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WISHT WOOD

THOSE slanderous rogues, the Devon folk, are wont to declare that there is not enough wood in Cornwall to make a coffin with. There is as much truth in this as in most of the tales folk tell of their neighbours. Certainly the Duchy is no longer what it was in the old days—the old ancient times of all, as they say—when the oaks rubbed shoulders together from Bude to Sennen, and the Mount was still *Carclowse en Cowse*, 'the Hoar Rock in the Wood,' and the last wolf was not yet trapped in the forest of Ludgvan. But Cornwall is still in a position to provide funereal timber for every one of her tall sons—ay, and for all the fat, wheezy Devon chaps that ever died of a surfeit of sour cider and sourer cream. Her hills are bare; naked and unflinching they stand up against Bucca, the blustering storm-god; but down in the deep valley-bottoms and narrow seaside glens, where Bucca never ventures, grow elms as tall, and oaks as stout, as ever Devon man set eyes on. And I know of a place where there is a wood—not an upstart plantation, nor a straggling copse, but a real wild wood of ancient growth, dense enough to shut the world out, big enough, with the help of a little manoeuvring and make-believe, for one to lose oneself in, without its like in all Cornwall. They say there is a wood near Bodmin, but this is not the one. Where it is I shall not tell, for fear the Devon men should come and make a may-game of it, and the foreign visitors drive out in their carriages to stare at it as they stare at the *Mên-an-tol* and the *Dawns-myin*, and other Cornish wonders. That would be a pity; for the marvels and secrets of Wisht Wood (so it shall be called, its real name being unspoken) are retired and delicate, only to be comprehended by solitary lovers.

This may be told, that it lies in a hollow on a hill-side, where the land dips from the moors to the pastures; and you may approach it from either direction, according to your mood—down from the heather to surprise it, or up from the grass to woo it gently. If you come from below you see it afar off, and lose it and find it again as the path wanders among the hills; and when you reach it, there is only a little brook to cross and you are within. But if you come from above, you are suddenly aware of the moist, sweet-smelling breath of innumerable green leaves, close at hand, and not one to be seen. You step without warning from heather on to stone; two steps you take, and stop, for the place where next you meant to set your foot is not earth, nor rock, but the top of a tall tree. A wall of granite drops sheer beneath you into twilight. Pines and ash-trees crowd against it; young elders and thorns grow out of its crevices; and beyond, down the slope, stretches the wood—a ruddy

mist of ash buds in spring, in summer a leaning roof of green leafage, a dense, unbroken surface, on which the eye rests as on firm ground, denying the airy space below, so that it comes like the shock of a blunt contradiction when a sudden wood-pigeon claps out of the fancied solidity.

Within, the wood's name is justified; it is a wisht place, sure enough, as the saying goes. It wears an appearance of extreme age—age that has surpassed the limits of venerable dignity and fallen into a fantastic dotage. Grey rocks lie half prone in grotesque attitudes among the trees; the trees, too, are grey with moss and shaggy lichen, and scarcely one of them has its natural growth. There are pollard ashes leaning cunningly this way and that, their monstrous heads bristling with stiff twigs. There are elder trees whose trunks run along the ground and suddenly erect themselves, like threatening snakes. There are thorn-bushes on which you would think an agonising spell had been cast, their twigs are involved in such mad twists and contortions. In one remote corner you come across two young trees locked together in a desperate death-grapple. Another has been pinned down by a boulder, and is growing over it, slowly smothering it in thick foliage. Two others, straight-stemmed pines, are crossed like foils at the parry. The heart of the wood is a deep black pool, hardly to be approached, so crowded about is it with peering, stooping trees and bushes. You guess them to be gloating over an unsavoury secret which they would not have you share. Elsewhere there is a handsome, flourishing oak, with one unaccountable dead limb, from which, as you approach, a stealthy hawk always stoops and flies noiselessly away. On still spring afternoons the least stir of wind rouses a faint sound of pattering footsteps, and a faint, sweet perfume; but when you turn your head there is no fair ghost gliding past, only a laurel thicket tapping dry leaf on leaf, and uneasily shaking its tasselled blossoms.

