

The Tenwood Witch

By Barry Pain

Mr. Ambrose Kay made his living by being born with money, marrying some more, and inheriting the rest. There is no other method of making a living which throws so little strain upon the maker, and if this way were more generally adopted it is probable that much grumbling and discontent would be avoided. Ambrose Kay had a sweet and gentle disposition, never having felt any strain of any kind. He never grumbled about his house in Hill Street, and he was careful not to speak about Tenwood Manor in the county of Sussex at all, because if he had spoken he would have bragged. He thought Tenwood to be in every respect perfection in spite of its gruesome tradition; he loved the place. He was always rather formal, and at the age of forty his round eyes peered through gold-rimmed glasses and his speech was slow and precise. Strangers were generally a little surprised when they found that he was a good sportsman, of an old-fashioned type. He had married at twenty-five a good-natured tomboy of a girl seven years younger than himself, and the marriage had been eminently happy.

But no man is so happily placed that he may avoid all anxieties, and Ambrose Kay had his share of them. There was, for instance, the time when his hair was getting thin on the top. There was a long period of struggle. Specialists were called in; flagrant and impossible quacks were not disdained. One remedy followed another. There were gleams of hope occasionally in a night of despair—times when he would come down to breakfast and tell his wife that he thought he had really hit on the right stuff at last. But one by one the gleams died out, and an inexorable looking-glass assured him that the struggle had gone against him. That anxiety was all over now. James had long ago cleared the majestic array of ineffective bottles from Mr. Kay's dressing-room. Ambrose Kay was quite resigned now, and the crown of his head was completely bald. He was still anxious about his figure. He kept a weighing-machine in his dressing-room, and consulted it at regular intervals. And here his war with fortune was more successful. On the days when that stupid machine made insulting disclosures of a gain of flesh, Ambrose Kay became appallingly strenuous. The time which was not given to violent exercise was time lost. At the table he became an ascetic, partaking of specially prepared dishes from which everything at all amusing had been rigorously excluded. And he always triumphed; the weighing-machine admitted the loss of the requisite number of pounds, and for a while Ambrose Kay was happy and himself again. But he was still anxious; at any time it might be necessary to begin the struggle again.

But his chief and most persistent anxiety was his only child Victoria, just fourteen at the time of this story. He was most seriously troubled on the subject of her health, which was excellent. He worried continually about her education, and the formation of her character, and the books she read, and the pony she rode. Ordinary parental care would have looked like stark neglect beside the multitudinous solitudes of Ambrose Kay. Never was any child so hygienically fed and clothed as Victoria, so protected and waddled in cotton-wool, so meticulously administered. Few nursemaids had been able to keep up to the high standard that Mr. Kay demanded for Victoria for more than a month or two. The world was ransacked to find a governess of perfection for her. Her pony had been subjected to tests that would have found out the weak points of a canonized saint, and was without doubt the safest pony in Sussex. Victoria surveyed it all with wondering eyes, and called the pony an old sheep.

It occurred to many people, Victoria included, that Mr. Kay rather overdid it. "After all," her mother observed, "she's not ill, you know. She's not even delicate."

"Possibly not," Mr. Kay admitted, "possibly not. But there's the nervous constitution to consider. Only to-day I discovered (fortunately in time) that Mrs. Annersley had given her that book of Hans Andersen's. I will not allow her to hear anything whatever about fairies, or ghosts, or ogres, or any supernatural nonsense of that kind. That's the way that children are tortured and their nerves ruined for life."

"Don't know," said Mrs. Kay meditatively. "I used to read Hans Andersen, and my nerves have come out of it all right. And the child lives in a haunted house, anyhow."

"Please don't revive that old story; we know that there's nothing in it, and it's best forgotten."

"Well, the Tenwood Witch died here."

"Some old woman who was so called died here undoubtedly. That is the only scrap of truth in the whole thing. Nothing has ever occurred to make us believe that the house is haunted."

"The servants talk among themselves at times."

"Servants will always talk. If any one of them breathes a word on the subject to Victoria it will mean instant dismissal, and they know it. If there had been anything ghostly to see or hear, you or I would have come across it."

"I suppose so."

"And it's not only Victoria I'm thinking about. You know how nervous Alicia is, and she's sleeping in the haunted room—I mean the room that was once said to be haunted."

