

The Girl In The Woods

a ghost story for Bramcote Hills Park

by

Andy Barrett

Cast

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|----------------------------|---|
| Jonathon Drew | The narrator of the tale; in his early seventies. |
| John Drew | The narrator's younger self; in his late twenties |
| Jimmy | A 1960's workman |
| Colin | A 1960's workman |
| Barbara | Jimmy's wife |
| Major Holden | The owner of Bramcote Hills House |
| Lady Holden | |
| Stokes | The groundsman |
| Mr Hobbins | The butler |
| Alice | A maid |
| Betty | A maid |
| Mary | A maid |
| Hilda | A younger maid |
| Ian | The young stable boy |
| The Girl | Aged between seven and thirteen |
| The Crimean Soldier | |
| Stephen Potts | In his late twenties |
| Edward | Leader of the orchestra / choir |
| Orchestra / Singers | |
| Non Speaking Parts: | |
| Poacher A | |
| Poacher B | |
| Soldiers | |
| Playing children | |
| Cook | |
| Dumb show performers | |
| Dancing Guests | |

Scene One

As the audience gather at the car park we hear the sound of muffled explosions. The audience begin to walk along the path and as they do so a number of workmen - the house was demolished in 1966 - walk past them.

At a certain point on the path there is an obstacle which prevents people travelling any further. The audience should be unsure what to do. As they wait we hear another muffled explosion.

A man in his sixties now enters, walking through the gathered audience. This is Jonathon Drew. As he is approaching the obstacle a couple of workmen with flashlights walk from the other side of the path. They meet at the obstacle.

Jimmy: Can't get through here mate.

Drew: What's going on?

Colin: Demolition.

Drew: You're knocking down the house?

Jimmy: We are.

Drew: Can I ask why?

Colin: Well it's a mess isn't it? Has been for years now.

Drew: Who lives there?

Jimmy: Nobody lives there. You can hardly go demolishing a house if you've got people living inside the thing can you.

Colin: The last people here were Council employees.

Jimmy: They turned it into a couple of flats.

Colin: Lucky buggers.

Jimmy: It's not everyday you get a job that comes with a Manor House attached.

Drew: The Major was right then.

Jimmy: Sorry?

Drew: The Major; Major Holden. He told me that he could see the house wouldn't last; that its days were numbered. Tell me, are there any... stories about this place?

Colin: What kind of stories?

Drew: The kind of stories that... you sometimes get with old houses.

Colin: Are you talking about ghosts?

Drew: Some may use that word.

Jimmy: Who are you?

Drew: I'm sorry. It's been a long time. I was just wondering.

Jimmy: Well no there aren't. Not that I know of anyway.

Colin: Nor me. And I've been round here all my life.

Drew: Did you play here, as children?

Colin: You're full of questions aren't you?

Drew: Yes; I suppose I am.

Jimmy: So what are you doing here?

Drew: I've come to attend the funeral of a friend.

Jimmy: Well I'm very sorry to hear that but we can't stand round talking to you all night. We're off home. We've got an early start tomorrow. If we don't get the thing pulled down quickly then before you know it the kids have moved in and are making a hell of a mess.

Drew: Can I have a look? Please. I won't be long.

Colin: There isn't a lot to look at.

Jimmy: Did you used to live here?

Drew: No. But I visited, once.

Colin: What for one of those big parties or something?

Drew: Well kind of; although totally by accident. You see it was the spring of 1920...

The sound of wind and rain.

Drew: and I was on a motorbike coming down from Hull to see a friend; the friend whose funeral I am going to tomorrow. It was a terrible night. Howling wind and pouring rain.....

Jimmy: Look I'm sure you've got plenty of memories but we really haven't got the time...

Colin: No, hold on Jimmy. I reckon this might be worth listening to.

Drew: And just when I thought the night couldn't get any worse I hit something in the road and my front tyre punctured. I knew that I was nearly at my destination but I had never been here before you see. It was my first visit; well my only visit up to now... and I was lost. I had no idea what to do but there was a wall alongside me; and I thought that I could hear voices. So I jumped over with the idea of asking for some help.

Scene Two

And now we see a young man walk along the path with motor cycle attire.

John: Hello! Hello! Is anybody there? Hello!

In the distance there a couple of poachers, (who we cannot see).

Poacher A: There's somebody coming.

Poacher B: This way. Come on.

Poacher A: What shall I do with this?

Poacher B: Leave it.

As they run off John looks in the direction of where the noise of their movement is coming from.

John: Hello! Is there anybody there?

In the distance we now see a figure appearing through the woods and approaching the path that John is on.

John: Hello! Can you help me?

As the figure gets closer we see that it is a young girl.

Girl: Hello.

John: Hello.

Girl: Why are you here?

John: I'm looking for help. My motorcycle has broken down.

Girl: Does the Captain know you're here?

John: No he doesn't.

Girl: Be careful he doesn't find you. Everybody knows that you get into trouble if the Captain finds you in the woods.

John: So what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be tucked up in bed at this time of night?

Girl: I'm climbing trees. Can you climb trees?

John: Yes I can.

Girl: My father says that everyone should be able to climb trees.

John: And he's right. Although I think that it's more a sport for boys than for girls.

Girl: But I haven't got any brothers sir, so I will have to do it. Will you help me?

John: And how can I do that?

Girl: It's such a big tree and I can never reach. And then it happens; that terrible thing happens and I can never stop it. Never.

John: What terrible thing? What do you mean?

Stokes, the head groundsman, approaches with a lantern over his arm and a rifle to his shoulder; although at this point he is yet to come into view.

Girl: Ssshhh! They're coming.

John: And who are they?

Girl: Don't tell them you saw me. You mustn't tell them you saw me.

John: I won't say a word. As long as you promise that you will run off home and go to bed.

