

An Encounter in the Mist

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I am in the fortunate position of having a good deal of leisure. This, however, has its disadvantages. My family is a large one and has never been backward in calling upon my services, and if ever a trustee or an executor is required my name is the first that springs to mind. I assume this is because I have plenty of time on my hands, for I am hardly vain enough to think that I have any aptitude for worldly affairs. But whatever the cause, I not infrequently find myself clearing up the estates and going through the papers of some deceased relative, generally a dull and thankless task. The papers of my late maternal uncle Giles, who died in 1912, looked like proving no exception. He had achieved some small distinction as a geologist in the 'seventies of the last century—I believe his monograph on the fossils of the Middle Chalk was a standard text-book in its day. I had painstakingly arranged for the disposal of his belongings, and had managed to persuade the Natural History Museum at South Kensington to accept eleven large cabinets of geological specimens. His letters and papers I had removed to my flat, and was examining them at my leisure. They were copious and extremely uninteresting, and it was only by exercise of considerable will-power that I persevered to the end. I am exceedingly glad that I did so, for embedded in a diary recording the humdrum affairs of the year 1879 I came upon the narrative of an event unique even in my experience of uncommon events. Uncle Giles obviously appreciated the startling nature of what befell him, for he recorded the incidents in the greatest detail, as one would expect from a man of science. He confined himself, however, to the facts, and failed to comment upon them. The narrative below is reconstructed from the diary, and I have only omitted a number of passages of a geological nature and of no interest to the general reader.

In October 1879 Giles Hampton, then in his middle thirties, was spending a short holiday in Wales. A friend of his, Beverley by name, had recently retired from his business in Liverpool, and had built himself a house in Caernarvonshire, on a lower slope of the Snowdon range. His invitation to stay had been especially welcome as his house was an admirable centre for a number of geological excursions. Giles

arrived at Fablan Fawr, as the property was called, on the evening of October 10th. The house was extremely comfortable by the standards of the 'seventies—it possessed, in fact, one of the first bathrooms to be installed in the county. Although its architecture would hardly satisfy modern taste, my uncle waxed enthusiastic over its noble yellow-brick turrets commanding the valley below. It was certainly placed in a splendid setting right at the head of a re-entrant in the hills. From the terrace in front of it one looked down over the Conway Valley, while immediately behind it the mountains proper began; the crest of the range being about seven miles away.

The house lay at the upper extremity of the cultivated zone, and a few hundred yards from the garden began the rocky heather-covered slopes of the hillside.

The weather was good, and for the first week of his stay Giles accompanied Beverley on a number of excursions—on two days they shot, and on others they visited various neighbours and beauty spots in the district. His diary begins to reflect a fear that his social activities will prevent him from making the geological expeditions he had planned. On October 18th, however, his host had business to transact in the local market-town, and Giles took the opportunity to make an all-day excursion to some large slate quarries which lay some ten miles away on the far side of the range of hills. The sky was overcast but gave promise of improvement later when Giles set off after an early breakfast. In his haversack were his luncheon and his geological hammers, and he had received from the groom a minute description of the best route to follow across the range.

It is a commonplace that a journey in hills takes longer than one anticipates, and it was after twelve o'clock when Giles reached his destination. The sun had come out and he was hot and tired, though much encouraged by the interest of the quarries he had come to see. So absorbing did he find them, and so full were the notes he took, that it was not until half-past three that he started on the return journey. By this time the sun had clouded over again and it looked like rain. As he reascended the track into the hills a fine drizzle began to fall which increased as he reached the higher altitudes, and before he had climbed to the crest he was enveloped in a thick mist, which reduced visibility first to a few yards and finally to a few feet only. My uncle had carefully noted various landmarks on his path, and even in the mist was confident of keeping to the right track. The route, however, was ill-defined, being in places little more than a sheep track, and when Giles found himself crossing an unfamiliar stream, he had to confess that he had strayed from the correct path. He retraced his footsteps for nearly half a mile,

but failed to return to a point he had noted where the track ran between two prominent rocks. Then indeed he realised that he was lost in earnest.