Alicia was Lady Alicia Medley, a distant cousin of Ambrose Kay's. She was unmarried, sixty years old, melancholy, and gifted with a fine capacity for believing almost anything. She was particularly great at amateur doctoring and dispensing. She never visited Tenwood without discovering that Victoria needed "a little something." This time she insisted upon cod-liver oil. Victoria loathed cod-liver oil, and to say that she loved her Aunt Alicia would be a misrepresentation of fact. The only other Christmas guests who had arrived so far were Mr. Annersley and his wife—the lady who had been indiscreet enough to present Victoria with "Hans Andersen"—and their daughter Judith, a girl of about the same age of Victoria and her dearest and most intimate friend.

As the two girls crossed the park that afternoon Miss Judith Annersley observed that the surrounding scenery was rather decent, and that one ought to have a pretty good time at Tenwood.

"Think so, Judy?" said Victoria: "It wouldn't be so rotten if it weren't for the grown-ups."

Miss Annersley protested that she had found Mr. and Mrs. Kay rather decent—in which apparently they resembled the scenery.

"Dear papa's all right," said Victoria, "when I'm handling him alone. He's an awful muff about me, but I can generally work things somehow."

"Queer too," said Judith, "because he's not a muff other ways—I mean to say he's a good shot and all that."

"Yes, but he's got me on his mind and on his nerves, and now that he's got Aunt Alicia to back him it's no joke. Judy, that woman's a holy terror. It's cod-liver oil at present. But she's taken the carriage and driven off to the chemist's this afternoon, so goodness knows what it will be next. She says that at this season of the year the young and thoughtless (that's you and me) are apt to try their digestions severely, and it is as well to have a few useful correctives on hand. Those were her own blessed words."

"I say," said Miss Judith Annersley, "couldn't we shunt her?"

“Don’t I wish we could I” said Victoria, with fervor. “She’s an utter and complete cat, and I wouldn’t much mind what I did. Mind you, you’re not safe, Judy. She was on to your mother this morning, saying that you didn’t look robust, and she could recommend a tonic. I had that tonic myself last year, and it was enough to poison an elephant.”

“I don’t know why she shouldn’t go,” said Judith pensively. “And I’ve got an idea that wouldn’t be half bad.”

They discussed that idea at great length.

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Lady Alicia Medley looked pale and haggard at breakfast next morning. In answer to kind inquiries from Victoria and her friend Judith, she admitted that she had not slept well. Later in the morning she had a serious interview with Mr. and Mrs. Kay.

“Ethel,” said Lady Alicia solemnly, “I am sorry to have to tell you that I cannot be one of your Christmas party this year. I cannot, in fact, spend one more night under this roof, and I leave by the afternoon train. And, if you take my advice, you also will leave this house as soon as may be and at any cost, and never return to it.”

“Dear me!” exclaimed Mr. Kay, “I’m awfully sorry. This is very sudden. What has been happening?”

Lady Alicia Medley observed that there were more things in heaven and earth than Ambrose supposed. She had had a strange and awful experience, one which she would never forget, and wished never to go through again.

“You don’t mean to say that you think you’ve seen—”

“No, Ambrose, I do not think I’ve seen. I am not that kind of woman. I have actually seen the historic ghost of this house—the Tenwood Witch—and seen as clearly as I see you now.”

“This is too extraordinary. Are you sure you didn’t dream it?” Mrs. Kay asked.

“Not being a complete imbecile, Ethel, I know whether I am awake or not. When this occurrence happened I was wideawake.”

“Do tell us about it.”

“Like yourselves, I discredited the story of the Tenwood Witch. I have slept in the haunted room often on previous visits, and have neither seen nor heard anything unusual. I never expected to see anything, and I am not a nervous woman. If I felt anything approaching to nerves I should take Thatcher’s All-round Tonic or some other suitable remedy. I have been told that I am particularly cool and clear-headed, and certainly I am not a person to imagine things.”

“Certainly not.”

“Very well. At a quarter to two this morning I was awakened by an icy breath passing over my face. I looked round and saw that the door of my room was slowly opening. As it opened the moonlight streamed in from the big window on the other side of the passage, so that I could see distinctly and beyond the possibility of any mistake. And suddenly there in the doorway stood the figure of the Tenwood Witch—a bent old woman with a shawl over her head and a cloak that reached to the ground. I could not see the face very well, but in dress and general appearance she closely resembled the portrait of the Tenwood Witch in the county history.”