The girl has vanished.

Scene Three

Stokes appears holding a rifle as though to fire it.

Stokes: Hands up and don't try any funny business.

John: Don't shoot.

Stokes: And why shouldn't I? You know this is private land. You know the punishment for poaching. Why shouldn't I pepper your backside with a barrel full of shot?

John: I'm not a poacher. My motorcycle has broken down. I thought I heard voices so I jumped over the wall. I'm sorry. I didn't know I was trespassing.

Stokes considers this, slowly lowering his rifle.

Stokes: Well I suppose you wouldn't be out poaching dressed like that. Go on. Off you get.

John: I was going to ask if you've any tools I could use. I haven't brought any with me and I don't fancy pushing my motorcycle on a night like this.

Stokes: Right; well I suppose so. If you don't mind waiting you can come back to my cottage when I've finished my rounds and I'll see what I can find for you.

John: That's very good of you.

Stokes: Believe me helping a stranger is much more preferable to having to chase poachers off of the estate. I'm not getting any younger.

John: Where am I exactly?

Stokes: Bramcote Hills House. Home to Major Ernest Frank Holden and his wife.

John: A military man?

Stokes: To the very bottom of his boots.

John: Well its military matters that have brought me here.

Stokes: And in what way is that then?

John: I've come to see the man who saved my life on the battlefields of France.
Shaking hands. Jonathon Drew.

Stokes: Billy Stokes. Head grounds man. Come on; let's see if we can find these bloody poachers.

The sound of rustling in the distance again.

Stokes and John set off along the path towards the house.

Scene Four

As the audience follow Stokes and John they pass under a line which is stretched from tree to tree across the path and on which are hanging a row of dead rabbits. The Major appears from behind one of these trees.

Major: Look at this Stokes! Brazen. Ah you've got one of the stealthy buggers.

Stokes: No sir; I'm afraid not.

Major: So who's this?

Stokes: An ex soldier seeking assistance.

Major: Excellent. Any man that has served for the King is a man that I am proud to aid in any way that I can. Ernest Holden.

John: Jonathon Drew.

Major: Can you give me a hand getting these damned rabbits down?

John: Of course.

Over the course of the following conversation the line and the rabbits are taken down. They should be handled roughly; thrown from person to person.

Major: Just look at them. Only a few moments ago they were running through these woods with vitality coursing through them. It always astounds me how quickly the spark of life vanishes from the eyes of the dead. And how can we help you Mr Drew?

John: I'm afraid my motorcycle has a puncture and I've set out without tools.

Major: Well I'm sure we can come to your assistance. Although I hope that you're not in too much of a hurry. It's always good to share conversation with those who have experienced army life. If you are in agreement I will ask the bailiff to collect your motorcycle in his cart and we will mend it in the morning. In the meantime I will have one of the maids prepare you a room for the night.

John: You needn't go to so much trouble Major.

Major: It is my privilege.

Major: So tell me, where did you serve?

John: The Somme sir.

Major: Damned terrible business.

John: Were you in conflict?

Stokes: The Major was awarded the medal with two clasps for his service with the Tirah Expeditionary Force.

Major: Thank you Stokes.

John: A man of courage then.

Major: I cannot remember thinking anything of courage at the time.

Stokes: He was injured too. At the defence of Ladysmith.

Major: Stokes, Mr Drew has no desire to hear of my scratches and bruises. He has been through much greater. Maybe you can go to the house and send the bailiff out to collect the wounded motorcycle. And take these rabbits too. Maybe some of the staff would like them.

Stokes: May I...

Major: Yes, you may.

Stokes takes the rabbits and exits.

Major: A true and honourable servant of the family is Mr Stokes. Just his misfortune that he has to walk amongst the carnage of an incendiary marriage. You don't mind if we wait a while do you? I like to spend some time in these woods and the house can seem very stifling.

John: Of course.

Over the next exchanges the Major walks a few paces up the path and looks out across the park.

Major: The memorial tablet to those killed from this village was unveiled on Sunday. It has brought back a lot of the sadness to the village. You can almost feel it on the skin. Is it true that the trenches were full of poppies?

John: Yes sir. Poppies and rats.

Major: And you? Did you see many die?

John: Yes. And I would have too if it were not for the man I have come to visit.

Major: Can I ask you to tell me what happened?

John: We were attacking German lines in the woods at Gommecourt; a decoy to make the Germans think that the main thrust of the assault was to be there rather than between the Ancre and Somme rivers.

Major: Who were you with?

John: South Staffs; 8th Battalion.

And now in the distance a war scene. Bombs; screams; people running around. This is an abstract, atmospheric canvas. As this is happening a man is walking towards the characters. The nearer he gets the stranger he seems – he is a soldier from the Crimean War.

John: I was hit by machine gun fire in my leg and it was bleeding all over the place. I managed to crawl into a crater from a German shell and lay there next to a young boy whose head had been blown half away. And I listened, expecting these sounds to be the last I would ever hear. And I must have passed out. Because I was woken by a man shaking me and shouting in my face. He tore off his shirt, tied it round the wound and carried me back to one of our trenches. It was hell that night. I wished he had left me alone in the crater to die. There was no moon. No stars. Just the terrible cries of the wounded and the frightened and the heavy desperate sound of men crawling back, their bodies covered in gore and dirt as the trench slowly filled up. The next day I was taken to the 36th Casualty Clearing Station at Heilly; and from there to Lincoln. It was only then that I found a small piece of paper crumpled up in my shirt pocket. Stephen Potts; 10th Battalion, Sherwood Foresters; Stapleford; Nottinghamshire. After the war was over I wrote and thank God he had come through too and told me that I should come to visit.

Major: And now here you are.

John: Yes.

