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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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Superstitious Terror Held the Community in Its Grip

Dread at Darracombe

By VIOLET M. METHLEY

IT WAS old Mrs. Yeoven, who lived in the cottage on the edge of the wood, who heard the terrible thing.

She was just pottering about her kitchen, doing the last necessary duties before going to bed, shaking up the cat's cushion and so on, the silence only broken by the hurried ticking of the grandfather's clock.

Then, suddenly, breaking that silence it came—a shriek of wild, terrified agony, repeated once—twice—each time lower, but more heart-rending, the scream of a woman in extremest fear and pain.

For a moment the old woman stood motionless, trembling from head to foot, her face working pitifully. But she was plucky, and next instant she had pulled herself together, stumbled across to the door, fumbled with the latch and flung it open.

The uneven line of the trees in the wood stood out black against the sky, separated from where Mrs. Yeoven stood only by a strip of garden ground. And from out of that blackness came a low moaning of anguish, a sobbing cry: "Ooooo—oh! Oh-h-h-h!" It wailed and died away into choking silence.

Without waiting to put on outdoor gear, the old woman set off at an unsteady run, down the path and out along the lane, under the high, overarching hedges, her heart thumping in time to a gasping breath.

It was a bare quarter-mile to the nearest cottage, Henry Caunter's, but Mrs. Yeoven was almost exhausted when she reached the door and beat upon it with her hands.

"Mis' Caunter!—Mis' Caunter!" she cried quaveringly, and the master of the house himself opened the door, standing, a burly figure, against the oblong of warmly lit kitchen.

"Why, Mrs. Yeoven!—what's up, ma'am?" he asked. "Come in and sit down. Here, Mother, 'tes Mrs. Yeoven!"

"Oh, Mis' Caunter, you'm best come up to wood at once," the old woman burst out. "There's a woman—murdered there——"

"My God, what d'you mean?" Caunter stared.

"'Tes true. I heard 'un—just inside wood seem'n'ly—screamin' and shriekin', poor soul! Somethin' fearful, 'twas—and when I runned along, her was moanin' and groanin'. Don't 'ee lag, Mis' Caunter—come 'ee along and see who 'tis."

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Yeoven, I'll come—an' I'll get Black and Saunders, too." Henry Caunter was already reaching up for his old-fashioned rabbiting-gun.

"A lantern, too, 'e'll want to view the poor soul," the old woman quavered. "'Tes gashly dark in wood."

"You'm right—Mother, gi's the old lantern, and put a candle-end in it."

With the lantern bobbing in advance, like a gigantic glow-worm, the party of three men were on their way up the lane, treading heavily through the muddy ruts. Mrs. Yeoven trudged panting behind, and stopped by her own gate to watch the light disappear into the wood's blackness.

Quivering with dread and curiosity, she waited there, straining her old eyes, leaning heavily on the gate. What poor soul would they find there—some gipsy tramping woman?—someone from the village?—ought she to have fetched Dr. Carew, to be ready?

Here and there through the trees she caught a glimpse of the searching lantern; presently it gleamed more brightly, was moving toward her again. Mrs. Yeoven tottered forward.

"Well, what have 'ee found?" she questioned eagerly. "Who's the poor soul?"

"There's nawbody there—nawbody and nothin'," Caunter declared. "All through wood us have searched."

"But I tell 'ee there *is!*" Mrs. Yeoven was shrill with certainty. "Shriekin' somethin' awful—moanin'—groanin'——"

"Owl, likely," Bert Black commented gruffly.

"*Owl!*" Mrs. Yeoven's voice held concentrated scorn. "As if I didn' know owls—as if I'd not been with child-bearing women by the hundred, and didn' know how a poor, dear soul cries out when 'tes her agony!"

Mrs. Yeoven's experience being unquestionable and certainly unmatchable by the group of sheepish men, they found no direct answer. But Caunter shuffled his feet and replied, doggedly, "Well, if 'twas a woman, she'm gone; there's nobody in wood; no, nor signs of blood. Combed it, so we did."

