

The House in the Wood

By H. F. W. Tatham

The cottage where the boy lived with his grandfather was on the edge of a great wood—a great, dark, gloomy wood, that stretched away for miles. Between the cottage and the place where the trees suddenly began there was a green curving meadow, full of rich grass, which ran close up to the border of the forest and contrasted pleasingly with the darker foliage of the trees that rose beyond it in serried ranks. The boy had often wondered what it was like in the wood, especially in summer-time, when the open ground round the cottage lay scorched by the hot sun and the spaces in between the trees were full of cool shadows. His mind pictured to itself all sorts of delights there—strange animals running about, such as he had never seen in the fields, strange birds singing, possibly inhabitants more mysterious still; for the prohibition that his grandfather had laid upon him, bidding him strictly, as he valued his life and soul, not to enter the wood, had fired his imagination and filled his thoughts with fancied delights, and fancied dangers perhaps even more alluring to a boyish mind.

But he was an obedient boy, and would not perhaps have thought of disobeying the command but for a certain event. One evening as he sat by the cottage door—his grandfather was out—he saw something come just to the edge of the wood and beckon to him. It was getting dusk, and he could not see the figure plainly, but he felt somehow an almost irresistible desire to follow it when it slipped back again among the trees. However, he withstood the temptation, although he said nothing to his grandfather on the subject. But the next night, at the same time, the same thing happened. He started up and went some paces towards the figure, but then suddenly controlled himself and returned. Again he said nothing, and when the third evening came, though he had intended not to be within sight of the place, he somehow found himself gazing at the trees with a keen feeling of anticipation. Sure enough the figure appeared, and this time the boy, almost despite himself, rose up, hurried across the intervening space, and entered the forbidden ground.

It was dark and cool under the trees, and the boy could see little at first; certainly no figure was visible. Cautiously he moved forward; then suddenly a little animal of some kind that he did not know ran across a small clearing in front, and he forgot everything in his eagerness to see it nearer. He ran forward into the wood, seeing the animal from time to time flit by among the trees, and had gone a great distance when finally he lost sight of it, and at the same time realised that he did not know where he was. Just at that moment he saw that a man was standing before him. The man was tall and handsome, and looked pleasant enough, though his eyes were piercing, and the boy felt a rather odd but not unpleasing sensation of dreaminess come over him as he looked at him. By and by this feeling of dreaminess passed, and he found himself looking the man freely in the face, and even experiencing a new sort of confidence in him. At the same time the cottage, and his grandfather, and all the country that lay outside the wood, appeared to him to be very far away, and even in a sense unreal if not non-existent, so that when the man asked him if he would come home with him and be his servant, he was quite ready to say yes, and soon found himself following his new friend further into the wood, while the trees grew larger and thicker and the light dimmer and dimmer as they went on.

Presently he saw a brighter light ahead of him, and in a few moments the trees suddenly stopped, and there was an open space of perhaps forty yards across, carpeted with smooth green

grass, in the middle of which rose a house. The house was small and ordinary in appearance, and there was nothing about it to arrest the boy's attention. His guide went up to the door, pushed it open, and went in, and the boy followed.

The greater part of the ground-floor of the house consisted of a longish room, clearly serving as a dining-room. Above that was a floor with several apartments, of which the boy was shown one as his own. His master had another. From this floor a stair led up to another storey, but this stair was shut off by a door, locked as the boy afterwards found, and he gathered that nobody was allowed to go up it without permission.

A meal was soon ready downstairs, though how and where prepared the boy could not tell, and this was the first thing that made him feel uncomfortable. There were others as the days went on, as we shall see.

The next was the fact that his master often had company feasting in the dining-room late at night, and their revelry displeased the boy, brought up quietly and soberly as he had always been. There were both men and women, and he saw, when he was called in sometimes to serve them, that they were young for the most part, and handsome and richly dressed. But the third thing was his visit to the upper storey, and what he found there, and the consequences of it.

It was one day when the master was out, that the boy, while brushing his clothes, heard something drop from a pocket to the floor, and picking it up saw that it was a very odd-looking key. It at once came into his mind that this was the key of the upper storey. And so it proved to be; for it fitted perfectly when he tried it. He turned it in the lock, pushed open the door, and saw the steep stair going up. For a moment he hesitated, then with a sudden resolution he went quickly up the stairs.