Both men look out

Major: Sometimes I felt guilty; being too old to serve with men like you. But at other times I was very thankful. Do you have nightmares?

John: They say they will go with time. Do you?

Major: Not as much.

At this the Crimean soldier has reached John and the Major. But they do not notice him. He walks through them and stops to stare at the Major. John looks round.

Major: What is it? Have you heard something? Maybe they've come back for the rabbits.

John: No. It wasn't a sound; it was something else.

Major: It's just the woods Mr Drew. Sometimes they seem to have a life of their own.

The Crimean Soldier stops and looks at them before leaving through the trees.

Major: Come on; let me show you the house I have been bequeathed; it's rather a splendid thing.

The two men set off. As they do so we hear the sound of rustling in the distance as the poachers move through the trees. They should be just visible to the audience.

Scene Five

As the audience follow the characters along the path we are stopped at the large Cedar tree by a group of four maids: Alice, Mary, Betty and Hilda – who is crying.

Major: What are you all doing out here? I thought that my wife had you working away preparing beds for her guests.

Alice: It's Lady Holden sir.

Major: Now what?

Betty: She says we have to come to the tree. That she can hear it again.

Major: And can you?

Betty: No sir.

Major: So why do you continue to meet her ridiculous demands when I have told you to ignore them?

Mary: She insisted sir. Said that she wouldn't get a wink of sleep until one of us had been out to hear it.

Major: So what are you all doing here?

Alice: We couldn't come out on our own sir. Not with her saying such things.

Betty: It puts the fear of God into us.

Major: You know she has been unwell. The Doctor has attended to her fever and says that her illness causes inflammation of the imagination.

Mary: But the fever is passed sir.

Major: And may return. We all must learn not to pay any attention to what she says.

Alice: But she has upset Hilda terribly sir. Look at the poor girl.

Betty: 'Tis a devilish thing to do; to put the fear of God into a young girl who has gone through so much heartache.

Alice: If we did not think so highly of you Major Holden then we would all pack our bags and leave.

Major: What is it Hilda?

Hilda: I'd rather not say sir.

Alice: You must.

Major: I will not be angry.

Hilda: She says that this place is filled with sadness and it can never go away.

Mary: It was more than that Hilda. Go on; you tell the Major.

Hilda: She said that such sadness can only be caused when a person is taken suddenly from this life and cannot find peace. She said that dead people's souls may be here, in the woods. That even now my mother may be looking for me to bid me farewell.

Alice: She's only a simple one sir, and now that Lady Holden has put such notions in her head she'll never be able to walk in these woods alone again.

Major: Hilda, what happened to your mother was a terrible thing. But there is nothing to fear from these woods. We really should try and be less morbid in our thoughts.

Hilda: She says this sadness can never go until your family leave this place.

Major: Enough I say! If you cannot keep your tongues and stop your empty heads filling with this idle nonsense then you will all be asked to leave.

Alice: Sorry sir.

Betty: It won't happen again sir.

Major: *(To John)* From time to time my wife is convinced that she can hear the sound of sobbing coming from this tree. She has a habit of sending the maids out as she refuses to go near it. In fact she refuses to do very much at all these days.

John: It's a wonderful tree.

Major: Over two hundred years old. The things it must have seen. Alice and Betty you are to follow me back to the house, tell my wife what you heard, and go straight to your quarters. We've an important function tomorrow and I want all of my staff to be at their very best. Mary you go and ask the stable lad to come here to walk Hilda home. And Mr Drew, would you be so kind as to wait here with our young maid until her escort arrives, I have some business I need to attend to. The house is just around the corner. The butler will let you in.

John: Of course.

Alice, Betty, Mary and the Major leave.

John: Are you alright Hilda?

Hilda: Yes sir, I'm sorry sir.

John: It's Jonathon. I'm just an ordinary sort, like you. Not one of these posh types.

Hilda: Do you think Lady Holden is right? That if people are taken before their time that their souls may come to haunt us?

John: I think that there is much sadness in the world at this present time. You should listen to what the Major says. This is a wonderful tree. Look at it. Imagine all the children who must have climbed it over the years.

Hilda: I suppose so.

John: Has your mother been dead for long?

Hilda: She died in the explosion.

John: What explosion?

Hilda: Are you not from round here?

John: No. I've come to visit a friend.

Hilda: It was terrible. One of the shells went off at the Ordnance Depot, over there, in Chilwell. There were one hundred and thirty killed.

John: I had no idea.

Hilda: She used to come home with yellow skin. That's why they called them canary girls. From handling the shells. She used to muck about. Say she'd become a chinaman. They were picking up bits of bodies from the fields nearby for days afterwards.

The stable boy approaches from the house.

Stable boy: Hilda!

Hilda: Over here Ian.

Stable boy: Come on you daft lummox, let's get you home.

Scene Six

As the stable boy walks towards Hilda and John a woman from the 1960's – Barbara – walks up the path towards the house...

Barbara: Jimmy! Where are you? Jimmy!

The older Drew and the two workmen are standing on the grassed area opposite the house.

Barbara: Jimmy!

Jimmy: Over here!

Barbara: You're taking your time. I was beginning to get worried. Your dinner's ready.

Colin: We're being told a story Carol.

Jimmy: This is Mr Drew. He met Major Holden. Went in the house; when it was all proper.

Barbara: And was it as splendid as they say?

Drew: Yes it was. Windows which stretched from floor to ceiling; a wonderful spiral staircase; and so many chandeliers.

Barbara: Well you're a very lucky man; but if you don't mind I'd like to have my husband back now. We're meant to be going to see Georgy Girl at the Essoldo tonight.

Jimmy: But he's just got started.

Colin: When you were telling the Major about the war; you said you felt something.

