtains in the same condition hung across the windows, and from the torn fringes cobwebs cluttered, hanging in festoons.

Suddenly I stared, clutching Dick’s arm, and as we looked, there came the sound of a silvery, tinkling laugh, and the tap of high-heeled shoes crossing the floor.

It was only the fact of my brother’s arm suddenly catching me round the waist, that kept me from what he would have called “making a fool of myself,” as it was, I felt as if turned to ice, even the scream that terror brought to my lips, seemed to freeze there, and as the tap of the little heels died away, my brother’s voice sounded in my ears—

“Come, girl, pull yourself together,” and half-carrying me, he took me back to the sitting-room, depositing me in the chair by the fire, looking at me in silence for some minutes, before he spoke.

“It is not explainable, Pat dear, is it?”

I shook my head, not daring to trust my voice yet; then he looked at his watch.

“Too late to move, dear; no trains.”

This in answer, I think, to the appeal I knew he must see in my face.

Suddenly I missed Tim.

“The dog!” I managed to whisper.

“Ratting, most likely,” answered Dick, in what he attempted to make a nonchalant voice, “but I’d better see. You will be quite all right for a moment. Sit where you are, I’ll be quick.” And he vanished, leaving me sitting trembling, in my big chair, feeling too done up to even think.

True to his promise, he soon returned, carrying Tim, whom he laid down gently and began to rub his limbs.

“What?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he answered, gravely; “but he wasn’t ratting, he was lying on the floor gasping and trembling.”

“Did you see anything?” I managed to ask.

“No,” he replied, hesitatingly, “except the white cat. I saw that. It was standing close to him. They have had a scrap.”

“But Tim isn’t scratched,” I said.

“No—no—he’s not,” answered Dick. “Oh, don’t let’s talk of it, dear. Here, have a cig., and forget it. We will pile up the fire and I’ll bring our coats, and we will sit here until it is daylight enough to move, then we’ll scoot.”

We did our best to cheer up; and after awhile, Tim revived, and became more like himself. We tried to keep away from the subject uppermost in both our minds, but the long silences were not like our usual happy silences, there was a disturbing element, and I fancy both of us, indeed all three, would have been thankful if it had been 8 a.m. and not 8 p.m.

Our meal was brought in and put ready, old Martha glancing at us more than once as she laid the cloth, but neither of us spoke until she had departed; or, at least, Tim was the only one who spoke, and he glared at her and growled, as she moved nearer to us.

“What is it, old man?” asked Dick, soothingly; and, under the touch of his master’s hand the old dog quietened down once more.

We made a poor pretence at a meal, and were thankful to ring the bell and get it cleared away. As old Martha was finally leaving us, Dick said:

“Please don’t disturb us again. We are both going to do some writing, and may be late going to bed, don’t trouble to wait up, we shall not require anything further.”

The old dame seemed on the point of speaking, but thought better of it, and moved away. Just as she got to the door, I heard a faint “Meiow!” Tim sprang up, hair bristling and eyes aflame. I turned my head to look at the cat, and to my amazement, saw the old dame stoop down and stroke the empty air. Seeing me staring, she straightened herself and vanished.

“Don’t leave me again, Dick,” I implored. “I shall bolt if you do.”

“All right, old lady; but just let me run for our big coats, sit tight for a minute, I will not leave you again—promise.” And he was gone.

Am I more susceptible I wonder, to things unseen, than other people, for it seemed to me that the instant I was alone, the very atmosphere of the room altered. Shudderingly I endeavoured to “sit tight”; but, to my disordered nerves the room no longer seemed empty, and I sat grasping Tim’s collar with one hand, and the side of my chair with the other, until I heard Dick’s step returning; and with his entrance, some, at least, of the strain relaxed, and I breathed more easily.

We heaped up the fire, drew the table with the lamp closer to us, put our chairs as close together as possible, and covered our knees and Tim with one of the coats.

“Try and sleep, Pat; I will guard,” said Dick. But sleep was far from me, and I did not intend him to watch alone either, so we lit our smokes, and tried to read or chat.

A couple of hours had passed cosily and serenely, when a queer creaking sound arrested my attention, and I turned quickly. Dick looked up instantly, and our eyes turned instinctively to where stood the old-fashioned basket-work; and as we looked, we both heard the tumbling of a reel of cotton on the floor.

“Sounds as if the old cat had got loose among the work-basket,” said my brother, trying to joke. “Oh! look at Tim.”

I am certain the dog saw what we imagined, “the white cat,” but he made no attempt to get to close quarters with it, only glared and bristled, hugging close and yet closer to his master.

“Can you go through it, dear?” Dick asked me, somewhat anxiously. “I fear we are in for something of a night.”

“I’ll try,” I whispered. “I’ll stick to it if I can, I’ve always hankered to see and hear ghosts, so I must be glad my wish seems about to be realised, but I prefer people to cats,” I said, with a feeble attempt at a smile. As I spoke, the soft, tinkling laugh reached my ear. I grasped Dick’s hand, as we sat, silent, intent on we knew not what.

