

Suddenly the silence was broken by the distant report of a rifle, and then by another report, and then by a long scream like the cry of a wounded beast. After that there was again silence. Dennis, Hughes, and the boy dozed off to sleep, and dreamt of roast meat for breakfast.

Tredegar alone could not close his eyes. He stretched his huge bulk on the sandy floor and stared hard into the darkness. But his thoughts were far away, and they would not let him sleep. He saw the black cliffs of Cardigan-shire, the long stretch of yellow sand, and the great bog of Gogerddam, reaching to the circle of wooded mountains. He saw, too, the face of one he loved, more beautiful, as it seemed to him, than the face of an angel. He looked again into the dark eyes, filled with tears, as he had seen them last. He heard once more a low voice whispering to him, "I love you, Emrys, and will always love you. I will wait till you return to me!" Till he returned to her! He clenched his hands and laughed bitterly. Mavanwy Morgan might be an old woman before then. She might be dead. She might even—No, at least she would be true. She would wait, wait. Even the stern and grasping spirit of her father could not force her against her will. She would wait till her lover returned. And he would return—aye, and rich enough to pay off the mortgages on his estate and live in the home of his fathers. Tredegar's face grew stern and determined in the fire-light, and the muscles stood out on his bare arms as he knotted his powerful fingers together.

But in time Nature asserted her authority. Even this active mind could not fight against the exhaustion of the body. His head gradually sank on his breast, and he fell asleep.

When he awoke the moon was high in the heavens. The fire had died down to a few glowing ashes, but every detail of the shore was clearly cut and defined in the moonlight. His companions still slept, and he could hear nothing but the sound of their breathing. He peered out towards the black wall of forest and listened attentively. He began to wonder why Williams and Morgan had not returned. He had half-hoped that the noise of their approach had roused him from his sleep. But he could hear nothing.

Then it struck him that the silence was not so complete as he fancied. No definite sound came to break the silence, but he began to fancy that the air was vibrating with a long even murmur, so faint and continuous as to be scarcely noticeable. He put the idea down to his imagination. A man who listens for sounds in the dead of night seldom fails to find them.

After he had listened for two or three minutes a new fancy struck him. He began to imagine that the small stretch of sand and rocks that came within his range of vision had in some inexplicable manner changed since he last saw it by daylight. It seemed in some way blurred—the white sand had grown darker, and the black rocks more grey. Seeing that the effect of moonlight is to heighten the lights and deepen the shadows, this general grey effect was the more strange and startling. He rubbed his eyes and observed everything carefully.

Then, as he looked, something ran across his hand, and he saw it moving swiftly out of the shadow of the little house into the moonlight. It was about the size of a mouse, and of a grey colour. He could not see clearly what it was, but it appeared to have a large number of legs. He caught up a small stone from the sandy floor and hurled it with all his force at the flying patch of grey. Then a strange thing happened.

The whole extent of beach and rocks seemed to suddenly quiver and move in the moonlight, and millions of little grey things scuttled in all directions and piled themselves up in ridges and heaps in their fear and excitement. But in a few seconds they seemed to recover from their scare, and the whole mass began to move slowly towards the forest.

He woke his comrades with kicks and shouts and flung a few sticks on the fire. In the blaze he saw two or three belated fugitives crawling across the sand. One of them got into the flames and frizzled there. He could see it quite plainly. It was an enormous spider, with a body an inch and a half

in diameter, and legs not less than eight inches long.

The other men were slow in waking, and by the time they were able to see or think clearly there was nothing to be seen in the moonlight but black rocks and white sand. The view had resumed its natural appearance. They plied Tredegar with angry questions. He told them what he had seen, and pointed to the little charred body in the fire. They believed then, and not one of them closed their eyes again that night.

CHAPTER II.

THE FOREST OF FEAR.

In the morning neither Captain Williams nor Morgan had returned, and their comrades resolved to go in search of them. After an early breakfast of fish they walked up to the edge of the forest, and cutting themselves some heavy sticks from the bushes, found the first mark that Morgan had "blazed" on the palm tree, and began to make their way through the undergrowth.

It was not difficult to trace the path of the missing men. They had marked a tree every twenty yards, and even if they had not done so it would have been easy to see where they had forced their way through the dense shrubs and creepers. They had, in fact, cut out a clean path, and it was wonderful how much strength and energy had been displayed by two men on the verge of starvation.