Drew: Yes, I did. I swear to this day that something brushed past me. Something without shape maybe but something that had a real presence.

Barbara: What kind of story is this?

Colin: It was probably just the wind.

Drew: No. Because I could smell something. Something that had the heat of a mans breath. Something that I knew.

Jimmy: What was it?

Drew: It was the smell of fear. Of terrible, terrible fear.

Barbara: Right well I think you've both heard enough of that. No offence Mr Drew but I've had a lot of upsetting things happen in my family recently and I'm not sure I like the sound of what you're talking about.

Drew: But it happened. And now that I am standing here it only seems like yesterday.

Barbara: So was all this supposed to have gone on?

Drew: Not far short of fifty years ago.

And now in the distance we see a group of musicians or singers approaching carrying lanterns and either their instruments or sheet music and music stands.

Drew: And as I arrived at the house I looked out behind where you are standing now and I saw what can only be described as a procession approaching across the grounds. And after everything that had happened so far – all this talk of war and death and illness – it all seemed so magical.

Barbara: What was it?

Drew: It was an orchestra / a choir.

Scene Eight

The musicians/singers begin to talk as they walk up to and past the audience.

A: How much further?

B: It's just there, look.

C: It's not as big as I thought it would be. You said it was like Chatsworth House.

Edward: No I didn't.

D: Will there be beds for all of us?

Edward: Lily said that we'd have to share but that we would all be very comfortable.

F: Just think how much she's paying us.

Edward: It's not about the money; it's about the honour.

G: It's about trying to impress an old flame.

Edward: Lily is an old friend.

H: You were in love, you told us so yourself.

Edward: That was a long time ago. She's been married twice since.

I: I heard she was on her deathbed.

Edward: Which is one of the reasons why I agreed that we would play. Now come on.

By now the musicians/singers are walking past the audience towards the house.

Scene Nine

As the audience turn round towards the house we see various sections of it lit up as maids are preparing rooms; the butler is uncorking bottles of wine, and a cook is preparing some food for the newly arrived guests. Lady Holden is standing at the front door.

Lady H: Edward, what a wonderful sight! But whatever are you doing tramping across the grounds (with all your instruments)? You look like the Sons of Israel.

Edward: The gate was locked and nobody could be found.

Lady H: I'm sorry my dear; I thought I told the groundsman that you would be arriving.

Edward: Never mind; at least the rain has stopped.

Lady H: Well come in, all of you. Welcome to Bramcote Hills House. I've had the cook prepare a supper and the butler bring up a couple of bottles of Chateau Beychevelle, which I believe they are serving on the Orient Express. Thank you so much for agreeing to play at our little dance. It means a very great deal to me.

The musicians walk into the house. John stands to the side, watching.

Scene Ten

As Lady Holden has been letting the guests in, Drew, Jimmy, Colin and Barbara have moved across to the house and are now standing on a little stage with the house behind them and John to one side.

Jimmy: A choir / An orchestra?

Drew: Yes. A dozen of them. And I stood and watched as they walked into the house and suddenly I felt very much like an imposter.

Barbara: I would have joined on the end of them all and had a glass of some of that chateau stuff.

By now all of the musicians have entered the house and walked off to an area at the back of the space in which there is a large table. They sit and are served food – all this is done as a dumb show as the scene progresses.

A Butler comes to the door and looks out. He sees John waiting there.

Butler: Mr Drew?

John: Yes.

Colin: I told you that this place must have had some grand parties.

Butler: What are you waiting out there for sir? Come on in; the Major is expecting you.

John: I seem to have arrived at a busy time.

Butler: Indeed you have sir. Follow me please.

The Butler and John walk to the area where the Major is sitting.

Drew: And so once again I found myself in the company of Major Ernest Holden.

Butler: There you go sir.

The room in which the Major is sitting is lit up. The Major is sitting in a chair under a lamp. There is another chair and a bar.

Scene Eleven

The Major gestures to John to sit.

John: I seem to have stumbled across a very eventful evening.

Major: We're hosting a dance for the recently formed cricket club who play in the grounds. I try to support the village in whatever way I can. Scotch?

John: Thank you.

The Major pours a large Scotch and hands it over.

Major: You must invite your friend. In fact I will arrange for a message to be sent to him. Do you have an address?

John hands over a piece of paper.

John: I really don't deserve such generosity.

Major: And why not?

John: Please don't think I'm not grateful, it's just that....

Major: Have you recovered? From the war?

John: Yes; I have.

Major: Work?

John: A small engineering firm in Hull, where I live.

Major: A wife?

John: No.

Major: A dog then?

John: Neither.

Major: I recommend one more highly than the other.

John: I will try and choose wisely then.

Major: It's time for your kind now you know.

John: I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand....

Major: And you've earned it. Whereas people like me, what place do we have in this new world that has been born out of so much bloodshed? Don't get me wrong, we won't vanish overnight and there will, of course, be much resistance. But everything has changed. Just ask the locals who have no work now that the lace trade has collapsed. But who wants to wear lace after what has gone on? One woman told me we should all be wearing nothing but black for the rest of our lives and maybe she has a point.

John: I don't see what that has got to do with you sir.

Major: The rich, the pampered, the old. The ones that took us into a war so that your generation could be slaughtered. And now I can see nothing but our gradual decline. It may take twenty years, it may take fifty, but it will happen. Sometimes I look around me and I see this house simply falling away. The candelabras melting like old church candles; all the fine decanters and goblets turning into sand. And the walls crumbling, brick by brick, until we are left sitting here, amongst the trees.

John: It would be a terrible shame to lose a house as splendid as this.

Major: Maybe.

John: You do not seem particularly attached to it.

Major: I came into ownership of it through a series of rather tragic events; which has only added to my wife's aversion to the place. My father would shudder in his grave if he could hear what she says about it.

