

Cwm Garon by L.T.C. Rolt

AFTER a long winter spent in the fog and grime of London, this Welsh Borderland was balm to the eye. Spring had only just touched the soot-blackened trees in the squares with the lightest film of green, but here she had already run riot, dressing the whole countryside in fresh splendour. So thought John Carfax as the labouring branch-line train bore him slowly over the last stage of his long journey to Wales. The map lay disregarded on his knees as he watched the moving panorama of hills stippled with April cloud shadows, of neat farms buried in the white mist of fruit orchards, and of rich meadows dotted with sheep or the red cattle of Herefordshire. He was in that mood of exhilaration and heightened perception which only a well-earned and long-awaited holiday in new surroundings can awaken, and he sniffed delightedly at the limpid air, crystal-line as spring water yet somehow filled with unidentifiable sweetness, which blew in through the open window. He was alone in the compartment now, but it had evidently been market day in the town where he had left the London express, for the little train standing at the bay platform had been filled with country folk. Black-gaitered farmers and their plump, basket-laden wives, all had gone, but still he seemed to smell sheep-dip and carbolic, to hear the lilt of their Border speech, and to see the lithe Welsh sheep-dog which had sat between his master's legs, regarding him with wall-eyed suspicion.

The rhythm of wheels over rail joints slowed, and Carfax could tell from the labouring exhaust beats of the engine that they were climbing steeply. A chasm-like cutting hewn through the old red sandstone cut off the view and plunged the compartment into sudden twilight, As suddenly, the train emerged and, with a hollow reverberation, crossed a swift mountain torrent, before swinging round a curve so sharp that the wheel flanges grunted and squealed in protest. As it did so, the carriage window framed a picture which made Carfax start and catch his breath in wonder, so startling was it in its wild grandeur after looking so long on the smooth fields and hills of England. A towering mountain wall had suddenly arisen to enclose the whole western horizon, and to dominate and dwarf the familiar landscape of the foreground. Seen thus against the westering light of late afternoon, the shadowed face of this great massif presented so marked a contrast to the sunlit levels below as to seem unreal and as menacing as a thunder-cloud. So impenetrable was the shadow on the mountain that its contours were invisible, and the long, level line of the ridge, sharply etched across the sky's brightness, appeared to mark the lip of a precipice the height of which seemed monstrously magnified. Reluctantly, John Carfax turned his attention from the window to the map. Then, as he felt the brakes applied, he got up and lifted his rucksack down from the luggage rack. This must be Pont Newydd ; he would have to step out if he was to cross the mountain and reach the inn at Llangaron Abbey by nightfall. A good map-reader, he had no doubt of his ability' to find his way through strange country by daylight, but to be overtaken by darkness on an open mountain was a very different matter. He welcomed the prospect of the long, hard walk after the inactivity of the train journey, and set off at a smart pace up the narrow road from the station. Behind him, he heard the train pant heavily out of earshot. It seemed to symbolize the last link between him and the civilization he had so lately left, and as he turned to glance at the thin plume of steam fast vanishing into the distance he felt something of the sensation a voyager feels when, landed on some remote, far distant island, he sees the ship that has brought him fade over the horizon. He experienced momentarily a strange feeling of loneliness, realizing that the train was an intruder from that world of elaborate artifice by means of which man had shut himself away from the eternal world of earth and sky as though fearful of their elemental mystery. It had ruffled a still pool of silence, but now the last ripples died away into stillness, until there remained no sounds but his own footfall, a distant rumour of birdsong and the sibilant voice of the little brook which ran beside the road. He had been walking for the best part of an hour before he came in sight of the first of the landmarks he had previously noted on his map, a grey, ruined tower set upon a conical mound and surrounded by a ditch. He conjectured correctly that it was one of the border keeps erected by the Norman Lords Marcher in their efforts to subdue the Silurians of the mountains. Here, turning off the metalled road into a rutted, high-banked lane, he set his face towards the mountain wall which had hitherto marched on his left hand. Pressing on, he passed by two small white-washed farms where sheep-dogs ran out to bark and sniff at his heels, but though the lane climbed continuously, the skyline of the ridge seemed to retreat elusively before him. At length, however, he emerged on to a level plateau, tree-less except for a few stunted thorn bushes, and patterned by crumbling, dry stone walls which had proved powerless to resist the downward