Mr. Kay made a mental note that Victoria must on no account be allowed to consult the county history.

“In one hand the figure held a great staff, the twisted bough of some tree, and with this it made threatening gestures. When I looked again it had gone—vanished without the faintest sound of a

footstep. I waited a little, and then I switched on the light, got up, and shut and locked the door. That was all, but it was enough. I am sorry, but I must go. My maid is packing my things at this moment—she feels quite as I do about it.”

Lady Alicia’s account of what had happened was not strictly accurate. I doubt very much if she ever felt that icy breath. Nor was it true that the footsteps were absolutely noiseless. I happen to know that the Tenwood Witch on this occasion was wearing tennis shoes, in order to step as quietly as possible, but she was not absolutely noiseless. Lady Alicia remained obdurate. No persuasions could move her. “No, Ethel,” she said, “I’ll come and see you in Hill Street with pleasure, but never again in this house. And if you take my advice you’ll sell the place at once.”

“But she did dream it,” said Ambrose Kay to his wife when they were left alone.

“Yes, unless someone was playing a practical joke on her.”

“I don’t think it likely. Of course, I don’t believe a word of the nonsense any more than you do, but we must take steps at once to prevent any word of this getting to Victoria’s ears.

“You think Vic would be frightened?”

“I can’t say. She appears high-spirited, but I am convinced that the nervous constitution is there. Children have been frightened into lunatic asylums by these stupid ghost stories before now. Unfortunately, Alicia told her maid, and there can be no doubt that the maid will have told our own servants. I must see to it immediately.”

Ambrose Kay developed as much energy as if his weighing-machine had recorded a three-pound increase. Long before Lady Alicia had left the house every servant in the house knew that if they breathed one word of what had happened to Miss Victoria Kay their portion would be instant dismissal, with, in all probability, a long term of penal servitude to follow.

“Ambrose,” said Lady Alicia sternly, just before her departure, “I can see by your manner that you disbelieve me.”

“Not at all,” said Ambrose. “I’m sure you thought you saw what you say. These illusions do sometimes happen, especially when one is not quite awake.”

“Really, you’re extremely trying, Ambrose. I don’t have illusions. I saw what was there, and I will not run the risk of another similar shock to my nerves.

“You could have any of the other bedrooms, of course. It’s only the room you had that is supposed to be haunted. You used to laugh at it.”

“That was before I had this awful experience. Nothing would induce me to spend another night in the house. And in my opinion you will be acting very wrongly if you do not warn your other guests and let them visit you later, when you’ve sold this place and have a decent house where this kind of thing does not happen.”

“But, you know, I can’t sell this place, even if I wanted to. It’s to go to Victoria. And if I warned people about a ghost they’d either laugh at me or think that I was making excuses because I didn’t want them.”

“Well, I have done my duty. I have warned the Annersleys, and I am sorry to say that they treated the matter in a very flippant and frivolous manner. Possibly by this time to-morrow they will be sorry they did not leave when I did. You may be sorry also.”

As Ambrose Kay watched the carriage vanish down the drive he did not feel absolutely heartbroken at the loss. They had done their duty in asking her, but she was rather a lugubrious old lady, and did not add to the enjoyment of a Christmas house-party. Besides, he felt a little doubtful about Lady Alicia’s indiscriminate prescriptions. If Victoria needed medicine, would it not after all be as well that the medicine should be given by a regular doctor? And, finally, he was annoyed with her for her attempt to detach the Annersleys. She was of the family, and could

come and go as she pleased or as her nightmares might happen to move her; but what right had she to try to spoil his Christmas house-party?

An idea occurred to him. If Lady Alicia had told the Annersleys all about it, it was just possible that they might be mad enough to speak of it in the presence of Victoria. Obviously, it was of no use to muzzle the servants if the visitors were free to do the harm. He could picture Victoria in a madhouse, her nervous constitution wrecked from the terror inspired by indiscreet revelations of the spirit world. He sought for Mrs. Annersley at once.

She treated the matter as a joke, but was quite willing to promise to say nothing to Victoria about it. "Still," she added, "why not let her share the fun? I told Judith, and she doesn't seem much upset by it."