He sat down for a few moments to consider his position. It was not the prospective discomfort of a night on the hillside that alarmed him, but the certainty that Beverley must be seriously upset by his non-appearance. Above all, he hated making a nuisance of himself. He pictured the assembling of a search party from every cottage on the estate and the upheaval in the well-ordered existence of his host. With this in mind one can appreciate how relieved he was to hear the sound of a dog's bark and footsteps in the mist on the hillside above him—footsteps interspersed with the tapping of a stick. He shouted and a voice in Welsh answered him. From out of the mist came the figure of an old man, with a great collie at his heels. Although old, he bore himself well. He wore a cloak of some dark material which reached to his ankles, but was bareheaded. His hair, which was long and white, framed a red wrinkled face which radiated kindness and benevolence. He spoke again in Welsh, and when Giles, by his gestures, showed him that he could not understand he smiled reassuringly. Giles indicated that he was lost, which was indeed pretty obvious, and repeated three or four times the name of his friend's estate, Fablan Fawr. The old man smiled again and nodded vigorously; then plunging his hand into the fold of his cloak he brought out a map, which he spread on a stone before him. Beverley's newly built house was not, of course, marked upon it, but it showed clearly the church situated a few hundred yards below it. With a gnarled forefinger the stranger indicated on the map the spot at which they were standing and then traced slowly the track Giles must follow to reach his destination. This he did three times, making sure that my uncle thoroughly understood the route. Then refolding the map, he pressed it into his hearer's hands. Giles tried to refuse the gift, but the old man only laughed and nodded. So thanking him profusely, the lost wayfarer set out along the route he had been shown. Having gone a few yards, he turned and saw the figure standing, dimly discernible in the mist and gathering dusk, watching him. He waved his hand in farewell, took another few steps, and when he next looked round, his guide was invisible.

Giles travelled rapidly to make up for lost time. The mist if anything had become thicker, but the track which he was following was well marked, and by constant reference to the map he made good progress and had soon crossed the ridge and was glad to find himself on the down grade once more. Here the path followed what seemed to be a dry stream-bed, which led him down the hillside at a steep, almost a

precipitous angle. With the visibility at only a few feet, it required to be taken cautiously. Suddenly my uncle missed his footing and stumbled—a mishap which in all probability saved his life. In his fall he dislodged a small round rock, which rolled quickly away from him—he heard it gather momentum and go clattering over a few yards of the track; then the sound ceased. Several seconds later he heard a crash, hundreds of feet below. The path had led him to the very brink of a sheer drop. Giles experimented with a further stone, with the same result: he looked again at his map, but there could be no mistake; he was sure that he had followed explicitly the course indicated to him. For the first time he became seriously alarmed. He realised the folly of any further move, and sat disconsolately on a boulder. There was nothing for it but to wait and hope that the mist would clear, he thought, and lit his pipe.

It was perhaps an hour later that he heard faint shouts on the hillside below, shouts which he answered with all the power of his lungs. Gradually the voices came nearer and he recognised that of Beverley's coachman. He and the groom had become alarmed for the safety of the guest and had set out to find him. Beverley himself had not yet returned home, for which Giles was profoundly thankful. The two servants escorted my uncle along the top of the cliff to a point where they rejoined the path down to the house, and in not much more than an hour he was changing his wet clothes none the worse for his adventure. Something prompted him to say nothing of his strange encounter on the hillside to his rescuers, nor did he mention this part of the story to his host at dinner-time. He told him, however, that he had strayed in the mist and had found himself on the edge of the cliff.

'You had a damned lucky escape,' said Beverley. 'There have been some nasty accidents in these hills. There was a man killed about four years ago, just before I came here. I believe he was found at the foot of the very cliff where you nearly came to grief.' He turned to the butler. 'You'd remember it, Parry,' he said; 'wasn't that the place?'

'Indeed it was, sir,' replied the butler; 'a gentleman from London he was and buried in the churchyard of the village here. I was in service with Captain Trefor the Fron that time, and he gave us the afternoon off for the funeral. The Reverend Roberts buried him—powerful in prayer he was that day. I've kept a piece from the paper till today—from the *Caernarfon and District Advertiser*. I'll fetch it, if you like, sir.' Beverley assented, and after a few minutes the butler returned with a newspaper cutting. Beverley and my uncle read the trite phrases of the local journalist, dated June 6th, 1875.