"In the dark, an' by that lil' lantern!" Mrs. Yeoven snapped. "Hid under some bush she is, poor soul, an' if I were twenty years younger, I'd go an' look meself, that I would!"

But the men were not to be driven to further efforts that night; they slouched sullenly away, leaving Mrs. Yeoven to sit up by herself for the night's remainder, till she slept by

fits and starts a few hours before dawn

AFTER a good night's rest and over his breakfast, Caunter was inclined to joke with his wife over old Mother Yeoven's fright, and to maintain the owl hypothesis.

"Them gashly burrds 'owl somethin' fearful nights," he declared, with his mouth full of bacon, and only scoffed when Mrs. Caunter ventured to say that Mrs. Yeoven, living by the wood, must have had as long an experience of owls as of child-bearing women-folk.

As was his wont, he met Bert Black and Joe Saunders at the end of the lane half an hour later, and the three slouched off workward together. But just by Darracombe Church, they were met by news, conveyed to them through the medium of the postman.

He arrested them with a jerk of the thumb toward a small whitewashed cottage opposite the vicarage.

"Heard what's happened, you chaps?" he asked. "Young Sallie Service, she'm run away; leastways, she disappeared last night, and Mis' Service do be in a ter'ble way, for fear summat have happened to she."

The three listeners looked at each other, as their slow brains assimilated the news. Then Henry Caunter spoke slowly.

"Why—'spose 'twasn't *she* then—"

"Nay, now t'wouldn't ha' been *she*——" Bert Black demurred doubtfully.

"Looks as though might hev' been *she*——" Saunders drawled, and the postman, a more alert individual, snapped them up.

"Now, what be you three talkin' of?" he demanded, his eyes bright with an interest which became his mercurial profession.

Slowly, Caunter gave the facts and the postman nodded gravely.

"Looks nasty, uncommon nasty!" he commented. "Seems you fellows ought to go straight to police station, and tell young Gipps what you seen an' heard last night."

"But us didn't see nor hear nawthing—that's just it, 'ee see!" Caunter protested, but the postman interrupted.

"What you *might* have seen an' heard, then—'tes all the same. Look here—I'll come along wi' 'ee."

LIKE a forest fire rumors spread through Darracombe, and within half an hour Constable Gipps was at old Mrs. Yeoven's, extracting her story. Before 11 o'clock he had gleaned two other policemen from neighboring hamlets and was making ready to search the wood for the second time.

Henry Caunter, lopping a hedge, paused to watch the three stalwart, blue-clad figures disappear amongst the trees, and even to his slow brain the spring morning was overhung by a creeping horror, as he thought what they might find there—what might have been there in the darkness last night.

Little Sallie Service—the prettiest girl in the village—the girl they'd all seen grow up. If old Mother Yeoven had told the truth, it might be *her* body lying hidden in the wood.

Three hours of police search discovered nothing, but at dinner-time Saunders gave Henry Caunter a fresh piece of news.

"Seems young Ted Havant has disappeared, too," he said, with careful carelessness.

"Wha-aa-at?" Caunter's jaw fell in his interest.

"Yees. Funny-like, 'tes. . . . All same time, and after the way he's been hanging round Sallie, ever since he comed back from sea, though her father ordered him out of house. . . . They tells I Mis' Service do be half frantic-like, swearin' as Ted done it, that he's Sallie's murderer."

"Why, why, there's no sayin' as

the poor soul *be* murdered yet——" Caunter shuffled his feet uneasily.

"Looks like it, putting things together," Saunders said. "That tale of Mrs. Yeoven's sounds like dirty work in wood, surely—fits in wi' the rest, too—the poor girl disappearing, and Ted Havant—just as he would, if he'd done the deed."

Constable Gipps, eager to show himself more competent than the usual village policeman, was even more confident that it all fitted in, and that the only mystery about the case was the disappearance of the girl's body.