One cannot doubt that other influences are at work in the place beside the ordinary control of sun and wind and rain, who are honest journeymen, loving the straight and comely in their serious work, and reserving all fantastic imaginings for their sky-playground and the clouds that may be carved and dyed to all wild shapes and frolic colours, and no harm done. Trees are not the dull insensible rustics some would have us think them. They breathe a moral as well as a physical atmosphere, and the forest is as impressionable, as sensitive to good or evil influence, as any other crowd. In a park the trees are fine gentlemen, in an orchard they wear the loutish smock-frock and gaiters, on waste lands they are ragged gypsies every one. Natural conditions are not enough to account for the moods and perversities of the denizens of Wisht Wood. The spot is a sheltered one, the soil wholesome and fertile; no visible reason prevents the trees from leading a decent, orderly life. What, ask the few who know the place and frequent it, has driven them thus frantic?

One hints at a dreadful midnight crime; but there is no record of this in local tradition, which is notoriously absorbent and retentive of such things. Another advances a more plausible theory. In the rock wall at the top of the wood there is a cave, blocked at the entrance by a great stone. This, he declares, is none other than the stone, told of in the history of King Arthur,

under which Merlin lies imprisoned by the craft of Nimue, the Lady of the Lake. We read :

‘And so, upon a time, it happened that Merlin showed to her a rock where was a great wonder, and wrought by enchantment, which went under a stone. So, by her subtle craft and working, she made Merlin to go under the stone to let her wit of the marvels there ; but she wrought so there for him, that he never came out, for all the craft he could do ; and so she departed and left Merlin.’

And later we read of Sir Bagdemagus riding out in quest of adventures, and coming to the same rock where Merlin was,

‘and there he heard him make great moan, wherefore Sir Bagdemagus would have helpen him, and went to the great stone, and it was so heavy that a hundred men might not lift it up. When Merlin wist that he was there, he bid him leave his labour, for all was in vain, and might never be helpen but by her that put him there.’

Our friend supports his theory with much earnestness and some display of learning. He scouts the claim of the Welsh folk to the bones of the great enchanter. The story nowhere tells of his death, and the Mynydd Merlin, the hill by Towey, under which it is alleged that he lies buried, is a delusive cenotaph. The Welsh were always vain and superstitious, ready to believe any wild tale that might serve to enhance their glory ; and they had their bards, skilful in fashioning false stories and in imposing them on the world ; so that they have stolen the credit from Cornwall and made a Welsh king of Arthur, and a stuttering Taffy of Merlin, whose only authentic words extant are in good Cornish. It was at Camelot that Merlin met Nimue and fell into a dotage on her, and Camelot is the Cornish Camelford, as all the world knows. From Camelot they went together to Benwick, and afterwards—the history is precise—afterwards they returned to Cornwall, where she grew weary of his importunities, and lured him to his doom under the stone. The learned arguments adduced in proof of the identity of that stone with the stone in Wisht Wood may be omitted here. But granted that this is the place, Merlin must still be here, and alive ; for the Lady would never have released one whom she hated and feared as a devil’s son, and neither she nor anybody else had skill to encompass his death. He has ceased long since from useless groanings, but the evil heart of him still beats strong, and he continues to weave his spells, not with the hope of freeing himself, but out of pure malignity, finding solace in the thought that he may yet have power to do harm in the world. The subtle venom of his magic rises in an unseen vapour through the crevices of the rock, poisoning the air, driving the trees to play mad antics, and twisting their innocent growth into the deformed likeness of his ugly passions.

So far our friend ; but though his explanation is attractive and plausible, to my mind it lacks a sound historical basis. The objection must again be raised, that the tale finds no support in local tradition, though it is just the kind of tale of which local tradition would be sure to preserve a vivid memory. To proceed scientifically on our investigation, since documents are wanting, it is precisely to local tradition that we must apply, and to the simple sufficient

solution it offers I pin my faith. In four words, Wisht Wood is pisky-ridden.