'Early on Wednesday morning last the body of a young man was found at the foot of the cliffs near Adwy-yr-Eryron pass, examination of which

revealed that the deceased had been dead for some hours. The remains have been identified as being those of John Stephenson, a young legal gentleman of London, who was visiting Llanberis on holiday, and who had set forth on Tuesday morning to explore the splendours of our Cambrian fastness and did not return that night. Wilson Jones, Esq., MP, with the public spirit which characterises his every action, organised a search party, but their efforts were hampered by the inclemency of the elements. It would appear that the deceased wandered from his path in the mist, plunged over the precipice into oblivion, and was thus cut off in his prime. A member of the party who made the sad discovery has informed our correspondent that the unhappy wayfarer had in his possession a long-obsolete map of the hills, upon which was marked the disused track across the ridge, rendered dangerous by the great landslide of 1852, which carried away whole sections of the path, a cataclysmic occurrence that can still be remembered by some of the older members of the community. The use of such a map must be regarded as contributory cause of the catastrophe. Let the future explorers of our barren hills take heed from the sad demise of this young person, and recall the solemn thought, applicable alike to those of high and low degree, that in the midst of life we are in death. A modern, accurate and well-engraved folding map of the area (mounted on linen, with panorama, 1s. 6d.; on paper without panorama, 9d.) can be obtained from the offices of our journal.'

The reference to the obsolete map found on the body excited considerable speculation in my uncle's brain. The coincidence was really too extraordinary to keep to himself and he felt impelled to tell his host the whole story. Beverley was deeply interested. 'Do you remember anything about a map, Parry?' he asked, addressing the butler again.

'Indeed I do, sir,' replied the butler, 'Very old-fashioned it was. The Reverend Roberts has it down at the Vicarage.'

'In that case,' said Beverley, 'would you send down to Mr Roberts, give him my compliments, and ask if it would be convenient for him to come and drink his coffee with us. And ask him if he would be kind enough to bring the map with him.'

The servant hurried off to do his bidding. 'The map given to me is in my pocket,' said Giles. 'I'll go and get it.' He fetched it and having spread it on the table, the two men pored over it. In the mist my uncle had noticed nothing odd about it, but in the brightly lit dining-room it had a very unusual aspect. The engraving had a rude archaic look, the lettering of the place names employed the long 's' and the paper was yellow with age. It was Beverley who first noted the inscription at the foot, engraved in a neat copperplate script—'Madog ap Rhys, 1707.'

The arrival of the vicar put an end to their expressions of surprise and incredulity. He listened with the greatest attention to my uncle's tale and produced from his pocket the duplicate of the map that lay on the table. 'I've always been puzzled how such a map came to be upon the body,' he said. 'It's a very rare piece of engraving. The only other example I know is in the National Library of Wales.'

'And who was Madog ap Rhys?' asked Giles.

'He was a hermit,' replied the vicar, 'who lived up on the hillside. I can show you the remains of his cell. He died in 1720. In those days they were working the lead down in Cwm Cadfan, and the ridge was crossed a great deal more frequently than it is now. Madog ap Rhys made it his special care to seek out lost travellers and guide them to safety, and whenever the mist was down he would wander along the range with his dog. He drew out and had engraved the map which we have before us, to present to wayfarers who had missed their path. There is a local superstition that he is still to be seen on the hillside, but I must confess that until today I have never taken it very seriously.'

Such is the story of my uncle Giles's adventure, and I trust that the reader will agree with me as to its unique quality. Malevolent spirits who lead travellers to their death are common to the folklore of all nations and all periods, but in a very different category is this case of the ghost of a benevolent hermit, who revisited the scene of his former acts of kindness and, with the best intentions in the world, inadvertently sent unsuspecting wanderers to their destruction.

'An Encounter in the Mist' by Alan Noel Latimer Munby (1913-74), from *The Alabaster Hand and Other Ghost Stories* (Dennis Dobson, 1949). Reprinted by permission of Dobson Books Ltd. Munby was Librarian of King's College, Cambridge, from 1947 to 1974; the stories in *The Alabaster Hand* were written between 1943 and 1945 when Munby was a prisoner of war at Eichstätt in Upper Franconia. Like Swain's *The Stoneground Ghost Tales*, Munby's volume was dedicated (in Latin) to M. R. James.