"An' that only means he's hidden it more cleverly than most murderers," the constable declared to his cronies. "Hid it, an' made for Plymouth, thinking to get away in a ship. Slippery chaps, these sailors, but we're having the ports watched for him already."

THAT Ted Havant had disappeared was undeniable, and even his mother could not account for his absence. He had gone, and after a violent quarrel with old Sam Service about the young sailor's courtship of Sallie. The girl had promised her parents that she would see him once more, and tell him to go away—and Ted's hot temper and devotion to Sallie were well known. It was easy enough to picture that final interview, and its tragic end, there in the shadows of the wood.

Only Havant's mother, in her tiny cottage, surrounded by her son's foreign curiosities and outlandish pets, persisted in her fierce conviction of his innocence.

"Quick-tempered my Ted may be, but he wouldn't hurt anybody weaker than himself—not if it was to save his life," she declared. "Look how gentle he is with childer and beasts—the dumb creatures all love him—don't 'ee, Jacko?"

The small monkey perched in the chimney corner whimpered in answer and sprang on to Mrs. Havant's shoulder. She faced the young policeman with smoldering anger in her dark eyes, set in a tiny withered face, oddly monkey-like, too.

"And 'ee say that my Ted has killed a poor young girl as he luved! Heaven pity you for the lie, Bob Gipps, and be off out of my house," she said, low-voiced. "My Ted!"

Gipps retreated sheepishly and justified himself afterward.

"Mothers be all alike—unreasonable beings," he declared. "'Tes of no use to argue with them—reckon Judas Iscariot's, she'd say just the same to this day! Not as you'd expect Mrs. Havant to allow as Ted were a murderer—'tes against nature. But that don't make him innocent, *all* same."

THEN, on the third night after the double disappearance, the tragedy and the mystery deepened a hundredfold.

The "Blue Dove" in Darracombe had closed, a little after the legal hour, since conversation had been so absorbing in the bar and stabilized, so to speak, by the presence of Constable Gipps himself. A twice-renewed search had still failed to discover any body in the wood, and Henry Caunter and his two neighbors were still discussing the matter as they made their ways homeward in the spring darkness.

They lingered by Caunter's gate for a few last words, glancing along the shadowy lane toward the dark barrier of trees beyond Mrs. Yeoven's cottage.

And, suddenly, cutting in upon their slow speech came again a woman's shriek from the wood. Hideous, heart-breaking, it wailed out through the night silence, rising higher and higher in extremest anguish, then dying down to low sobs and pitiful groans. As it sank at last into silence, Caunter spoke unsteadily.

"Mercy on us! Did—did ivver you hear the like? That—that be some poor woman dying, sure 'nough."

Down the lane old Mrs. Yeoven came running again, half horrified, half triumphant.

"You heared it?" she whispered. "'Tes the same, the very same—'tes she, poor girl!—poor soul!"

"But—he can't be murderin' of she *again*," Caunter stammered. "'Tes against all reason!"

"Reason!—reason! What hev' that gashly thing to do wi' reason?" The old woman's voice grew shrill. "Tell 'ee that be her poor, sufferin' ghost, cryin' out from that whist place, as her did when her was killed, three nights agone—cryin' out for Christian burial, and for vengeance 'pon him what did the deed."

With shaking, skinny hand outstretched and bare white locks flying, old Mrs. Yeoven had much of the air of a witch or prophetess, and the three men, staring at her in awed silence, felt their doubts melting away. And, almost before they could collect their thoughts, the terrible sounds came again, louder than before, and Saunders stumbled off down the lane to summon Gipps.

A third time, the wailing shrieks broke out from the wood, and the constable, listening, as white-faced as the others, did not suggest searching the place again that night. Better wait till the morning, when search would be easier. . . .

Easier, but no more successful than before. Again the wood was ransacked from end to end by the constables, aided by a dozen volunteer helpers; the undergrowth was dragged aside, doubtful spots dug up with spade and pick. Yet, against all reason, every soul in Darracombe, including Constable Gipps himself, was now more convinced than ever that murder had been done in the wood, that the body was still concealed there, somewhere. It might seem impossible, but then so was that awful sound which so many of them had heard, which so many more were to hear again.