John: He lived here too then?

Major: Oh yes; the Captain loved it very much.

John: Captain?

Major: Chief Constable of the Nottinghamshire Police Force; not a military assignation.

The Butler enters.

Butler: Mr Holden sir. I'm afraid I have some bad news. It's Cobalt.

Major: What's wrong?

Butler: When the bailiff was driving her back with Mr Drew's motorcycle something scared her. She broke free of the harness, reared up and fell badly.

Major: Is she lame?

Butler: I am afraid so.

Major: My finest horse Mr Drew. The friendliest disposition you could ever find in an animal. The bailiff knows what to do.

A shot rings out in the distance. There is a silence.

John: I'm sorry.

Major: Isn't it uncanny how one small unfortunate incident is always the precursor to something far more terrible. Mr Hobbins please arrange for Mr Drew's friend to be brought to the house tomorrow morning. He can be found at this address.

Butler: Of course sir.

Major: Good night. I hope the room we have made up for you is to your liking. And let us all hope that the morning brings us each better tidings.

The Major exits.

John: Mr Hobbins; I saw a girl; in the woods.

Butler: Perhaps she was acting as a lookout for the poachers. You wouldn't believe what some of the children get up to around here.

John: She mentioned a Captain. She said that if the Captain found her she would be in trouble. Do you know what she might have meant?

Butler: When I was a little boy sir I used to play over there, by the Hemlock Stone. And we were sure that there was a witch who lived in one of the caves. And that if the witch was ever to find you she would poke her fingers in your eyes until they popped out and then bury them. There were a couple of older people in the village sir who had lost their eyes, accidents with stocking frames as it turns out – there was many a nasty injury around here – but we were convinced that at night they rose up out of their beds, went up to the stone and scabbled around in the dirt, digging until their fingernails bled, in the hope that they could find those eyes that the witches took.

John: I don't understand.

Butler: The imagination of children sir, a wonderful thing. If we all retained it into our dotage think how wonderful the world would be. Though whether or not we'd ever get anything done is another matter entirely. Now please excuse me, I must see to this matter of your friend. Maybe I could show you to your room.

John: Of course.

The Butler walks off and the lights fade.

Scene Twelve

Lights fade up in the distance and we see a couple of men – poachers – laying traps. At the same time old Drew begins to speak again:

Drew: I couldn't get to sleep that night. My mind was just ablaze with thoughts and questions. There was something...wrong. Something unsaid. As though I'd stumbled across a secret that nobody dare utter. And as I lay there I began to imagine that the wind in the trees really did sound like sobbing.

And now very quietly we hear the sound of the wind which becomes, almost imperceptibly at first and then with more clarity, the sound of a girl crying.

Drew: In the end I could stand it no longer. I rushed to my window and tore open the curtains certain that I would see something horrible, and that whatever I saw it would have something to do with that huge cedar tree that loomed over the south side of the house. But there was nothing there. Only two men in the distance, lit now and then as the moon crept out from beyond the clouds. Probably the poachers that Stokes had been looking for and who had lead me into this strange and melancholy place. But when I went

back to bed and closed my eyes again I could still see them. Only now they weren't laying traps or stringing up rabbits. Now they were men blinded by mustard gas digging into the dirt looking for their eyes. And then I could see them clearly, picking up bits of bodies, of women's bodies, and putting them carefully into their poachers' bags.

This could be all be suggested in the distance in some way.

I tossed and turned knowing that these were all thoughts, nothing more. That my mind has been stirred by what had happened that evening. And yet the more I told myself this the more vivid the pictures in my mind became.

Barbara: You must have fallen asleep eventually.

Drew: Yes. I suppose I must. Because I never saw her come into the room.

Scene Thirteen

The lights come up on John's bed. The girl is standing at the end of it.

Girl: Wake up.

John: How did you get in here?

Girl: How do you think?

John: Is your mother one of the maids?

Girl: My mother's gone.

John: Your father then. Does he work here? In the grounds? Is that why he tells you to climb trees?

Girl: I have to help him.

John: Why?

Girl: Because nobody else will. Nobody does anything. They just let him do it.

John: Why did you say that I would get into trouble if the Captain found me?

Girl: Everybody knows that. That's why he has the dogs. To keep people out.

John: There is no Captain here. Do you mean the Major? Major Holden.

Girl: Holden, yes, that's him. Are you his friend?

John: No; but he's helping me. Maybe he can help you.

Girl: You said you would help me.

John: To climb the tree?

Girl: They want me to stop.

John: Who?

Girl: The old woman. She says that it's dangerous.

John: Then you should listen to what they say.

Girl: Have you got any children?

John: No.

Girl: I think you're kind. I can tell.

John: Who are you?

Girl: You'll help me I know. Not like the others. You will won't you?

John: Yes; yes, if it's what you want.

The girl vanishes into the darkness.

John: But first you must tell me who you are. Hello? Hello?

John looks around before pouring himself a drink. His hand is shaking. He gets back into bed. Lights out. There should be darkness for a while. The sound of owls; of light wind; of trees creaking. This could possibly become more expressionistic – maybe the sounds of war; of fragments of conversation from the play so far?

Scene Fourteen

As the lights come up we see the orchestra / choir seated at the back of the space. They are rehearsing and play / sing a quiet tune. As they do this we see John enter the dining room. Lady Holden is there.

John: Excuse me.

Lady H: Not at all. You must be Mr Drew.

John: Yes madam.

The Major enters.

Lady H: Please call me Lily.

Major: She likes to play the liberal in the company of young men.

Lady H: We see so very few here. I'm afraid most of my husbands' colleagues are as stuffy and militaristic in spirit as himself.

Major: She has no time for soldiers.