Now by adopting this explanation we get rid of the shadowy Merlin, in whom I for one have never entirely believed; and we are enabled to put a pleasanter construction on the behaviour of the trees. Instead of writhing in atrocious torment under an infliction of black magic, they are simply attempting, in their stolid, clumsy way, to adapt themselves to the freakish moods of the Little People; and all this melodramatic show of anguish and deadly combat is merely a joke and a may-game, a rheumatically, stiff-jointed old grandf'er playing at Indians and pirates with young Curlylocks. The sport may not be altogether to the old one's liking, but the capricious elf is master, and must be obeyed.

One thing is certain—no place in Cornwall is so pisky-haunted as the neighbourhood of Wisht Wood. In a cottage hard by, an old woman dwelt within living memory, who never looked to dirty but one clean apron betwixt Monday morning and Saturday night, for the piskies did all her churrs for her. Every night she opened the window a little way, set a dish of milk on the table, and went to bed. Every morning the milk was gone, the cloam washed and put by, the slab polished, the floor swept and sprinkled with white sand, and not a cobweb left under the planchin. And there is a man working in the farm below, who is in the habit of going up-along to Churchtown every Saturday evening, to take a social glass, or maybe two, at the inn. And three times out of four, he assures me, he is pisky-led on his way home across the moor; as soon as his feet touch the heather they fall under an enchantment, and lead him this way and that, in stumbling circles and zigzags, till his dizzy senses fail him, and he knows no more till he wakes next morning, with his toes in a puddle and his head in a furcey-bush. As for the wood itself, few of the neighbours will venture within it by day, and none by night. Chattering voices are heard there, for all the world like the confidential twitterings of a flock of pednypaleys, and the scurry of tiny feet, like the sound of mice playing hide-and-peek in the grass; and on Mondays, if you peep into the wood as you pass, you may chance to see scores of little red caps hanging up to dry on the thorn-bushes. From these and other indications, I am inclined to believe that Wisht Wood is the headquarters, the chief camp or metropolis, as you will, of piskydom. And so I come to my story.

But first a note on the origin and history of the piskies. As to their origin, that is obscure and doubtful. Some think their tiny bodies hold the souls of the good heathen who died before the saints came to Cornwall from Ireland, and are fated to remain on earth because there is no appropriate place for them elsewhere. No such thing, others say: there were no piskies at all in Cornwall before the invasion of the saints; but when St. Keverne and St. Just and St. Sennen and the rest sailed across the sea on their goodly millstones (for such was their saintliness that they could not do the simplest thing except in a miraculous way), the piskies came with them, perched on their shoulders, or hanging on to their beards; for in those days sanctity wore a merry face, and holy men were well disposed towards the sprightly little folk,

and loved to have them about them, to cheer their vigils with sport and frolic. Others again declare the piskies to be no others than the ancient pagan gods of Cornwall; and this to me is the most probable explanation of all, and sets their history, and especially the story I am about to tell, in the clearest light. Being gods, they subsist on worship and belief; without these they perish. Tiny as they are now, in the old days they were tall and stout, far exceeding mankind in bulk and stature. You have heard of the Cornish giants; well, these were they. But on the day when the first millstone with its saintly cargo kissed the pebbles under Cape Cornwall, they began to shrink and shrivel. As the years passed and the old beliefs faded, they dwindled and dwindled, until at the time of my story, the time when the great Preacher came across the Tamar, they were no bigger than the dolls you buy at Corpo-Crist Fair.

Those were the days before the folk of West Cornwall were so foolish as to make roads, which only serve to let in the foreign gentry and other undesirable persons. But the Preacher, though small of stature and particular in his attire, had the stoutest heart that ever beat under a black gown. By bridle-paths, trodden knee-deep into mire under the hooves of pack-mules, by trackless moors, over rocks and through rivers, he pushed his indomitable way from mining village to upland farm, from upland farm to fishing cove, halting, wherever he found an audience, to plead, exhort, and denounce, and everywhere leaving behind him a trail of flame and sweet odours. So in time he came to the neighbourhood of Wisht Wood, and entered the farmhouse that still stands hard by, first to deliver his message, and afterwards to take rest and nourishment. And as he sat in the kitchen, expounding points of doctrine to the farmer and his hinds, a tapping was heard at the door, low down, just above the drexel, like the tapping of a grey-bird's beak breaking a snail-shell on a stone. So the farmer's wife went to open the door, and screamed and scuttled back; for there on the drexel stood a tiny little man, no bigger than a whitneck when it sits up on its hind paws. Like a whitneck he was dressed in a brown coat and white waistcoat; his breeches were brown also, his stockings were green, and his shoe-buckles were two silver dewdrops. On his head he wore a red cap, which he doffed politely as soon as the door opened, discovering a natty little wig made of grey lichen. And in his right hand he flourished a straight twig, to the end of which a shred of white linen was tied, by way of flag of truce.