A dread more tangible than that inspired by any human murderer hung over Darracombe, a horror of the supernatural, of the thing which cried from the wood, shaking reason to its very center. Five centuries before, all the villagers passing that dark covert of trees would have hurried past, with head averted, crossing themselves. . . . As it was, they avoided it, except when protected by numbers.

But a terrible fascination drew them to the neighborhood at night, since only at night had the fearsome thing been heard.

For three evenings almost all the inhabitants of Darracombe gathered in the lane which led to Mrs. Yeoven's when darkness fell, hanging about the gate, from whence led the footpath to the wood, whispering, listening, hoping and yet fearing a repetition of the shrieks.

Two nights passed in silence, but on the third, as the knots and clusters of villagers waited in whispering silence, the stillness was broken once again by those appalling shrieks and wails, dying down into blood-curdling groans, rising again to agonized cries, dying, rising, more terrible and nerve-shaking than ever.

Mrs. Yeoven, listening with the others, shook her old head and muttered, "Aye, aye! Poor suffering soul! Her blood's cryin' out—that's what it do be. Cryin' and moanin' from the earth, against him as did put 'un out of the world."

A low murmur ran through the groups of villagers, and suddenly from the outskirts of the gathering broke out frantic weeping, and a woman's voice sobbing pitcously.

"My Sallie—my li'l Sallie!"

"'Tes poor dear Mis' Service," men and women whispered to each other. "She'm half frantic—her hus-

band didn' ought to have let her come —hearin' that gashly thing——"

"Aye, but likely he couldn' stop her," another temporized. "Mrs. Havant—she'm here, too."

"My li'l girl—my baby," the pitiful sobbing went on. "To think of her lyin' there—and nawthing done to find him what killed her—the cruel brute what murdered her."

Suddenly her voice grew shrill and harsh, rose hysterically through the dusk.

"You'm all standing by—you've given he the chance to get clean away —that's what you've done!"

"There, there, Alcie woman, don't 'ee take on like that—don't 'ee talk so." Kindly Tom Service tried to soothe his wife, but she broke away from him, and ran toward where the policeman stood, clutching at his arm, raising her pitiful, working face to his.

"You—you—what be *you* a-doin', Sam Gipps?" she demanded. "There be she cryin' from the wood—cryin' from the place where her poor body's hid away, and you've not the pluck to follow that cryin'—to see where it do come from. A coward—that's what you be, Sam Gipps! A coward!"

The constable shuffled his feet uneasily, glanced from side to side, tried to free his arm from the thin fingers which clutched it.

"We've searched every inch of wood, ma'am," he said gruffly. "All the chaps know we have—and we'll do it again tomorrow."

"Tomorrow—when she'm a cryin' to you tonight!" Skinny, ineffective Mrs. Service had taken on a tragic dignity in this moment. "If 'ee be a *man*, go now!"

CONSTABLE GIPPS hesitated only a moment, then rose to the occasion. Suddenly he drew himself up to his burly, square-shouldered height, made a gesture as though tightening his uniform belt, and strode toward the stile, beyond which the footpath, leading to the wood, showed pale and ghost-like.

"I be going now," he announced firmly. "Be any of you chaps comin' therealong, too? If not, I be going alone."

There was a pause, then a movement amongst the menfolk, a separating of themselves from the clustered women.

"All right, Sam, I'll come," one voice spoke, and the response led after it a succession of others.

"Me, too!"—"Yes, us'll come!"—"So'll I"—"And I——"

The group round Gipps thickened; there was a stir amongst the farther fringes of the villagers down the lane. The constable glanced at his following, and paused, with one solid leg raised to cross the stile, to speak confidently to Mrs. Service.

