

# The Pines

By Elliot O'Donnell

“Who is the most interesting person in this institution?” my friend Dr. Custance remarked, repeating my words. “If you mean from your point of view—ghosts, I should say Dacre, George Richard Dacre. He is pretty old now—close upon seventy, and very possibly you have never heard of him. The case, with which he was somewhat closely connected, took place in Cumberland about forty years ago, and the spot is still said to be haunted. If you would like to hear all about it, come along, and I will introduce you to him.”

Custance led me into a room, where an old man, with a glistening bald head and white beard, sat, leaning back in his chair, and examining his hands with an air of strange intensity.

“Mr. Dacre,” Custance remarked, “I have brought you a visitor, a Mr. Elliot O'Donnell, who is very interested in the supernatural, and would much like to hear some of your experiences.”

The old man raised his eyes; they did not look at me, but beyond, far beyond, into a world that seemed known only to himself.

“I have only had one experience,” he said, “and that was a long while ago; so long that, at times, it seems as if it must have happened to me in another incarnation, when I was something out of doors—a pine or an elm—something growing in a wood. I can still, occasionally, smell resin, after one of those long hot summers we used to have,—seventy or eighty years ago,—and occasionally hear the wind, the deliciously cool, evening breezes, rustling and sighing, as it were, through my branches and fanning my perspiring bark. Sit down, and I will tell you all about it.

\* \* \*

“It was a cold night. Rain had been falling steadily not only for hours but days—the ground was saturated. As I walked along the country lane, the slush splashed over my boots and trousers. To my left was a huge stone wall, behind which I could see the nodding heads of pines; and through them the wind was rushing, making a curious whistling sound—now loud, now soft—roaring and gently murmuring. The sound fascinated me. I fancied it might be the angry voice of a man and the plaintive pleading of a woman, and then, a weird chorus of unearthly beings, of grotesque things that stalked across the moors and crept from behind huge boulders. Nothing but the wind was to be heard. I stood and listened to it. I could have listened for hours, for I felt in harmony with my surroundings—lonely. The moon showed itself at intervals from behind the scudding clouds and lighted up the open landscape to my right. A gaunt hill covered with rocks, some piled up pyramidically, others strewn here and there; a few trees with naked arms tossing about and looking distressfully thin beside the more stalwart boulders; a sloping field or two, a couple of level ones, crossed by a tiny path; and the lane, where I stood. The scenery was desolate—not actually wild, but sad and forlorn; and the wood by my side lent an additionally weird aspect to the place, which was pleasing to me.

“Suddenly I heard a sound—a sound, familiar enough at other times; but, at this hour, and in this place, everything seemed different. A woman was coming along the road—a woman in a dark cloak, with a basket under her arm; and the wind was blowing her skirts about her legs.

“I looked at the trees. One singularly gaunt and fantastic one appalled me. It had long, gnarled arms, and two of them ended in bunches of twigs like hands—yes, they were exactly like hands—huge, murderous-looking hands, with bony fingers. The moonlight played over and around me—I was bathed in it. I had no business to be on the earth—my proper place was in the moon. I no longer thought it—I knew it. The woman was close at hand. She stopped at a little wicket gate leading into the lane skirting the northern boundary of the wood. I felt angry; what right had she to be there, interrupting my musings with the moon! The tree with the human hands appeared to agree. I saw anger in the movements of its branches—anger, which soon blazed into fury. It gave a mighty bend towards her, as if longing to rend her in pieces.

“I followed the woman; and the wind howled louder and louder through those rustling leaves.

“How long I scrambled on I do not know. As soon as the moonlight left me, I fell into a kind of slumber—a delicious trance; broken only by the restless murmurings, the sighings and groanings of the wind. Sweeter music I never heard. Then came a terrible change. The charm of my thoughts was broken—I awoke from my reverie.

“A terrific roar broke on my ears, and a perfect hurricane of rain swept through the wood. I crept cold and shivering beneath the shelter of the trees. To my surprise a hand fell on my shoulder: it was a man, and, like myself, he shivered.

“ ‘Who are you?’ he whispered, in a strangely hoarse voice. ‘Who are you? Why are you here?’

“ ‘You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,’ I replied, shaking off the man’s grasp.

“ ‘Well—tell me,’ he rejoined; ‘for God’s sake tell me.’ He was frightened—trembling with fright. Could it be the storm, or was it—was it those trees?

“I told him then and there why I had trespassed. I was fascinated—the wind—and the trees—had led me thither.

“ ‘So am I,’ he whispered; ‘I am fascinated. It is a long word, but it describes my sentiments. What did the wind sound like?’