march of the bracken. Here he came within the mountain's shadow, so that his eyes could, for the first time, penetrate its darkness to discern the steep diagonal path which scaled the ridge. Following its upward course he could see, too, the shallow notch cut in the skyline of the ridge which marked the pass, if "pass" it could be called, for his map told him that the path climbed almost to the 2000 feet contour. The premature dusk of the shadow spurred him on, and he had soon passed through a rickety gate on to the open mountain and was tackling the steep ascent. Pausing on the break-neck path to regain his breath, he turned and saw that already the plateau, which had seemed so high and windswept, now looked insignificant, merging imperceptibly into a vast chequer-work of field and copse whose folds this height had now smoothed out. He plodded on, and had nearly reached the summit before he stopped and turned again to find that the familiar landscape had shrunk to a remote perspective, while the evening sunlight on the farther fields looked pallid and unreal as though seen through a veil. Glancing about him he saw the reason. A white wall of cloud was rolling along the ridge out of the north-west, and in the next instant the scene below was lost in swirling mist. No rain fell, but his rough tweed jacket was soon pearly with beads of moisture, while a chill wind blew about him. The sudden coming of the mist brought with it a feeling of utter isolation, intensifying the loneliness he had felt when he left the station. It seemed to mark a further stage in some inexorable progress designed deliberately to cut him off from the familiar world of his fellow-men. Sole occupant of a minute island of mountain turf, heather and whinberry, that familiar world already seemed incredibly remote. Fortunately for him, the path was clearly defined, so that he was able to press on without pause or doubt. And as he did so, some curious trick of the silver light threw his shadow upon the white curtain before him so that it seemed that a figure, monstrous, yet tenuous as the mist itself, was leading him onward towards the summit of the pass. Watching it, he thought he could understand the stories he had heard of the creatures which were believed to haunt the mountain mists, and he felt he knew the terror that might come with this loneliness as terror comes with darkness to the child. His heart seemed to beat in his ears like a muffled drum, for the stillness was intense, even his footfall was muffled now by the resilient turf of the path. When, faint and far off, his ear caught the cry of a curlew, the sound brought no comforting sense of companionship, but by its plaintive wildness, seemed only to accentuate the silence and the loneliness. Suddenly, the path swung right-handed, levelled out, and he found himself passing through a narrow defile which he knew must mark the spine of the ridge. Immediately beyond the pass, the track skirted a mawne pit, a hole from which peats had once been dug, but which had now become a quagmire ringed by livid green moss and tufted cotton-grass. A luckless mountain pony had evidently floundered into it at some time and, unable to extricate itself, had perished miserably. Now that ravens, crows and mountain foxes had done their work, all that remained was a skeleton of whitened bones wrapped in the hide as in a winding-sheet. Carfax paused for a moment at this desolate sight, and as he did so the curlew cried again, nearer at hand this time, and the mist seemed to eddy more densely about him. He shivered involuntarily and went on, happy to find that the path was now leading him down-wards as steeply as it had climbed. As he stumbled along, his feet pressing uncomfortably into the toes of his shoes, he noticed that the mist was now thinning, and that its white-ness was becoming suffused with golden light although the invisible depths into which he was descending still seemed dark. Not only was he walking out of the mists, but the cloud itself appeared to be lifting, sweeping up the steep flank of the mountain like steam out of a cauldron until, with breath-taking and dramatic suddenness, the veil which had imprisoned and blinded him lifted like a curtain to reveal the whole wild prospect clearly before him. "You'll find the valley enchanting"—he suddenly recalled the words of the friend who had first suggested his holiday, not in their original sense as a conventional overstatement, but with a new, and strangely literal significance. He stood in the last stormy light of a sun that was just about to set behind the rim of yet another mountain ridge which marched parallel with that upon which he stood, and which appeared to be of equal, if not greater height. It could not be much more than a mile by crow-flight, he judged, from ridge to ridge, yet between them yawned Cwm Garon, a stupendous furrow which, in the course of un-numbered centuries, the Afon Garon had carved into the heart of the mountains. Already this valley was wrapped in the blue shades of a premature twilight, yet Carfax could sense rather than see the intense green of the meadows along the floor of the Cwm. Here and there, lights gleamed from farmhouse windows. Faintly there rose into the thin mountain air the resinous incense of pine-wood smoke, and the murmur of the swiftly flowing river. At one point the valley widened into a natural amphitheatre in the centre of which stood the grey shape of a building larger than a mountain farm. This Carfax