"Don't 'ee take on so, ma'am. We'll find the body of your poor darter, for certain sure, if it be there to find——"

Startlingly and unexpectedly, Gipps was interrupted; from the shadow of the overarching trees a girl's laugh broke out irrepressibly, then a girl's voice.

"Body? What d'you mean? Mother, dear, what is it?"

A slim figure in a pale dress ran forward from the dusk; Mrs. Service stared wildly, spoke in a hoarse whisper, "Sallie—Sallie—*alive!*"

"Very much alive, Mother darling!" fresh and clear, the girl's voice rang, followed by the sound of a kiss. "There, doesn't that tell you I'm all right? Oh, Mother, poor dear Mother, did you really think I was dead?"

"Dead—and murdered! We were sure of it, Sallie."

"Murdered! Oh! How terrible! Poor Mother! Poor Dad! I'm sorry—I never, never meant——"

"But where were 'ee, Sallie?" Mrs. Service clung to her daughter.

"At—at Whitcombe—away on the moor—staying at the li'l inn there—" Sallie broke off, then finished boldly: "Ted and I!"

"Ted—Ted Havant!" Mrs. Service gasped. "But—but it was him as murdered you—so us thought."

"Not murdered — married!" A man's voice and a man's laugh came from the tall figure behind Sallie. "You mustn't blame her, Mrs. Service—it was all my fault. Married a week ago, we were—slipped off quietly, seeing how set against me you and Mr. Service were. You see, we found that we just couldn't live without each other—didn't we, Sallie, love?"

"Yes, dear," very softly the girl's answer came through the dusk. "So you must try to forgive us, Dad, and Mother. After all, you felt the same—didn't you?—before *you* were married. But—I hated deceivin' you, all the same."

A little sob broke from Mrs. Service.

"Oh, Sallie! li'l girl—I'll forgive you anythin', as you're not dead—not murdered——"

Breaking through her last words came once again the terrible sound from the wood, rising to the wailing shrieks, sinking to the blood-chilling moans, and old Mrs. Yeoven clutched at Havant's arm.

"There—what be that, young fellow?" she demanded, her voice still accusing. "What be that dreadsome crying—you answer me that! That's what we did think was poor Sallie's ghostie, cryin' on us—but what *be* it?"

Havant stood listening, his head raised, listened until the last weird moans had died away into stillness, then turned to face the groups behind him, with a little nod.

"So *that* is what it was!" he said.

"You know what it be?" Constable Gipps questioned him.

"Yes, and it's my fault, too, though not in the way you thought. I didn't know what I was doing, but—look here, I'll tell you. Six weeks ago, when I came back from my last voyage, I brought a lot of beasts and birds as usual, and one of them was from Ceylon—a small brown bird I bought in the bazar at Colombo. I didn't know what the thing was—a bit like an owl, and a bit like a hawk, and as peevish as it could be! Wouldn't eat, wouldn't sing, sat and sulked in a corner, till I told Mother, a week ago, that I'd let it go loose, to save it from dying of peevishness. So I did—and when it was free, it found its voice, seemingly!"

"D'you mean to say——" Constable Gipps gaped.

"Yes. I didn't know what it was, but I do *now*. It is a devil-bird. I've heard 'em in the Ceylon jungles; that's the only place where they live, I believe. I thought, just as you did, that it was a woman being murdered, first time I heard it—lots of others have been taken in the same way. They're rather rare, and they're supposed never to be seen—I should think mine was caught by mistake, and the natives didn't know what it was, because they're afraid of going near 'em."

"And d'you mean to say it's going to stay there, a-'owlin' its life out, and frightening the wits out of me?" Mrs. Yeoven spoke rather tartly. After all, a small brown bird was rather a come-down from stark tragedy.

"I expect it'll die, anyway, as soon as the cold weather comes, Mrs. Yeoven," Havant said soothingly and prophetically. "It's a tropical bird, you see—used to hot weather, the devil-bird."

"A devil of a bird!" Constable Gipps summed up emphatically the opinion of the assembled worthies of Darracombe. "And the less we hear of it again, the better I shall be pleased!"