The flight led him up to a circular landing, round which were several doors, all shut. He moved out into the middle of this, and looked about him, turning round several times. Suddenly he heard the sound of a door closing, and looking quickly round, saw that he was surrounded by shut doors on every side, one that stood at the head of the flight of stairs having swung softly to behind him. But he had forgotten to take his precise bearings, and was not sure which of three particular doors it was that masked the head of the staircase. Making a guess (for the silence and these blind shut doors began to alarm him) he went to one at random and opened it.

It was not the right door. He saw a room, dark and dusty, and something that lay on the ground in front of the fireplace—he could not clearly see what. He stood and stared for a moment or two, hoping his eyes would grow more accustomed to the light; when the thing, whatever it was, rose suddenly, and with a low snarling growl ran across the floor towards him. He had a vision of fierce eyes and long white teeth as he sprang back and slammed the door just in time; and as he stood outside with his heart beating, he heard the thing growl and sniff in the room and scratch at the inside of the door. Partially recovered from his fright, he opened the next door. Again he was disappointed; the room was lighter than the other, but contained little furniture besides a table, on which stood a bottle. Somehow, frightened as he was, he felt a great curiosity to know what this bottle contained; and going up to it, drew out the stopper and smelt the green sticky liquid it held. The smell was sweetish, but he could not recognise it, and he was about to replace the stopper when an itching, sudden and violent, in one of his eyes made him raise his hand to rub it. Now it chanced that some of the liquid in the stopper had wetted his finger and naturally touched his eye, and to his intense surprise he found that the sight of that eye became infinitely keener than that of the other. Pleased at the discovery, he carefully moistened his finger again, and proceeded to smear the other eye also, whereupon it also was endowed with sight preternaturally sharp.

By this time he felt that he had been long enough on forbidden ground; so, replacing the stopper, he left the room, shut the door, and opening the next one found the stairs and the way down; then, after locking the door at the stair-foot, he put back the key in his master's clothes, and the clothes in his master's room. After that he went out into the wood, to test his new powers. He was delighted to find that he could see all sorts of things in the dark recesses and among the thick leaves that had been invisible before; and he was so much interested in this pursuit that the time slipped rapidly away, and when at last he returned to the house it was dusk, and he saw by the line of light that showed through the curtained windows that the dining-room was filled by company, while the noise told him that the revelling had begun. As he entered the house he heard his master's voice call angrily, and hurried to open the dining-room door. On opening it he stood aghast with amazement and horror.

Round the table there sat a dreadful company. All the glamour of youth and beauty had vanished, and his eyes with their new vision discerned nothing but hideous hags and men with vile and bestial faces; while his master—but what he saw when he looked at him he could never exactly recall; yet he knew that there stood in his place a dark shape, with eyes of burning fire, glaring upon him with rage and fury. The boy started back, shading his eyes with his hand; and at that the master, as though divining the secret, rushed at him. With a shriek of terror the boy turned and fled out into the darkening wood, anywhere out of that dreadful house and away from that accursed company and those flaming furious eyes. As he burst from the door he thought he heard the footsteps of his master rush up the stairs; as for himself, he ran straight on, hoping against hope to reach the border of the wood. On he went; his breath came thick, his knees shook, and then suddenly he heard behind him a long low howl, like that of a wolf. With renewed speed he hurried on, keeping in a straight line as nearly as he could, but the howl was repeated, and each time louder and louder, as if the thing were drawing nearer. By this time night had fallen, but the moon had risen and his eyes could pierce the darkness with supernatural power, and he thought he saw a brighter light ahead, and dared to hope that perhaps the edge of the wood was close; but just at that moment the howl broke out again, so loud and near that his heart seemed to come into his mouth at the thought of what might be pursuing him, and looking round he saw, through a gap in the trees, a black animal with eyes of flame not fifty yards behind. He rushed desperately forward. Yes, there was the edge of the wood, and the green grass meadow, and his grandfather's house; but the undergrowth grew thick between, and as he tore his way through he heard the padding of the creature close behind. The last thorn bush stopped him for a second, and he felt the teeth close on his leg, but with a despairing effort he wrenched himself free, and sank fainting on the grass outside the accursed wood, and felt that he was safe, even as his senses left him.