took to be his destination, the ruined Abbey of Llangaron and its adjoining inn. After the cloud-blinded solitude of the mountain-top, the sight of his goal raised his spirits to high good humour, and he strode on down the steep path at a great pace, his mind occupied with the prospect of a blazing fire, a well-earned dinner and a foaming tankard. Great anticipations are often the prelude to disillusionment, but in this instance John Carfax was not disappointed. The dinner was excellent, and he gave a sigh of contentment as he stirred his coffee and extended his slippers towards the friendly flame of the log fire. Its warmth was welcome for the spring nights were chilly in this valley which the sun so soon forsook. In the opposite chimney-corner, likewise toasting his toes, sat his only fellow-guest at the inn. He was busily writing in what appeared to Carfax to be a large journal or diary which he balanced on his knee, and the tireless scratching of his pen mingled with the comfortable crackling of the fire, and the occasional faint bubbling sound which Carfax's pipe made when he drew deeply. In London, he thought, it is never truly quiet, but here one becomes conscious of the slightest sound. He had exchanged generalities with his companion during their meal when they had sat together, but the latter had not been very forthcoming. He was much older than Carfax ; in middle age he had obviously been a man of great strength, tall and broad in proportion. Now the wide shoulders stooped, and a suit of rough, grey tweed hung loosely about his gaunt frame. Yet it was obvious that he was still very active, nor had his presence lost its power of command. A fine head of white hair and a short, pointed beard meticulously trimmed made a fitting frame for the massive brow and the distinguished features. The most remarkable thing about these features, Carfax thought, were the eyes, bright blue eyes which had no need of glasses and whose keenness quite belied his age. When he had spoken he had regarded his fellow-guest with a penetrating, unblinking gaze that was almost hypnotic in its intensity and which, in a lesser man, would have seemed mere ill-mannered arrogance. Carfax found it disconcerting, for it gave him the impression that a keen intelligence, possessing a store of secret knowledge, was coolly taking the measure of his own mind while it remained itself inscrutable, permitting him no such liberty. He recalled with a slight feeling of resentment that whereas he had straightway introduced himself, the other had not responded similarly. He yawned and must have dozed, for he suddenly became conscious that the fire had burned lower, and that the bole of his pipe was cold. He hoped that he had not snored, and glanced apprehensively at his companion. If he had, it would seem that his bad manners had passed unnoticed for the other's head was still bent over his book and his pen travelled imperturbably on. He glanced at his watch. The hour was not late, but the long journey, the keen air and the warmth of the fire had told upon him, and his eyelids were heavy with sleep. He rose to go to bed, but before doing so some chance impulse made him walk to the window, part the curtains and look out. The night was clear, and a bright moon, near the full, rode above a wrack of clouds which was drifting like smoke from lip to lip of the defile. Yet despite the swiftly moving clouds overhead an absolute stillness held the valley, for the trees stood motionless. Only the unseen river, rushing over its rocky bed, sounded incessantly. The window looked directly up the roofless nave of the Abbey, and the great columns threw upon the moonlit grass, shadows so dense that the eye could scarcely distinguish image from substance. Beyond, above the site of the high altar, the great east window, devoid of tracery, framed the dark brooding shape of the mountain which Carfax had crossed that evening. The scene was so extravagant in its chiaroscuro, so humiliating in its grandeur, that he could not restrain a muttered exclamation—" Oh who will tell me where He found thee at that dead and silent hour ? What hallowed solitary ground did bear So rare a flower Within whose sacred leaves did lie The fullness of the Deity ? "

It was appropriate that these lines of the Silurist should have sprung to his mind, for it was not surprising, he reflected, that this country should have been the inspiration of Vaughan and Traherne. Here, truly, heaven seemed nearer earth . . . "And hell, too, maybe." Carfax started, not only because the voice sounded close at his elbow, but because he was not aware that he had spoken his thoughts aloud. He realized that his taciturn companion had moved silently from his chair and was gazing out into the night with those strange, unblinking eyes of his. "Yes," he went on in a soft, ruminative tone, as though he were speaking more to himself than to Carfax, "it is certainly very beautiful, so beautiful that it distils some influence—call it magic if you like—which turns men's minds from material to spiritual things. Unless I am much mistaken, it set you thinking of the Dominicans who built their great church in this solitude, and of the Silurists, Traherne and Vaughan." Carfax turned back into the room, letting the curtain fall across the window. The uncanny accuracy with which the other had read his thoughts disturbed him. His expression must