"Ah, but possibly Judith has not Victoria's nervous constitution, and children often suffer terribly from these things when they are too proud to admit it. Dear me, there is Judith in the garden with Victoria. If you don't mind, I think I'll just say a word to her."

He went down and secured Judith. "I say, my dear, I believe you've heard why Lady Alicia left so suddenly. Now, of course, I know that she never saw any ghost at all."

"So do I," said Judith.

"Sensible girl. There are no such things as ghosts. Still, it might be as well not to tell Victoria. She is not quite so strong-minded as you are. She has a nervous constitution. A thing like that might keep her awake at night. So don't tell her why Lady Alicia left."

"All right," said Judith seriously, "I won't tell her," and then, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, she broke into a wild burst of uncontrollable laughter. She apologized breathlessly as soon as she could speak, and explained that her father and mother had made fun of it; she supposed that was why she had laughed.

"I see," said Mr. Kay, but he shook his head seriously.

"I assure you," he told his wife afterwards, "that the child, Judith Annersley, was on the verge of hysteria. Of course she would not confess that she was frightened, and tried to make me believe that she was rather amused than not, but I could see very well that she was not herself. I'm really sorry we ever asked that old cat here at all; why should everybody suffer because she happens to have a nightmare? It's too bad. Thank Heaven, Victoria will never hear anything about it. I've guarded against that."

His weighing-machine that night guaranteed a loss of several ounces. From one point of view this was satisfactory. It illustrated, as he observed, the power of mind over matter, and the effects of worry on the general physique.

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Judith and Victoria spent a happy afternoon. Their conversation was interrupted at intervals by bursts of laughter that left them helpless and speechless.

"And to think, Judy," said Victoria, "that I nearly missed it altogether. I'd made up my mind to go at twelve o'clock, because that's the proper time for ghosts and hobgoblins. But I didn't wake till nearly two. I'd half a mind to chuck it until to-night, but then I thought I'd take my chance. It would have been better just at midnight, but I guessed it would scare her any time. So I slipped on my toggery and slithered down the tower stairs in my tennis shoes. She never said a word. Oh, that was all right—that was quite absolutely right! And there's a good five-shilling bottle of cod-liver oil at the bottom of the fish-pond."

“Her parting present to me,” said Judith, “was a large tin of egyptic tablets. I was to take one after every meal—or two if I had any feeling of constriction.”

“What’s that?”

“Blessed if I know.”

“What have you done with them?”

“I gave a big handful of them to your old pony.”

What a pig you are, Judy! You oughtn’t to have done that.”

“That’s all right. He wouldn’t look at them. So I buried them all!”

“Do you know what I’m going to do?” asked Victoria. “I’m going to ask papa to give me the haunted room. It’s much nicer than the room I’ve got. It’s bigger, and it’s got lots of cupboards, and it’s panelled.”

“He won’t do it.”

“Yes, he will. He doesn’t believe in the witch business himself, and he’ll always do anything I want unless he can argue that it’s bad for me. The worst of it is that I’ll have to tell him about this little spree of ours one of these days.”

“I shouldn’t. Why?”

“Don’t know. I’ve got to tell the poor old dear everything that I can tell him. I can’t tell him that I rode his hunter the other morning, because if I did he’d sack every man and boy in the stables. And it’s not their fault, because I persuaded them. But I’ll tell him about the Tenwood Witch; I shouldn’t wonder if it amused him. I fancy he’s not too keen about Aunt Alicia himself. Besides, it’s Christmas time, and nobody can make much of a row about anything at Christmas time.”

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Victoria kept her word. She told her father the whole story. He said that she had been very wrong, and she must promise never to do it again. She promised at once. It was, he reminded her, the duty of children to show a proper respect for their aunts.

“Even if they give you pills?” suggested Victoria.

Besides, her father urged, these practical jokes were very dangerous. Victoria herself apparently had not got a nervous constitution, but Aunt Alicia had. It was entirely due to Victoria’s wickedness that Aunt Alicia was not with them and sharing in the Christmas festivities.

At this point a slight spasm crossed over her father’s face. The spasm became a smile, and the smile became a laugh.

It may be presumed that she was forgiven. For at present she occupies the haunted room, and at an impromptu fancy dress dance that Christmas she had considerable success as the Tenwood Witch.