“I told him. He was a poor, common man, and had no poetical ideas. The wildly romantic had never interested him—he was but an ignorant labouring man.

“ ‘Sounded like sighing, groaning, and so on?’ he said, repeating my words, and shifting uneasily from one foot to another. He was cold, horribly cold. ‘Was that all?’

“ ‘Yes, of course. Why ask?’ I replied. Then I laughed. This stupid, sturdy son of toil had been scared; to him the sounds had been those of his moorland bogies—things he had dreaded in his infancy. I told him so. He didn’t like to hear me make fun of him. He didn’t like my laugh, and he persisted: ‘Was that all you heard?’

“Then I grew impatient, and asked him to explain what he meant.

“ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I thought I heard a scream,— a cry. Just as if some one had jumped out on some one else and taken them unawares. Maybe it was the wind—only the wind. But it had an eerie sound.’

“The man was nervous. The storm had frightened away whatever little wit he may have possessed.

“ ‘Come, let us be going,’ I said, moving off in the direction of the wall. I wanted to find a new exit; I was tired of paths.

“The man kept close to me. I could hear his teeth chatter. Accidentally his hand brushed against mine. His flesh was icy cold. He gave a cry as if a snake had bitten him. Then the truth flashed through me. The man was mad. His terror, his strange manner of showing it, and now this sudden shrinking from me revealed it all—he was mad—the moon and trees had done their work.

“ ‘I’m not going that way,’ he said, ‘come along with me. I want to see which of the trees it was that cried.’

“His voice was changed; he seemed suddenly to have grown stranger. There was no insanity in his tone now. But I knew the cunning of the insane, and I feared to anger him, so I acquiesced. What an idea! One of the trees had cried! Did he mean the wind?

“He grew sullen when I jeered at him. He led me to a little hollow in the ground, and I noticed the prints of several feet in the wet mud. Then I saw something which sent the cold blood to my heart. A woman bathed in blood lay before me. Somehow she was familiar to me. I looked again— then again. Yes, there was the dark shawl, the basket—broken, it was true, with the contents scattered; but it was the same basket. It was the woman I had seen coming down the road.

“ ‘My God, whatever is this!’ The man by my side spoke. He swayed backwards and forwards on his feet, his face white and awful in the moonlight. He was sick with terror. ‘Oh God, it is horrible — horrible!’ Then, with a sudden earnestness and a crafty look in his eyes, he bent over her.

“ ‘Who is it?’ he cried. ‘Who is the poor wretch?’

“I saw him peer into her face, but he didn’t touch her—he dreaded the blood. Then he started back, his eyes filled with such savageness as I had never seen in any man’s before. He looked a devil—he was a devil. ‘It’s my wife!’ he shrieked. ‘My wife!’ His voice fell and turned into what sounded like a sob. ‘It’s Mary. She was coming back to Helvore. It was her cry. There—see it—confound you! You have it on your arm—your coat—all over you.

“He raised his hand to strike me. The moonlight fell on it—a great coarse hand—and I noticed, with a thrill of horror, a red splash on it. It was blood. The man was a murderer. He had killed his wife, and, with all the cunning of the madman, was trying to throw the guilt on me.

“I sprang at him with a cry of despair. He kicked and bit, and tried to tear my arms from his neck; but somehow I seemed to have ten times my usual strength.

“And all the time we struggled a sea of faces waved to and fro, peering down at us from the gaunt trees above.

“He gave in at length. I was no longer obliged to hold him with an iron grip, and help came eventually in the shape of a policeman, who seemed to grasp the situation quite easily. There had been a murder; the man I had secured was known to him. He was a labouring man of unsteady habits; he had been drinking, had met and quarrelled with his wife. The rest was to be seen in the ghastly heap before us.

“The wretch had no defence. He seemed dazed, and eyed the bloodstains on his face and clothes in a stupid kind of way.

“I slipped five shillings into the policeman’s hand when we parted. He thanked me and pocketed the money; he knew his position and mine too; I was a gentleman, and a very

plucky one at that. So I thought as I walked back to my rooms; yet I lay awake and shuddered as visions of the nodding heads of pines passed before me; and from without, across the silent lanes and fields, there rose and fell again the wailing of a woman—a woman in distress.

\* \* \*

“The murder in the wood was an event in Helvore. The people were unused to such tragedies, and it afforded them something to talk about for many weeks. The evidence against the husband was conclusive. He had been caught red-handed, he was an habitual drunkard, and he paid the penalty for his crime in the usual manner.