At first the men saw nothing to attract their attention, unless, indeed, it was the absence of bird and animal life, and the extraordinary profusion of insects. But when they had penetrated to a distance of about one hundred and fifty yards the whole wood seemed suddenly to spring into animation.

It is no exaggeration to say that there were spiders everywhere. Every leaf and frond trembled with their weight. The undergrowth rustled as they moved through it in countless thousands. Hundreds scuttled away out of the path, and hundreds were trodden under foot. Their webs were woven from branch to branch and twig to twig till the very air seemed full of light network and quivering bolts of grey. And everywhere winged insects flew and struggled and died.

It was a horrible and disgusting sight. Before the searchers had gone another 150 yards their clothes were grey and shaggy with fine silken threads, and they had to brush insects from their hair and eyes. The spiders were of all sizes, some two or three inches in diameter, and some scarcely bigger than the head of a pin. They appeared to be absolutely harmless. Hughes caught a large one in his hand, and it struggled like a rat, till he dropped it on the ground and crushed it with his heel. But it did not bite him.

Yet in spite of their harmlessness and their anxiety to escape, their very presence filled the men with so great a horror that Tredegar had the utmost difficulty in persuading his companions to continue the search. However, he drew so terrible a picture of the two missing men abandoned in that gruesome forest that the others were forced to proceed for very shame.

In an hour's time they came to a spot where the trees were smaller and set farther apart. All the undergrowth had suddenly died away. In its place was a floor of hard earth and black rock. And still the spiders were everywhere. It was now possible to see for some distance in every direction, and yet, strange to say, it was at this point that the men lost the trail. They found the mark of Morgan's knife on a tall mahogany tree, and after that were unable to find a single other sign of anyone having passed that way. It is true that they could no longer glean any information from the undergrowth, and that the earth and rock beneath their feet was so hard that it would not receive any impression of a human foot. But it was strange that there was absolutely no further mark on the trees.

They consulted together, and organised a definite plan of search. Tredegar remained by the mahogany tree, and the others went out in three different directions through the forest. It was agreed that Tredegar should be a kind of landmark by which the others could retrace their footsteps to the path, and that he should shout at interval to give them some idea of his whereabouts. In less than five minutes all three had passed out of Tredegar's sight, but he could still

hear them tapping the trees with their sticks.

Every three minutes by his watch he gave a loud and long call, and three distinct answers came back from the forest. Then, after a lapse of twenty minutes, there came only two answers to the cry. He waited for three minutes more, then called again and again in quick succession, but still there were only two answers. Then he heard the sound of someone running in the distance. It was Dennis, and he came panting through the trees with a white face.

"I've found summat, sir!" he cried. "Come along wi' me."

Tredegar gave three sharp cries, the pre-arranged signal for all to return, and then questioned Dennis as to what he had found.

"The rifle," the man answered, huskily, "and blood. And there's summat else—God knows what it is—I can't tell you, sir; but it's more like a fishing net than anything."

In a few minutes Hughes came running up. He had not seen or heard anything. But there was no sign of Winkles, and all three men kept shouting for ten minutes; but still he did not come. Then they decided to go and look at the things Dennis had found, marking every fifth tree as they went, and to return afterwards and wait till the boy turned up.

They were not long in reaching the place indicated by Dennis. A rifle lay on the ground, and close by it an empty cartridge. Tredegar opened the breech and took out another cartridge, also empty. The weapon had been fired twice, and they called to mind the two shots they had heard the night before. On the ground there were traces of blood and evidences of a struggle. The black rock was scratched, and the earth torn up into long ridges. A few yards away they found Morgan's knife. There was blood sticking to it, and some long yellowish hairs.

Dennis picked up the rifle, and leading them further into the forest, showed them a thing which might well set the brain of any man a-wandering. To all appearances it was a gigantic spider's web. It was fifty feet in diameter, and every strand of it was an inch in thickness.

At the first glance Tredegar's blood ran cold. Was it possible that a spider of such enormous proportions existed, and that William and Morgan had been overpowered by its stupendous strength? Then he examined it more carefully and saw that each rope was composed of thousands of thin glutinous strands woven and twisted together, and that the whole design had been constructed by knotting the ropes into the required pattern. The structure was stretched horizontally between several trees, and had the appearance of a gigantic hammock.

"The work of a man!" Tredegar said, turning to his comrades.

The others examined the thing and nodded their heads.

"Aye, sir," Dennis muttered. "No animal could make these knots. I should like to meet him." And he eyed the barrel of the rifle wistfully. They had no cartridges with them.

