



The Dene

b a r r y s t e a d

THE DENE

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*Once upon a time, not very long ago,
before mobile phones and the internet...*

PART ONE

THE VALLEY IN THE HEIGHTS

ONE

The evidence the evil would return presented itself twenty years ago when two boys and a girl stayed out too late.

It was June, one of the sunniest they could remember in their short lives of eleven years, and it was Friday night: no school tomorrow and the weekend would last forever. After tea they had scrambled across the quarry and skipped through Thockley wood to the hay fields below Belfry. This was their domain, as was all the valley. They knew the secret paths and the best hiding places in every wood. Picnic sites had already been lined up for the long summer holidays ahead, and if the sun was really hot then perhaps they could swim in the large pond they called the Dams next to Thockley wood. Then there was the swing over the Dene which the two boys had made last weekend from a length of old rope and a tyre taken from the tip.

They all lay down, exhausted from running, on a wide flattened patch of grass and stared at the sky.

“What shall we do next?” said the taller of the two boys.

“We could go down to the road and watch the wagons,” said the other.

“Too far,” said the girl. “Anyway I’m bored with watching lorries and the quarry’s closed so there won’t be many.”

“But there still is some,” he replied in defiance of the facts. “I bet you!”

“Tell you what,” said the taller boy, sucking on a length of grass, “let’s go and play on the swing!”

They made their way, with less speed than when they had come out, back to the wood and climbed over the gate into the shade of the pines.

“Have you skipped piano practice tonight?” asked the girl.

“Yeah,” said the taller boy. “I can do what I want.” The other boy laughed.

“I can!”

“So why do you still have to go to Sunday school twice every Sunday?” He thought he had scored a point. “We don’t.”

“It keeps my mum happy,” was the reply. “Anyway, I don’t really believe.” He was on the defensive and had strode ahead.

“Why do you want to learn to play the piano?” asked the girl, sensing a fight and trying to deflect it.

The taller boy paused to let them catch up. “Because of my dad, I suppose,” he answered, a frown of regret furrowing his brows. “He used to play before the pit disaster.”

“Oh,” said the girl a little embarrassed. It was a subject none of them liked to dwell on.

Thockley wood grew on the southern side of the valley and the Dene - that was the local children’s name for it - lay close to the entrance. It was a cleft in the sloping ground of the wood about five foot wide, framed

by two silver birch saplings and overrun with moss and ferns. With a streamlet trickling out, it looked like a miniature gorge and the more it wound its way into the wood the more overgrown and blanketed with brambles it became until, impassable, it ended in a thick, tangled mass of holly bushes, hawthorns and brambles at the centre of the wood. A large oak - from which the swing was suspended - loomed over the silver birches and the streamlet crossing the path.

"I bet this place looks dead spooky in the dark," said the short boy.

"It looks spooky now," replied the girl, climbing into the tyre. "Push then, one of you." The taller one obliged, sending her arcing gently over the path, her dark hair flowing in curls behind her.

"We've got to explore the Dene right to its end one day," he said.

"Like a real expedition?" enthused the other. "Great! We could bring torches, and knives to cut a path. We might even find treasure."

They took turns - with the boys showing off as to how high they dared go - losing all sense of time and it was only when the sun dipped behind the trees on the other side of the Dams did they realise how late it was. The shafts of light through the branches had gone and the wood was cloaked in a rising gloom.

"We should have been home hours ago", said the girl, looking at her watch.

"Ah, don't panic," said the short boy. "One more swing, eh?"

"I'm going," replied the other boy. "My mum'll kill me." And he set off along the path followed by the girl.

"Softies!" yelled the short boy from the tyre as he launched himself into the air.

The other two paused at an arch made from two intertwining holly bushes that marked the entrance to the wood and shouted for him to join them.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming." He braked to a stop by digging his heels into the path and pulled the tyre over his head. From inside the Dene he heard a movement, like somebody stepping on a twig. He peered into the shadows but could see nothing. Just my imagination, he thought.

Then he heard sniffing.

He backed away slowly and ran to the holly arch. "There's somebody in the Dene," he said. He tried to sound casual. "We've been spied on!"

"Rubbish," retorted the girl on a laugh. "We didn't see anyone go in and it's so overgrown in the middle of the wood that you can't get in."

"But I heard sniffing," he protested.

"Then it was just an animal. A fox or badger," said the other boy. "They come out at night. Let's have a look."

They inched their way back along the path and half way to the Dene the girl pointed.

"Look, he's right." She suddenly stiffened.

Obscured by ferns there was something behind the birches.

"It might be a deer," said the tall boy and held his hand to his lips. "Shh!"

"No, it's just another kid," whispered the girl, "isn't it?" The short boy wasn't sure. "Didn't sound like one," he said. "I'm off. Come on." The taller boy ignored him, craning his head to and fro to catch a glimpse through the leaves as his friends hurried back to the arch.

"Don't be stupid!" hissed the girl in the best stage-whisper she could manage, then to the short boy: "Scarey."

"Yeah." He felt his knees tremble.

The taller of the two was congratulating himself on his curiosity and bravery as he dared another three steps toward the Dene. He knew there were deer in the valley but had only seen one once, and then from a distance, and was wondering if it would have antlers when he heard a low guttural growl. No deer, that. For a moment his feet refused to move, divorced from a mind spinning with thoughts of man-eating animals. He gulped and realised how dark it was and the wild animals suddenly became werewolves and unnamed monsters of the night.

His feet regained contact with his brain and he sped to the arch. "Run!" he shouted, waving his friends on. The look on his face was enough to propel them over the stepping stones where the burn flowed out of the Dams.

When the taller boy caught them up they were half way round the wide pond. The shorter one cast a look over his shoulder toward the wood.

“Look,” he said.

The other two were positive they didn't want to but nevertheless curiosity pulled their heads round. They couldn't see it but whatever was disturbing the ferns was moving with a cautious, skulking deliberation.

“Weird,” said the girl, plainly frightened.

“I think we're being watched,” said the tall boy, his voice shaking.

“Yeah,” agreed the other, not bothering to hide his fear. “I'm off.” And it was an effort even to say that. He dashed off up the path as fast as he could with the other two close on his heels, their fear magnified by the deepening twilight and their imaginations. They didn't let up on the speed till they were half way across the quarry. Even then they didn't dawdle.

Two days later under the bright sun which banishes all nightmares they were laughing about it, and two months afterwards it had been forgotten among the games of an unusually happy summer. Unwisely, for after the passing of twenty years it would bring catastrophe.