When he came to again, the wood was quiet. He was cold and he felt his leg painful, and looking down saw that it had bled considerably and that a piece of flesh had been torn away by the teeth of the animal, whatever it was, that had pursued him. When he rose to walk the wound was dreadfully stiff, but he managed to stagger across the grass to his grandfather's cottage, where he rapped on the door. His grandfather opened it; they fell into each other's arms. The old man was far too overjoyed at seeing the boy again to blame him for his disobedience, punished sufficiently as it had been by its own consequences. He told the boy more fully of the hideous perils of the wood, and also warned him that all danger was not yet over. The boy knew the secret of the magic ointment, and the ghastly inhabitants would not rest till they had taken vengeance for his presumption. The boy was not much alarmed, as he felt sure that the wizard had no power outside the wood and could not even cross its boundaries; else why had he been

left unmolested when he had lain insensible on the grass? And his confidence was increased by the absence of all molestation for some months. But on the last night of September something happened. The day had been unusually gusty and stormy, and the trees in their full foliage had rocked and swayed terribly. But it was not till the boy was in bed that a loud crash told him that one of them had fallen. He jumped out of bed and hurried to the window. A huge elm, nearly a hundred feet high, had been blown down, and lay pointing directly to the cottage from the wood. The light of the full moon fell straight upon it and he could see every twig, and even some animal that ran and leapt among the great branches that were not more than fifty yards away. He could not clearly see what this animal was, and strained his eyes, from which, by this time, the effect of the magic ointment had worn away, to try and discern its nature. At last, overcome by curiosity, he slipped on some clothes and hurried across to the tree.

The animal had crept in among the branches, and the boy went round beyond them to where the trunk lay, hoping to scare the creature out into the open. He mounted the trunk and peered among the leaves. There, sure enough, was something dark. It was crawling, however, towards him, and somehow, as he looked, an uncomfortable feeling came over him. At that moment there was a swift rush of feet along the tree-trunk and he was seized from behind.

To struggle proved useless. He was bound and gagged and borne swiftly away into the wood. After a while his bearer stopped; he heard a door open, and shortly after he felt he was being carried upstairs. He was flung down on the floor of a room and left lying there.

How long he was left there he knew not; he was in an agony of terror and remorse, and while he dreaded the solitude and darkness, he dreaded yet more the coming of any visitor. At last the door opened and something was let into the room. He could not see, lying as he was in darkness, what it was, but he heard the door shut and a low laugh from outside, and then a soft padding footfall. By and by the thing came up closer and sniffed at him; and though he shut his eyes tight and did not dare to look, he knew that it was the animal that had chased him through the wood. Every moment he expected to feel the sharp teeth meet in his flesh, and he felt somehow that his only chance was to lie still and not to move a muscle. So with shut eyes he lay, and the thing walked round him and growled low at intervals, and at intervals he could feel its hot breath on his face; and once its teeth pressed his leg, but somehow it did not hurt him. And the weary hours passed, and daylight began to brighten, and his hopes, he knew not why, to rise; for he felt that some unseen protection guarded him, even on that unholy ground, and kept that famished hell-hound from touching him. At last he opened his eyes. There lay the hound, with its misshapen form and eyes of fire and tongue lolling from its red mouth between its jagged teeth; but its eyes were fixed not on him but on the door, and it seemed to be waiting for something or some one to come in. And at that moment the handle of the door turned and the wizard entered with a lamp in one hand. Shutting the door behind him he stepped across the room, set down the lamp on a table, and looked at the boy. 'Still alive?' he muttered; 'still alive? Tear him, good dog, tear him,' and he turned towards the creature. But it had risen to its feet, and was standing by the door with its hungry eyes fixed on the wizard, and it did not obey. The man spoke again, and angrily; and as the hound still did not move, but only stared upon him, he stepped across and struck it with his hand. As the blow fell, with a yell like that of a demon it sprang at his throat.

There was a ghastly struggle. The lamp was upset; the curtains caught fire and blazed; the man and the hound rolled on the ground, tearing and biting each other, with an awful bestial fury. The boy, with a strength given by terror, wrenched his hands, torn and bleeding, from their fastenings, and succeeded in untying the bonds that bound his feet; and just as the walls of the

room caught fire he struggled to the window. The distance to the ground was not great, and tying the rope that had bound him to the bar, he lowered himself and dropped to the ground.

As he ran through the woods he heard the flames roar, and saw the red light of the conflagration rise against the moon. But he did not wait, and at last, after long and sometimes apparently hopeless wanderings, he reached the border of the wood and safety. It was, indeed, some way from his grandfather's house, but he reached that by skirting the edge, luckily taking the right direction. And that was the end of troubles; so we may conclude that the wizard and his familiar perished, and were consumed in the flames that burnt the House in the Wood.