

The Forest of Shadows

By Madison J. Cawein

Deep in the hush of a mighty wood
I came to a place of dread and dream,
And forms of shadows, whose shapes elude
The searching swords of the sun's dim gleam,
Builders of silence and solitude.
And there where a glimmering water crept
From rock to rock with a slumberous sound,
Tired to tears, on the mossy ground,
Under a tree I lay and slept.

Was it the heart of an olden oak?
Was it the soul of a flower that died?
Or was it the wildrose there that spoke,
The wilding lily that palely sighed?—
For all on a sudden it seemed I awoke:
And the leaves and the flowers were all intent
On a visible something of light and bloom—
A presence, felt as a wild perfume
Or beautiful music, that came and went.

And all the grief, I had known, was gone;
And all the anguish of heart and soul;
And the burden of care that had made me wan
Lifted and left me strong and whole
As once in the flush of my youth's dead dawn.
And, lo! it was night. And the oval moon,
A silvery silence, paced the wood:
And there in its light like snow she stood,
As starry still as a star aswoon.

At first I thought that I looked into
A shadowy water of violet,
Where the faint reflection of one I knew,
Long dead, gazed up from its mirror wet,
Till she smiled in my face as the living do;
Till I felt her touch, and heard her say,
In a voice as still as a rose unfolds,—
“You have come at last; and now nothing holds;
Give me your hand; let us wander away.

“Let us wander away through the Shadow Wood,
Through the Shadow Wood to the Shadow Land,

Where the trees have speech and the blossoms brood
Like visible music; and hand in hand
The winds and the waters go rainbow-hued:
Where ever the voice of beauty sighs
And ever the dance of dreams goes on;
Where nothing grows old; and the dead and gone,
And the loved and lost, smile into your eyes.

“Let us wander away! let us wander away!—
Do you hear them calling, ‘Come here and live’?
Do you hear what the trees and the flowers say,
Wonderful, wild, and imperative,
Hushed as the hues of the dawn of day?
They say, ‘Your life, that was rose and rue
In a world of shadows where all things die,
Where beauty is dust and love, a lie,
Is finished.—Come here! we are waiting for you!’

And she took my hand: and the trees around
Seemed whispering something I dared not hear:
And the taciturn flowers, that strewed the ground,
Seemed thinking something I felt with fear,
A beautiful something that made no sound.
And she led me on through the forest old,
Where the moon and the midnight stood on guard,—
Sentinel spirits that shimmered the sward,
Silver and sable and glimmering gold.

And then in an instant I knew. I knew
What the trees had whispered, the winds had said;
What the flowers had thought in their hearts of dew,
And the stars had syllabled overhead,
And she bent above me and smiled, “‘T is true!
Heart of my heart, you have heard aright.—
Look in my eyes and draw me near!
Look in my eyes and have no fear!—
Heart of my heart, you died to-night!”