Lady H: Only because I have discovered that past glories will ultimately curse a man to become an unspeakable bore. I swear that when he dies if you were to place your ear to the ground above him you will hear the dull muffled sounds of orders being barked into the worm ridden soil.

Major: My wife does not understand the notion of order.

Lady H: A need for order disguises a fear of life.

Major: And perhaps you can tell Mr Drew what you have accomplished in your life.

Lady H: We are without issue. Although I have no idea why he could possibly want a child knowing how much heartache has been caused to this family.

Major: Is there anything more pointless than a woman with a barren womb.

Lady H: Of course his favourite horse was shot last night and so I am to endure even more of his bitterness. Has he told you about his beloved dogs? Sometimes I think that if I was to grow fur and a tail overnight that only then would I be raised in his affections.

Major: Did you sleep well?

John: Yes; thank you.

Major: I believe one of the gardeners has gone to see if your friend is at home and to bring him here to meet you.

John: I can hardly call him a friend. I have no memory at all of what he looks like.

Major: Maybe you should go and meet him on the path Mr Drew; so that you can share your reunion in privacy.

Lady H: If I were you I would ask him to take you straight back to his own abode. Surely you have noticed by now that this ancestral pile is saturated with sadness. Stay here any longer than you have to and you will be as cursed as the rest of us.

Major: Stop trying to scare him woman. He's an army man. He's stared death in the face. And I'm sure it looked a lot less frightening than your pampered booze ridden countenance.

Lady H: Ask him why there are places in this estate where his dogs refuse to walk. Ask him why he spends so much of his time away from this family home of which he should be proud. Ask him what has happened to the rest of his family ever since....

Major: Shouldn't you call in on your childhood sweetheart and show them where they will be playing tonight?

Lady H: All in good time. I believe they are practising at the moment. Such a cultured and talented man.

Major: Mr Drew please excuse me again. I look forward to seeing you and your friend this evening at the dance.

The Major exits.

John: I met one of the maids, by the cedar tree.

Lady H: I have heard sobbing coming from that tree, I swear it. I used to think that it was haunted; that there is a lost soul wandering through these woods and through this house but maybe I am wrong. Maybe that tree weeps because its roots reach right underneath these walls, feeding on the Holden grief. Maybe that is what I hear Mr Drew. The misery of this house and the misery of this family.

John: I have...been aware of something.

Lady H: You would not be the first.

John: A girl.

Lady H: And when you say that you have been aware of this girl, what do you mean?

John: I cannot explain it.

Lady H: Mr Drew, there are very few people who have been given the gift of being able to see the spirits of the dead. Although some would call it a curse. Did she speak of tragedy?

John: No. But there was something ominous. As though a terrible accident was about to happen.

Lady H: All I can tell you is that this family has kept within its bosom a deep and dark secret for longer than I have known it and one that I am refused access to. I am convinced that whatever it is, is the cause of the sadness that pervades this place. I do not know what you have experienced but it may be that you have encountered the thing that they have tried to bury but which will not lie in peace. Am I scaring you Mr Drew?

John: No.

Lad H: Then let me tell you more about the family you have had the misfortune to stumble upon.

Scene Fifteen

Lady H: Ernest is the son of Captain Henry Holden; the first of his family to live here after his brother in law John Sherwin Gregory passed the house onto him, having no children as heirs.

This whole section can have a series of visual accompaniments across the playing area – these can be quickly viewed tableaux that flare up and then die away again; or longer sections.

Henry married well. And he and Isabel were very happy and had a large family. Five sons and three daughters. But in 1864 there was something that happened in the grounds. The

secret I told you about. All I know is that there was there was a death. A gardener I believe. Somebody who had worked here for a while and had been a friend to the family. Whatever happened a few days after this death Henry and Isabella's second son died. At the age of two years and three months.

For instance at this point we could see a group of people walking across the back of the playing space carrying a tiny coffin.

Obviously the family was devastated but time, as they say, is a great healer. And so thirty years passed. The apple trees grew and the lupins bloomed; and at church on a Sunday people lined up and doffed their caps. It was a wonderful time for everybody. The high point of Bramcote Hills House. And then it all changed. It was 1893. By now the children had been born, had grown up, and had all left the house when one day there was a bit of an accident at the cedar tree.

John: The one you hear sobbing?

Lady H: Indeed. There was a branch that all the local children used to try and climb up to, you've seen how tall it is, and one of the bailiff's children had taken a bit of a tumble. I think he broke his arm...

John: He?

Lady H: Yes. And as a result Captain Holden took it upon himself to chop the branch off. And as he was doing so a postman arrived with a telegram. His eldest son Harry, was on his deathbed in Gibraltar. Well that was just the beginning of it. One year later Isabel died too; in this house. The Captain was heartbroken. He never recovered. His first daughter had died of fever in Rome in 1888 and it appeared that he had had his fair share of death. But it was not to be. Three years after his wife's death his second daughter Ethel Laura died. The Captain himself began to decline and died the day after his youngest sons wedding. And there are two things that are strange Mr Drew. Firstly the

maid who found him swore blind that there was somebody else in the room with her even though she couldn't see a soul. And she also said, and these were her very words, 'that is was as though all the sorrow in the land had landed upon the brow of the Captain and turned the very air to tears'. And secondly, on the night of the funeral the Butler went to The Warren Arms and became very drunk. He kept saying that the Captain always knew he should never have touched that tree; that he should have left it well alone and that he had brought the curse of revenge back upon himself and all his family.

John: So what happened to the house then?

Lady H: It passed to Millington, the eldest son of Harry. But just as he was about to come of age he died in a motorcycle accident on a foggy night.

John: And then Ernest takes possession?