It must have been somewhere about midnight when the door behind us opened suddenly, violently, letting us a rush of cold damp air; and through the wide-flung heavy door, we saw dimly the old, high-backed chair with its faded torn cushion, and a glimpse of the hangings in the distance.

“The same room,” I managed to whisper, and Dick’s whispered “Buck up!” and the calm pressure of his hand on mine, worked wonders in quietening the terrific throbs of my heart.

We heard a heavy footfall, a tumbling, half-shuffling step, we heard the sound of something being kicked, we heard our furniture being knocked, we felt the presence of some other creature in the room, yet we saw nothing.

Somehow that other presence seemed to draw nearer, ever nearer to where we sat, and instinctively we rose and edged further and further from the fireplace, closer and closer to the door—the presence seemed to follow, and compel us to leave our refuge of safety, the door, and go nearer to the far end of the room beside the other door from whence “It” had entered, and then “It” seemed to relieve us of its following menace and go from us, and we heard as if a heavy body sank into one of the red leather chairs. I almost shrieked, but again the steady clasp of my brother’s arm reassured me.

We did not speak, yet both were now certain we were not alone, and both waited as if there was—something we must wait for, then the tinkling laugh sounded close beside us, close enough to make me start and gasp. The heavy body seemed to lift from the chair and pass us, with a cold gust of air, and we heard the little tapping shoes in the room beyond. Together we crept closer to that open door, until we stood there against our wills, and yet powerless to fight the power that drove us there.

The room was no longer in darkness, nor yet in rags and tatters, it had every appearance of an exquisitely furnished and upholstered room. I was *beyond* horror now—I seemed to be the interested spectator of a wordless Drama.

The room was no longer tenantless, for there, in the high oak chair, sat the figure of a girl, her small head with a wealth of red hair, was thrown back against the chair, and her blue eyes seemed to flash blue fire as she stared defiantly before her—one dainty foot in a silver-embroidered shoe, with the highest of heels, was poised on an ebony or black oak stool, the other was impatiently tapping the floor. In her arms was the large White Cat, looking at her and rubbing its head against her shoulder.

We saw a man go through the door by which we stood, as if he entered from our room—a big coarsely-made man, with the coarse bloated features of a hard drinker—we saw him go near to the chair where the dainty figure sat upright, defiant, we saw him raise a threatening band, but the little figure only gazed at him with blazing, scornful eyes. We saw him bend swiftly and draw from his breast pocket something that gleamed, and, frozen to the spot as we were, we saw him plunge a keen knife into that lovely body, and withdraw it, to plunge it deep into the White Cat. There was a long moaning cry, and the mocking little lady lay a huddled heap on the floor, with the White Cat clasped close in her arms. One shriek I gave, and fainted.

When I opened my eyes again, the grey light of dawn was stealing in at our windows, the fire was burning merrily, and a kettle hissing on the bob.

I was lying back in one of the big chairs, my brother was kneeling beside me, and a grey-haired, kindly-faced man was holding my hand. I came to myself, slowly, memory struggling to recall the “whys” and “wherefores.”

Dick answered my unspoken question, saying quietly:

“Don’t worry, dear, you are all safe.” And then youth and health began to re-assert themselves, and I tried to collect my scattered wits.

“She is all right, Doctor, isn’t she?” asked my faithful old brother.

A gruff, but kindly voice answered:

“Yes, but take your time, and then get her home.”

“I—I—oh! what was it all?” I asked, consciousness and memory coming suddenly into their own. “Did I dream it? Where is the pretty girl? Oh! tell me what did it all mean?”

“Better tell her, Doctor,” said Dick, “there will be no peace otherwise.”

Then the gruff voice bade me “get up and look into the room beyond.”

“Must I?” I asked, shuddering.

“Come, girl,” said my brother, and with his arm round me, he led me to the still open door. I looked—and saw an empty, dirty room—with cushions and hangings of faded blue velvet festooned with cobwebs—peopled only with skurrying rats and mice.

“Well! But—what—” I began.

“Ah! my dear lady,” answered the old doctor, “I cannot tell you why, but from the accounts of your brother here, I can only say, that you appear to have witnessed the tragedy which happened long years ago in this old inn, and which gave it the unenviable reputation it possesses of being haunted by a pair of lovers and a White Cat. I cannot tell you the story, but old Seth Manners, who lives with his grand-daughter a mile away, could, if you care to hear it, tell the story. I only know that once every year the whole scene takes place, but, except old Martha, who’s nursing the girl was, I know of no one else who has seen it. But then,” he went on, “no one comes here. Did no one warn you?”

“Well, vaguely,” I answered, as my mind flew back to veiled hints on the part of fellow travellers, the station master, the old man where we had tea, and last, but by no means least, if we had been intelligent enough to understand Timothy’s warnings without end, from the moment we reached the door of the Star Inn, and met the White Cat on its doorstep.