'Aw, my life!' screamed the farmer's wife. 'Aw, my dear life, ef 'tedn' wan o' they piskies!'

Now the Preacher was not without acquaintance with the creatures of the unseen world. All his life the evil spirits and the good hovered about him—these with comfort and assistance, those with pricks and buffetings. So he showed no astonishment or dismay at the sight of the little man. He stood up, and in a stern voice, the voice that had made wax of the hearts of thousands, he bade the sprite depart and trouble him not. But the little fellow did not budge. Pressing the red cap to his bosom, he bowed profoundly, and, in a voice like the chipping of mice in the wainscot, squeaked out a string of outlandish words.

‘What is all this?’ asked the Preacher, looking round.

A very old man—he was the farmer’s grandfather—lifted his voice from the chimney corner.

‘I d’ knaw,’ he quavered. ‘’T’es a brae long time sence I heerd the like; but I d’ knaw. ’T’es the auld ancient spache o’ Cornwall. Folk did use to taelk so when I was a lad, but now ’t’es most forgot. Manen o’ what the li’ll chap do say is that the piskies o’ Wisht Wood are wanting to ’ave a word wi’ your reverence, ef you’ll be so kind as to step across for a minute.’

‘Don’t ’ee goo, your reverence!’ cried the farmer’s wife. ‘They’m artful an’ vicious as foxes. They’ll do ’ee some harm, sure ’nough, the rogues!’

The Preacher’s eyes flashed.

‘I will go,’ he said. ‘This is part of my work; and from my work none shall turn me back.’

So saying, he stepped to the door and took the path across the meadow, the pisky trotting before him, the folk of the farm following after. They crossed the bridge over the little babbling river, and passed one by one through a gap in the hedge into the shadow of the wood.

’T’was a strange sight within. At first, to their sun-dazzled eyes the green twilight seemed studded with innumerable clusters of scarlet berries, on the trees, on the bushes, on the rocks, on the grass, everywhere. When they began to see more clearly, they perceived that what they had taken for berries were little red caps, such as the pisky ambassador wore; and under each cap shone a pair of little eyes, no bigger than a bush-sparrow’s, and as bright and un-winking; and the little eyes were set in little wrinkled faces, as like one to another as the faces of a parcel of Chinamen. And all the little faces were turned towards the Preacher, and all the little eyes were taking stock of him, up and down, while the air began to fill with a buzzing murmur, like the hum of midsummer flies.

The Preacher advanced a step and waited; his companions huddled in a whispering, gravely-nodding group behind him. The hum grew louder, and all the bright little eyes turned together towards a square white stone that lay among the grass, ringed about with a circle of toadstools. Suddenly a tall, stout pisky, wearing a carcanet of dewdrops round his cap, leapt briskly upon the stone, and immediately the hum died away into silence. Then the tall pisky hemmed, removed his cap, and began to speak, with quaint, earnest gestures of finger on palm and arms swung abroad—the queer little manikin! But as he too spoke in the ancient tongue, the Preacher turned about and beckoned the old grandf’er forward to interpret. And this is what the tall pisky said to the Preacher:

‘To the black-robed foreigner, in the name of the community of the Pobel Veau, the Little People here assembled, greeting. We have a story to tell, a complaint to make, and a petition to prefer. In the beginning we ruled; our stature was great, our power also. Then the white monks from Eire descended on our shores like a flock of seagulls, and hunted us out, and sprinkled us with holy water. As the drops fell on us we shrank, and became as dwarfs, all but a few, who avoided the shower and fled to the Hoar Rock that stands in the sea,

and made war thence on monks and people, and perished at last by the sword. But we survived, by virtue of the holy water and of the relics of ancient worship that remained to us. For the white monks were kindly and compassionate; they remembered that we were gods, with the pride of gods and the need of gods. Our power they took from us, but left us a nook in the hearts of men, that we might not altogether perish. It was a compact between us and them, and so long as their creed endured we had no fear. Then we heard rumours of changes, of a new creed, and a new God that hated holy water; and we trembled and hid ourselves. When we ventured forth again, our friends the monks and friars had disappeared, and black-gowned persons were in their place. And looking one upon another, we perceived no change; our stature was not diminished by the breadth of a hair. So we took heart, and went by night and peered into the breasts of the people as they lay asleep; and our niche, the niche the monks had left us, was still there, swept and garnished as of old. There was peace in our niche, but elsewhere in every heart there was a division and a conflict between the old faith and the new. Then we laughed; for, looking again, we perceived that we had waxed a little bigger—our limbs were plumper and our chests broader. This we set down to the dissensions between the Gods who had supplanted us; the people, not knowing which to adhere to, were turning half in jest to us, their forgotten divinities. Some of us said, "We have but to wait; soon the parsons will go where the monks have gone, and we shall be masters again." But others said, "No; our time has gone by for ever; if the parsons go, others will step into their place before us. Let us rest content in our little niche; parson or priest, none will disturb us there." And we took notice that the parsons talked loud for a while, and then they fell asleep talking; and for many years we lived in peace and merriment undisturbed.

' But one day not long ago we woke, and looked upon one another and exclaimed; for it seemed to each that his companions had suddenly grown old in the night, so wizened were our faces, so shrunken our limbs. Also it appeared as if the grass about us had sprouted miraculously; it was breast-high when we lay down, and now it waved above our heads. And as we stared and shouted in wonderment, a jack rabbit hopped in amongst us, and we jumped up and fled in terror; for he seemed as big as a bull calf. Then we knew that what had happened before at the first coming of the monks had happened again. In a single night we had been shorn of half our stature. We doubted and feared, and sent messengers forth. They returned, and told us of a strange Preacher from the East, with yet another new creed, hot and strong; they spoke of shoutings and raptures, of old customs overturned, of old beliefs brushed away by the power of a single voice. Then we called a council of the chiefs, and debated on the danger that threatened. Some were for flight across the sea to Eire, the green island, where our brethren dwell securely. Others were for a call to arms, and open war. Others for waylaying the Preacher on the moors, craftily decoying him among the deserted mine-shafts, and leaving him there in the darkness to break his neck at the first step forward. But others—they were our wisest—counselled prudence. "Let us wait," they said, "until the Preacher

comes this way. Then let us demand audience of him, and put our case before him plainly, without craft or concealment; if there is pity in him, if there is room in his creed for loving-kindness and tenderness towards the weak and oppressed, surely he will deal gently with us, and renew the compact the monks made with us of old."

'So said our wisest, and their counsel seemed good to us. We waited, and now the Preacher is before us, our fate in his hands. Consider, O Preacher; we are a small folk, and a harmless; there is no malice in us, and our pride is subdued. The people love us, for the sake of old times, and because we solace them with our merry antics. But now that they begin to think new thoughts, to travel this way and that, and to read in the magic Book you bring them, they are in danger of forgetting us; and forgotten we perish. Now, is there no room for us in your message? Will you not slip in a word here and a word there, commending the Pobel Veau, who were gods once? Gods once, and now we run from a jack-rabbit! Soon the bull-horns will rise up against us, and the muryons send out hunting parties to chase us from wood and moor, and the quilken run at us open-mouthed when we go down to the stream to drink. There will be no place left where we can lay our heads in safety; we shall be wanderers and outcasts in our own country; no fate is harder. Have pity then, O Preacher; your power is great—a word from you, and our safety is assured. 'Tis little that we ask; no increase or exaltation—only a secure tenure of our present stature, that we may not shrink to dust, and be blown away by the wind into the sea.'