"He must have been a strong fellow," Tredegar said. "The captain was no chicken—and he had a rifle, and Morgan could use a knife."

They made their way back to the mahogany tree and again called out for Winkles, all three of them together, so that the sound might carry further. But there was no reply, though they waited there and continued to call until they were faint with hunger and the sun was low in the heavens.

"We will return," Tredegar said, in a low voice. "It is a horrible thing to leave the boy here in the darkness. But perhaps he has struck the coast, and he has only to follow it till—" he stopped suddenly. He remembered that they had argued in the same way about Captain Williams and Morgan, and that they had not returned.

They retraced their steps in silence, finding the marks on the trees with difficulty, for it was growing rapidly dark. At last, however, they passed through all the horrors of that crawling and rustling forest, and came out on to the shore.

They heaped up a pile of wood and lit it—they owed this much to Winkles, who would have insisted on its being done. Then they cooked some fish, ate a hearty supper in silence and turned in for the night. They had a rifle with them now, and were not afraid of anything, either man or beast. Tredegar

slipped a cartridge into the breech and laid it ready to his hand. It would go hard with anyone who attacked them in the night.

In the morning Winkles had not returned, and they went once more into the forest to look for their three missing comrades. They took the rifle with them and searched all day, but found nothing except spiders. An acute sense of horror came over them, and a mad desire to get out of the accursed place. They were all agreed on one point—none of them would enter the forest unless the other two went with him.

Yet even this precaution proved no safeguard. Before another twenty-four hours had passed Dennis had disappeared. He went out one evening to fish on the far side of the lake and never returned he had taken the rifle with him, and it was found lying on a flat piece of rock. There was no sign of a struggle, and the cartridges were undischarged. But there were curious footprints in the sand, like blurred impressions of human hands and feet, and there was also a long trail, as though some heavy body had been dragged towards the forest.

Tredegar and Hughes came to the conclusion that their unfortunate comrade was undoubtedly dead. They had not been more than two hundred yards away from him, and if he had been able to cry out they would have heard him. A great fear fell upon them, and so paralysed their minds that they made no attempt at a rescue. They retired into their shelter and kept watch alternately until the dawn broke. And the dark circle of forest round their little bay seemed to each of them like the yawning jaws of some terrible monster waiting to swallow them up in its depths.

But with the morning light their courage returned to them. Tredegar rose to his feet and clenched his great hands as he looked at the forest. He asked nothing better than to meet this thing face to face and feel it in his grasp, and strangle it or beat out its brains on the trunk of some tree. Two hours after sunrise the two men entered the forest. Tredegar carried the rifle under his arm, and twenty cartridges in his pocket. Hughes cut himself a bludgeon of ironwood sufficiently heavy to break in a man's legs or batter in his skull.

They took a new route this time, and followed the trail they had seen upon the beach—the footprints and the marks of something being dragged along the ground. This trail led them into a more northerly direction than Captain Williams' path, and was an easy one to follow. The undergrowth was crushed and broken, and the prints of the animal's feet were plainly visible from time to time. Here and there the thick stem of a shrub was torn in half, and Hughes thought he could distinguish the marks of nails upon the bark. In one place they found a long shred of cloth upon a stout thorn, and recognised it as part of Williams' coat. As on their last journey, the spiders were everywhere, but they scarcely heeded them. Their minds were too intent on the matter they had in hand.

For two hours they followed the trail, and observed by reference to the compass, which was fortunately in their possession, that the path was sweeping round in a circular route towards the west. Then the wood began to grow more open, and in a few minutes they caught sight of a "blaze" upon a tree, and found themselves upon their old track, close to the place where they had waited in vain for Winkles to return.

They stood here a little while, and gave several calls in the hope of hearing some answering voice; but there was no reply. Then they decided to make their way to the strange web they had discovered the day before. Tredegar held his rifle with both hands in order to raise it to his shoulder at a moment's notice.

Before they had gone very far Hughes grasped him by the arm, and pointed into the heart of the wood. They both stopped, and saw in the distance the strands of the giant web like fine threads against a clear piece of sky. In their centre was a large, dark patch with four arms or legs, like the figure of a man clinging to a wall, and, as they looked, it seemed as though the limbs moved. Nearer the edge of the patch were four other patches, but these were motionless. The sight reminded them horribly of a spider and four dead bluebottles. Tredegar raised the rifle quickly to his shoulder but