Lady H: Not quite. There is one more brother to go. Frederick. He was here for two years and then one day, whilst driving across the bridge over the River Smite in Whatton his car swerved and overturned. He was killed. His wife was in the car behind and watched the whole thing. Nobody could work out why it swerved. It was as though it was trying to avoid something, she said. And at that point Ernest became the master of the house. Quite a roll call of death don't you think? I know that the war took many from the same family; but the Holden's have somehow brought death upon them. I wonder what happened all that time ago with the gardener. Maybe your little girl has something to do with it.

A maid appears.

Maid: There is a Mr Potts at the door madam.

Lady H: Your friend?

John: Indeed. I do not know what has shocked me most. Your story or the fact that I am about to meet the man who saved my life.

Lady H: Well you must go to him.

Lights out

Scene Sixteen

Barbara: So who was the girl who visited you?

Jimmy: She must have been the daughter of the gardener who died.

Colin: But that had happened sixty years before Mr Drew was there.

Drew: That's right.

Barbara: And you're sure she came to your room.

Drew: I am. But I haven't finished my story yet...

Colin: I want to know what you said to the man who saved your life.

Drew: We didn't say a thing to start with.

*Lights up on John and Potts who are outside the house standing opposite each other.
They shake hands.*

Drew: We just shook hands and walked. Along this path.

John and Potts walk along the path away from the house and the cedar tree. Drew begins to follow them as Colin, Jimmy and Barbara follow him.

Jimmy: I've never said it before but I'm going to now. Why should we be here on our own? Think of all the thousands of people who have walked this path and stood amongst these trees over the centuries. Why should there not be spirits amongst us? Maybe it's not the wind that rustles these leaves; maybe it's the breath of the dead.

Scene Seventeen

As John and Potts get to the wooded area Potts goes over to a tree and looks for some initials.

Potts: There they are. My initials. Look.

John goes over to look.

Potts: You're looking a lot better than the last time I saw you.

John: I have no memory of you at all you know. If you hadn't put this piece of paper in my pocket I would never have known who saved me.

Potts: I knew you were alive. You had a smile on your face, as though you were dreaming. Nobody else around did. That's what made me notice you. A small smile in the middle of all that carnage.

John: I should be thankful for my dream then.

Potts: We should always be thankful for our dreams.

John: Do you think that you will ever stop thinking about the terrible things that we saw?

Potts: I cannot imagine anything powerful enough to replace it.

John: Love maybe?

Potts: Maybe.

John: Maybe that's what ghosts are? Memories of terrible things that will not go away. You must have heard about the explosion which happened near here.

Potts: My sister died in it.

John: I'm sorry.

Potts: We don't need to be in the midst of a battlefield to find horror.

John: No.

Potts: Only a few weeks ago a man who lived opposite my parents for years killed himself. His wife had ran off with another man leaving him to look after the child. But he couldn't bear it and one evening he put on his best jacket, called round to everybody he knew to say goodbye to them, and then walked into his barn and hanged himself.

John: That's terrible. What happened to the child?

Potts: Taken in by an old woman.

And now quietly we hear children quietly sing: ‘Walnuts and chestnuts, come in and get them, mind that the dogs don’t bite your legs off’. Both look to the trees.

Potts: I used to play with a lot of them that died you know. Here, in these woods.

And now we see children appear and play in the woods, quietly, in the distance, moving from tree to tree.

Potts: There was a song we sang.

A moment to listen to the song as the playing continues.

Potts: If only we knew what was to come.

John: Better that we didn’t.

And now the children walk behind the trees and become soldiers who walk through the audience. One of these is the Crimean War figure who heads towards the house as the sound of light orchestral music begins.

John: They must be rehearsing for the party. You must come.

Potts: Why not? I never thought I’d get invited to a party here. Everybody knew that you got into trouble if the Captain found you in the woods.

As they set off to leave the girl appears again in the distance. John sees her.

John: Hello. Hello!

Potts: What is it?

John: The girl.

Potts: What girl?

John: Look. Can't you see her?

The girl can be seen for a moment and then vanishes.

Potts: Where?

John: She's gone. If she was ever there.

Potts: Are you alright?

John: Yes. Yes; I've been having a very strange time.

Potts: Come on. Let me show you around.

Potts and John walk off towards the house.

Drew: And so I spent the day with my new friend. He took me to his home and showed me the farm which his father owned. And then we headed back to the house for the party...

Scene Eighteen

As the audience go back to the house we see a group of people dancing. As it finishes there is applause. The Major comes forward.

Major: Ladies and gentlemen we are here this evening to celebrate the success of our very own Bramcote cricket club. In these days tainted by the shadow of death it is of the utmost importance that we celebrate all that is civilised and civilising. And what could be more so than the game of cricket. And now, as a gesture of flamboyance and excitement that we all so desperately crave I have a gift for all of you. Ladies and gentlemen if you will please go to the windows.

The guests and the orchestra move towards the back of the playing area and a fireworks display happens, (remember this is 1920). As this ends we see the Crimean War figure walking through a shower of sparks – he is holding a noose. Nobody can see him. John starts looking around; and is beginning to panic slightly.

Potts: What is it? Is it the sound?

John: No. There's something wrong. Can't you feel it?

Potts: Yes. I can.

John: I felt it earlier. Something dreadful; ominous. Like that split second of silence after the whistle; just before the shell explodes.

The Crimean figure walks past them holding the noose.

Potts: Do you want me to get you a drink?

John: Yes. If you would.

Potts exits as the girl appears next to John.

Girl: Hello.

John: Who are you? You must tell me. Please.

Girl: He's here again. It's happening again. You will help me won't you?

John: Why have you come to me? Why not somebody else?

Girl: Because you said you would help me.

John: But I need to know who you are. Was your father a gardener? What happened? Tell me what happened.

Girl: He's going to the tree; he always goes to the tree. I have to go. You will come won't you?