“If you feel like remaining on,” said the doctor, “you may rest in peace, nothing more will happen until twelve months has gone by, and if you decide to stay, I shall be delighted to see you both any time—my house lies beyond the village, close to that belt of pines against the hill.”

“Pine Side,” I murmured.

“Exactly,” said Dr. Moss, “Pine Side—it is also the name of my house, come and see it”

“Are you game, Pat?” asked my dauntless brother.

“Yes,” I said, “I am. I want to call on Seth Manners, and hear the story of the Lovers and the White Cat.”

And so we stayed, and were greatly bowed down to in the village, on account of what they called Lancashire grit; and maybe there is something in that same grit which enabled two unsuspecting, sensitive beings to witness, without losing their reason, a tragedy of other days, enacted as clearly as we witnessed this one. If I must be quite truthful, there is no other being in this world with whom I should have had the nerve to see it through with, but that one beloved brother, with his calm and steady courage and ever tender care.

We spent the remainder of our holiday there, where we began it, and not the least enjoyable part of it were the happy hours of talk and mutual interest we spent with our kindly friend Dr. Moss. We found under that gruff exterior one of the kindest natures that ever lived; and our talk, in those quiet evenings beside his study fire, often led us into channels deeper than we could navigate. For, scientist as he was, he never succeeded in explaining away those things which we saw with our own unclouded eyes and heard with our keen ears, in our quaint sitting-room at the Star Inn. And one day, when I had recovered from the shock to my nerves, we called on our old friend Seth Manners; and, over a cup of tea and a crust from his big loaf, we told him our experiences at the inn, and begged him to tell us the story.

He took a great deal of persuading, but more, I think, because he liked to feel his was the important position of being the only person besides old Martha, who knew the story, and could faithfully recount it.

“It is no’ a long tale,” he began. “So sit you here, Miss; and when I gets me pipe a-goin’ yer shall ’ave it.”

“It’s like this,” he began, between the puffs of his pipe, “Sir Dan Barnes owned all this place, and thought he oughter own the souls and bodies of the people as well, and Miss Maudie, the rector’s pretty girl, said always as ’ed not brow-beat ’er—she’d see to that. ’Appen ’er ole father knuckled under a goodish bit to Sir Dan, and w’en Sir Dan sets eye on pretty Miss Maudie, just when she come ’ome from school in London, the poor old rector was in a bad way for money. ’Is youngest lad was a wrong ’un and ’e got bettin’ and drinkin’, an’ old Sir Dan got the lad in ’is clutches and led ’im on, till the lad forged ’is employer’s name to a big pot ’o money, and then begged of Sir Dan ’is-self, and Sir Dan said ’ed pay the cash, if Maudie would marry ’im. The girl was driven to it, though ’er ’eart, poor lass, was guv elsewhere. Sir Dan gave ’er a week to make up ’er mind, and she gave in, but must take ’er big white cat, Benbow, with ’er.

“Sir Dan ’ated that cat, it alus spitted at ’im, but the girl said ‘Me and Benbow, or neither,’ so ’e took them both, and w’ile the ’all was being done up, they lived at the Star. Sir Dan ’e was blind drunk every night, and he treated the girl shameful, but whenever ’e raised ’is hand to ’it ’er, Benbow spit at ’im and often clawed ’im, an’ the girl just laughed and mocked ’im. ’E used to chase the pair of ’em round the room, and threaten to kill ’em both when ’e got ’em, but Lady Maudie used to laugh that little mocking laugh of ’ers, an’ blow out all the candles and laugh again when ’e fell into the furniture in ’is drunk efforts to catch them.

“One night he ordered ’er to put the beastly cat down or ’ed kill it, and she chucked up ’er dainty ’ed and laughed in ’is drunken face and ’e whips out an old Italian knife ’e ’ad and stabbed ’er to the ’eart and then the Cat; and some say as threw them both in the old chest in the room and then shot ’imself, and they didn’t find Lady Maud for some days after, and then she was found in the chest with the body of the White Cat still clasped in ’er arms.

“Old Martha nursed Lady Maudie as a babby, and watched over ’er when she could, and sez as she often sees ’er, and that Benbow follows ’er always. P’raps the old woman’s dotty—she’s near eighty, anyhow; she swears that her darlin’ Maud still lives in the inn, and that those who have eyes to see, know that she is speakin’ the truth when she says that Lady Maudie and her White Cat still live in the Star Inn at Pine Side.”

The old man stopped speaking, and seemed oblivious of our presence; so, laying some silver on the table, we slipped away, and next day our holiday ended.

We often speak of it, and it is always a vivid memory. The “whys and wherefores” remain—as they ever will—unsolved, until they and all else are made clear to our limited understandings.

The fact remains—we saw what took place long before our time, and the sight of a White Cat always has power to make me shudder and remember

“PINE SIDE.”