“I left Helvore. I had seen enough of Cumberland and thirsted for life in London once again. Yet, often at night, the sighing of the wind in the trees sounded in my ears, bidding me visit them once more.

“One day as I was sitting by my fire with a pile of books at my side, taking life easily, for I had nothing to do but to kill time, my old friend, Frank Leethwaite, looked me up. He had been at Sedbergh with me in the far-off eighties, and he was the only friend of the old set with whom I had been out of touch.

“He had not altered much, in spite of a moustache and a fair sprinkling of white hairs. I should have known him had I met him anywhere. He was wearing an Albert coat, and his face was red with healthy exercise.

“ ‘How are you, old chap?’ he exclaimed, shaking hands in the hearty fashion of true friendship.

“I winced, for he had strong hands.

“ ‘Fit enough,’ I said, ‘only a bit bored.’ But you—well, you look just the same, and fresh as a daisy.’ I gave him the easy-chair.

“ ‘Oh, I’m first rate—plenty of work. I’m a journalist, you know. It’s a bit of a grind, but I’m taking a holiday. You look pale. Your eyes are bad?’

“I told him they got strained if I read much.

“ ‘I daresay you will think me mad,’ he went on, ‘but I’m going to ask you rather a curious question. I remember you used to be fond of ghosts and all sorts of queer things.’

“I nodded. We had had many discussions on such subjects, in my study at school.

“ ‘Well, I’m a member of the New Supernatural Investigation Society.’

“I smiled doubtfully. “Well, you can’t say it has discovered much. The name is high-sounding, but that is all.’

“ ‘Never mind. Some day, perhaps, we shall show the public what we can do.

“Leethwaite lit a cigarette, puffed away in silence for a few seconds, and then went on:

“ ‘I am undertaking a little work for the Society now!’

“ ‘Where?’

“ ‘In Cumberland. Ever been there?’

“I nodded. Leethwaite was very much at his ease.

“ ‘Been to Helvore?’

“I knew by instinct he would mention the place.

“He thought I looked ill, and told me I had been overdoing it.

“ ‘It is merely a case of “flu,” ’ I assured him. ‘I had it six weeks ago, and still feel the effects.’

("The woman in the hollow was before me. I saw again her shabby shawl and the blood round her throat.)

" 'There was a murder down there a short time ago.

" 'I heard of it,' I remarked casually. 'It was a wife murder, I believe.'

" 'Yes, just a common wife murder, and the fellow was caught and hanged.'

" 'Then why the ghost?'

" 'Well, that is the odd part of it,' Leethwaite said slowly, leaning back in his chair, his long legs stretched out.

" 'I have heard from two Helvore residents that screams have been heard in the wood about twelve o'clock at night. Not the time for practical jokers, and the Cumberland peasantry are too superstitious to try their pranks in unsavoury spots. Besides, from what I have heard, the spot is not only unsavoury, it is singularly uncanny.'

" 'They haven't seen anything?' I asked.

" 'No, only heard the cries, and they are so terribly realistic that no one cares to pass the place at night; indeed, it is utterly banned. I mentioned the case to old Potters—you must have heard of him, he used to write a lot for the *Gentleman's Magazine*—and he pressed me to go down and investigate. I agreed; then I thought I would look you up. Do you remember your pet aversion in the way of ghosts?'

"I nodded. 'Yes, and I still have the aversion. I think locality exercises strange influence over some minds. The peaceful meadow scenery holds no lurking horrors in its bosom; but in the lonely moorlands, full of curiously moulded boulders, one sees, or fancies one sees, grotesque creatures, odd and ill-defined as their surroundings. As a child I had a peculiar horror of those tall, odd-shaped boulders, with sneering faces—featureless, it is true, but sometimes strangely resembling the faces of humans and animals. I believe the wood may be haunted by something of this nature—terrible as the trees.'

" 'You know the wood?'

" 'I do. And I know the trees.'

" 'Again in my ears the wind rushed, as it had on that memorable night.

" 'Will you come with me?'

"Leethwaite eyed me eagerly. The same old affection he had once entertained for me was ripening in his eyes; indeed it had always remained there. Should I go? An irresistible impulse seized me, a morbid craving to look once more at the blood-stained hollow, to hear again the wind. I looked out of the window; the sky was cold and grey. There were rows and rows of chimneys—chimneys everywhere—and an ocean of dull, uninviting smoke. I began to hate London and to long for the countless miles of blue sea, and the fresh air of the woods. I assented though my better judgment would have had me refuse.