The girl looks up and runs off as the Major approaches.

Major: Jonathon. So glad you could make it.

Potts arrives holding two drinks.

Major: And this must be your gallant friend. *Shakes his hand.* Ernest Holden; a pleasure to meet you.

Potts: Stephen Potts.

Major: *To Drew.* Are you alright man? You look as though you've seen a ghost.

John: The tree. What happened at the tree?

Major: What do you mean?

John: The cedar tree. The one that your wife hears sobbing. Something terrible happened didn't it? Please excuse me but I must know what happened.

Major: You've felt it too then.

John: Yes.

Potts: What's happening?

Major: There was a man, who worked for my father before he took over this house. He was to come here with my parents when they moved in but one night he was press ganged and went off to fight in the war in Crimea. His father took him on as a gardener for the estate when he returned and he and his family moved into one of the cottages. But he was not a well man. The war had put a dark shadow across his mind. He started letting poachers in; and children too, saying that they had to climb trees, it was natural, that they should play while they still could, before they had to go and do terrible things like he had. Then his wife died of typhoid; when he found her she was wearing her wedding dress covered in tiny little droplets of blood. Well his behaviour became stranger still, threatening even. In the end my father told him that he would have to leave the estate. He went into the woods and hanged himself. From that cedar tree.

John: He had a daughter didn't he?

Major: Yes, he did. How did you know?

John: What happened to her?

Major: My father arranged for her to be sent away in secret. He wanted the whole thing hushed up. He felt guilty; as though it was his all his fault. Nobody ever heard from her again.

John: She didn't die?

Major: Well yes, eventually I suppose.

John: But there was an accident. Something about a bailiff...your father chopping down the branch....a curse.

Major: It was the branch the man hanged himself on. There is a belief in the family that when my father tried to cut it down it roused his spirit to walk amongst us. That we will not get any peace until we leave.

John: But she said that he's here. That it's happening again.

Major: Who?

John: The girl.

Major: What girl?

John: There's a girl that I keep seeing, since I've been here.

Major: Not the one who keeps climbing the tree?

John: Yes.

Major: I tell Stokes to keep an eye out for her but she keeps getting in. Apparently she's rather disturbed. Lost her father recently. Another hanging I'm afraid.

Potts: In a barn?

Major: So they say.

John runs out of the house.

Potts: John!

Major: Come on.

Potts and the Major also run out of the house.

Scene Nineteen

From outside the house John is looking to the very top of the tree.

John: Can you see it? There. Look. The girl. Come down! Don't go any higher!

Girl: I have to; so that I can get him down.

John: But there's nobody there.

Girl: Can't you see him?

Potts: See who?

A body – the Crimean War figure – falls from a noose.

Girl: Look; he's dangling. I have to set him free. I have to set my father free.

John: There's nobody there.

Girl: I can see him.

Major: What's going on?

John: No you can't. Whoever you can see; it's not your father. It's somebody else's.

Girl: But I want it to be mine.

John: It's not. It's a man who died a very long time ago.

Major: There's nobody there.

John: I felt it. You felt it. Maybe she can do more than feel it. Maybe she can see it.

Major: See what?

John: The thing that has been stalking your family.

Girl: Why aren't you coming? You said you would help.

The sound of crying that we heard earlier.

John: Come down! Please come down. Nothing is meant to happen to you.

Major: Be careful.

John: No!

Lights out.

The sound of a body hitting the ground.

Scene Twenty

Drew: She was dead as soon as she hit the ground.

Barbara: That's awful.

Jimmy: You didn't think she was real did you?

Colin: Neither did you.

Drew: I did at first. But.....no. There was something so strange about the whole place that I really did start to believe that I had been visited by somebody from beyond the grave. It was my fault.

Barbara: No.

Drew: I told her that I would help. Maybe if I hadn't she wouldn't have climbed up that night.

Barbara: She would have climbed up whatever you said. She thought she had seen her father. She thought that she could save him. Bring him back from the dead.

Colin: Maybe that's what ghosts really are. Those that we haven't accepted have left us.

Drew: The sound of crying that Lady Holden heard wasn't a ghost at all. It was a premonition, just like the one the Major had about what would happen to this house.

Jimmy: What happened when you told her?

And now we see some kind of dumb show to accompany the following:

Drew: It was the beginning of the end. Her fever returned and she finally got her wish to escape from this house. Hers was the last death to happen here from the Major's family. Within a matter of weeks he had sold the estate.

And now we see the Major leaving, with servants carrying his luggage.

Drew: We felt it though; all of us. Whatever that girl saw we had felt its presence; Stephen and the Major and I.

Barbara: The ghost of the gardener who hanged himself on that tree.

Drew: I suppose so, yes.

Jimmy: Maybe you sensed it because you were all soldiers and had seen the same horrors that the gardener had seen.

Drew: Maybe. But every time I enter a wood, wherever it is, I look to the trees and wonder if it will share its darkest secrets with me.

The servants start to leave.

Colin: And you have come back to attend the funeral of your friend?

Drew: Yes; although I never saw him again after that day. We wrote for a while. He told me that the new owners, the Tansleys, sacked all of the servants and maids and ground staff. Apparently there were stories. Of a tree that cried. They wanted to put an end to it all. To start again. After a while we stopped writing; I'm not sure why. I read that Major Holden died in 1937, two years before war ripped through the world again. That's it. That's the end.

Barbara: And that all happened here?

Drew: Yes it did. Goodbye.

Drew walks off, up to the tree where he stands and looks up. We hear the faint sound of crying. He exits.

Barbara: Do you want to come and have supper with us Colin? I'm not sure if I fancy the cinema after that.

Colin: Yes, why not?

Barbara, Colin and Jimmy exit in the other direction.

End

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