Such was the speech made by the tall pisky to the Preacher in Wisht Wood, the old grandf'er interpreting. The other piskies hummed applause, for their spokesman had performed his office well; and they turned confident faces on the Preacher, for surely here was piteous eloquence to move the hardest heart. But the Preacher's face was stern and forbidding, as he stood meditating his answer. And when it came, it was no answer. The petition he thrust aside, making no reference to it; and instead, waving a hand that seemed to carry a sword, he delivered once again the message that he had come to publish through the land. As St. Patrick preached of old to the birds in Eire, so now the Preacher preached to the piskies of Wisht Wood, in words of fire, with a voice of thunder, terrible to hear.

The piskies listened with puzzled faces, that grew longer and longer as the Preacher went on, pleading, promising, and threatening. When he had finished, the tall pisky bowed politely, and spreading two vague little hands, said:

'We are foolish little fellows; these matters are too deep for us; nor do they seem to concern us. They are for good folk and wicked folk, and we are neither; whether we laugh or cry, whether we do this or that, it is out of pure wantonness, and for no reason at all. How then should all this concern us? One thing only concerns us—our diminishing stature, and the danger we foresee from the bull-horns and muryons. From the fear of this arose our question, which remains unanswered. Was it obscurely put? I will repeat it. Tell us, O Preacher, is there no room for us in your new creed?—no tiny corner-space

for laughter, and the telling of gay randigals, and the kicking of heels on the turf?'

Now hitherto the Preacher had been puzzled by the piskies, and doubtful in what light to view them and in what way to treat them. But when the tall pisky spoke thus of randigals and riotous doings, he cast all doubt aside, recognising their corrupt and devilish nature. There never was a better or more saintly man than the Preacher, but there was something terrible in his inflexible goodness. Two things oppressed him—the wickedness of the world, and the awful brevity of human life; between these he found no time or place for laughter. Angrily he turned his back on the tiny tempter, and addressed his followers, vehemently denouncing the piskies to them as evil spirits, imps of the pit, passionately exhorting them to cherish the demons in their hearts no longer, to cast them forth, trample them under foot, and bray them in the mortar of righteousness with the pestle of faith. His words burned the people like hot coals, so that they fell under conviction and groaned aloud. Then he was seized with the spirit of prophecy, and foretold the imminent doom of all piskies, spriggans, knockers, and brownies, that they should be first scorned, and then in a little while forgotten, and so perish utterly from the land.

Then the piskies called anxiously to the old grandf'er, to know what the Preacher was saying; and when he told them they wailed shrilly, and those in the trees dropped to the ground with one accord, as the berries drop from the mountain ash in autumn; and all the company of little men fled shrieking and lamenting into the recesses of the wood, and were seen no more.

So runs the story of the piskies of Wisht Wood, and the doom pronounced on them by the Preacher who came out of England. This was many years ago, and the doom is long in fulfilling itself; for the piskies are still abroad in the land, though they are shy of showing themselves, because of the fright the Preacher gave them. For my part, it is not on account of the Preacher's denunciation that I fear for the piskies; it is not in earnest open combat that old beliefs are overcome. But of late a more terrible enemy has come out against them. The scoffer is abroad; and all the heavy artillery of homily and text cannot work half the havoc of a single volley of light laughter. Nowadays the lads and maids come home from school, 'cutting up,' as they say, talking proud book-talk, and making fun of giants and piskies, tokens and spells; the old speech and the old wisdom of their fathers are not good enough for them. And what is the result? The stature of the piskies diminishes daily; already the bull-horns grow restive, and toss the little men from their backs when they essay to mount them; and the muryons, I am told, are plotting raids and robberies in their caves underground. The time is not far distant when the last of the piskies will be laid in his box; and if you are present at the burying, perhaps you will see a light cloud of imperceptible dust fly up and disperse as the grave-digger gives the final pat with his shovel on the mound. And when the dust has vanished, you will have seen the last of the piskies.

CHARLES LEE.