" 'Yes, I replied, I will go. As to the ghost, it may be there, but it is not what you think; it is not the apparition of a man. It may be, in part, like a man, but it is one of those cursed nightmares I have always had. I shall see it, hear it shriek—and if I drop dead from fright, you, old man, will be to blame.'

"Leethwaite was an enthusiast, and psychical adventure always allured him. He would run the risk of my weak heart, he said, and have me with him.

"A thousand times I prepared to go back on my word; a thousand tumultuous emotions of some impending disaster rushed through me. I felt on the border of an abyss, dark and

hopeless; I was pushed on by invisible and unfriendly hands. I knew I must fall; I knew that those black depths would engulf me eternally. I took the plunge. We talked over Sedbergh days, and arranged our train to the North. Leethwaite looked very boyish, I thought, as he rose to go, and stood smiling in the doorway.

“He was all kindness; I liked him more than ever. And yet, somehow, as we stood looking at one another, a grey shadow swept around him, and an icy pang shot through my heart.

\* \* \*

“It was night once more, and the moonlight poured in floods from over the summit of the knoll where the uncanny boulders lay. Every object stood silhouetted against the dark background. A house, with its white walls, stood grim and silent; the paths running in various directions up and alongside the hill were made doubly clear by the whiteness of the beam” that fell on them. There were no swift clouds, no mists to hide the brilliance of the stars, and it was nearly midnight. The air was cold, colder than is usual at Helvore, and I shivered. Leethwaite stood by my side. I glanced apprehensively at him. Why did he stand in the moonlight? What business had he there? I laughed, but I fear there was but little mirth in the sound.

“ ‘I wish you would stop that infernal noise,’ he said; ‘I am pretty nervous as it is.’

“ ‘All right,’ I whispered; ‘I won’t do it again.’

“But I did, and he edged sharply away from me. I looked over his head. There was the gaunt tree with the great hands. I fancied once again the branches were fingers. I told him so.

“ ‘For God’s sake, man, keep quiet,’ he replied.

“ ‘You are enough to upset any one’s nerves.’ He looked at his watch for the hundredth time. ‘It’s close on the hour.’

“I again looked at the trees and listened. Suddenly, although there had been absolute silence before, I heard a faint breathing sound, a very gentle murmur. It came from over the distant knoll. At first very soft and low, but gradually getting louder and louder, it rushed past us into the wood beyond. I saw once more the great trees rock beneath it; and again I heard those voices—those of the woman and the man.

Leethwaite looked ill, very ill, I thought. I touched him on the arm. ‘You are not frightened,’ I said; ‘you—a member of the New Supernatural Investigation Society?’

“ ‘Something is going to happen,’ he gasped. I feel it—I know it. We shall see the murder— we shah know the secret of death. What is that?’

“Away in the distance the tap-tapping of shoes came through the still night air. Tap—tap—tap, down the path from the knoll.

“I clutched Leethwaite by the arm. ‘You think you will see the murder, do you? And the murderer!’

“Leethwaite didn’t answer. His breath came in gasps; he looked about him like a man at bay.

“ ‘And the murderer! Ha! It comes from there. See, it is looking at us from those trees. It is all arms and legs; it has no human face. It will drop to the earth, and then we shall see what happens.’

“Tap, tap, tap—the steps grew louder and nearer they came. The great shadows stole down, one by one, to meet them. I looked at Leethwaite. He was fearfully expectant; so was I.

“A woman came tripping along the path. I knew her in an instant—there was the shabby shawl, the basket on her arm—it was the same. She approached the wicket.

“I looked at Leethwaite. He was spellbound with fear. I touched his arm. I dragged him with me. ‘Come,’ I whispered, ‘we shall see which of us is right. You think the ghostly murderer will resemble us—will resemble men. It will not. Come.’

“I dragged him forward. He would have fled, but I was firm. We passed through the gate—we followed the figure as it silently glided on. We turned to the left. The place grew very dark as the trees met overhead. I heard the trickling of water and knew we were close to the ditch.

“I gazed intently at the pines. When would the horror drop from them? A sickly terror laid hold of me. I turned to fly.

“To my surprise Leethwaite stopped me. He was all excitement. ‘Wait,’ he hissed. ‘Wait. It is you who are afraid. Hark! It is twelve o’clock.’ And as he spoke, the clock of the parish church slowly tolled midnight. Then the end came. An awful scream rang out, so piercing and so full of terror that I felt the blood in my heart stand still. But no figure dropped from the pines. Not from the pines, but from behind the woman a form darted forward and seized her by the neck. It tore at her throat with its hands, it dragged and hurried her into the moonlight; and then, oh damning horror, I saw its face!—it was my own.”