have revealed this disquiet, for the other chuckled. "I must really apologize," he went on, "if I startled you. I can assure you I am not really such an accomplished thought-reader. Let me explain : I have visited this valley on numerous occasions spread over a period of years, and I know that on first acquaintance it always casts this same spell over visitors who, like yourself, are gifted with imagination. All I have done was to observe in you the familiar symptoms." Carfax was somewhat mollified, though he still felt slightly irritated by the other's self-assurance, and by the way in which he talked of what had been to him a profound spiritual experience as though it were a cold in the head. Nevertheless, his companion's words had roused his curiosity. "What exactly do you mean by saying 'on first acquaintance' ? " he asked. "Are you suggesting that my present impression of Cwm Garon is likely to change ? And what did you mean by your odd remark about hell?" the first question first," replied the other, "if I have judged you correctly, then I think your impressions will change, but I don't propose to bias your mind by suggesting how that change may come, or what form it will take. Explore the valley for yourself to-morrow and then, if you should feel so disposed, I should be most interested to hear your views. As to your second question," he went on, "I regret the remark, and do not know what prompted me to make it. I would prefer not to explain myself further for the moment, except to suggest that a belief in heaven implies a corresponding belief in hell." Despite renewed questioning, the older man refused to commit himself further, and it was a puzzled and thoughtful Carfax who eventually bid his fellow-guest good night, lit his candle, and made his way up the narrow, stone newel stair to his bed in the tower room. He slept soundly, rose early and breakfasted alone. He was about to set out on his tour of exploration, in fact he was standing in the hall of the inn packing sandwiches into his haversack, when he noticed the visitors' book and remembered that he had not yet signed it. As he turned the pages to remedy this omission, he discovered the identity of his fellow-guest, for in the last occupied space was written 'Charles Elphinstone, Oxford ', in a fluent, scholarly hand.

The name seemed familiar, but for the life of him he could not place it. By the time he had reached the valley floor the previous night, darkness had prevented him from forming an adequate picture of his new surroundings, and now the weather conditions could scarcely have been less favourable. The portents of a stormy sunset and an ominously clear night had been fulfilled. The mountain walls upon either hand were hidden by a moving wrack of clouds whose tattered fringe had descended almost to the upper limit of the cultivated fields. A fine but deceptively penetrating rain was falling, and although occasional strong gusts of wind came eddying off the mountains, now from this direction, now from that, the air was humid and stifling. The swollen Garon and the innumerable small torrents cascading down the steep slopes filled the valley with the sound of falling water. Nevertheless, knowing how swiftly the mountain climate could change, Carfax was not unduly downcast and, buttoning up the collar of his mackintosh, he set off resolutely up the valley. The lane was narrow and high banked, and was never far away from the line of alder and hazel which overhung the shallow gorge through which the river flowed. He noticed that the small fields, both pasture and arable, looked clean and well tended, their hedges neatly laid and trimmed, but he saw no one at work in them. The small farms seemed equally deserted, and had he not scented wood-smoke as he passed them he would have thought that they were empty. No doubt the weather accounted for this suspension of activity. It struck him as ironical that the only fellow-mortal he encountered in the morning's solitude he passed by unawares. Only a chance glance over his shoulder had revealed the figure of a man sheltering beneath a tree which he had lately passed. The man stood so still, and the old brown overcoat, together with the sack which he had thrown over head and shoulders against the wet, blended so exactly with the colour of the tree bole at his back, that Carfax stopped for a moment to confirm his first glance. The man ignored his scrutiny, but when, at the bend of the road, he looked back again, he was no longer to be seen. He had been walking for the best part of an hour when he saw on the left of the road what he took to be the ruins of a church. The valley was narrower here, and its walls more precipitous, for the clouds revealed glimpses of naked crags and desolate screes of shattered boulders. As though these features had not already made the site of the church sombre enough, a dense belt of pine-trees had been planted beside it. This must be Capel Cwm Garon, he reflected, recalling his study of the map during breakfast. He thought he had never seen so gloomy a place, it would seem dark even in sunlight, and, as the ruined church appeared to be of no architectural merit, he walked on. He conjectured that he must be nearing the head of the valley, for the lane grew rougher and commenced to climb steeply until he presently gained the open mountain. The rain had stopped,

the sky looked brighter ahead, while the clouds showed signs of lifting. The rain, the lowering clouds and the oppressive humid warmth of the valley had between them damped his spirits, but now he stepped out cheerfully, a cooler and drier wind in his face which made him feel as one who passes into fresh night air out of some overheated room. By the time he had reached the head of the pass and could look down on the great landscape of hill and vale spread out beneath him, there was blue sky overhead, and a moving pattern of sunlight and shadow was dappling the slopes of the mountains. Carfax felt very well content as he sat with his back against a sheltering boulder and munched his sandwiches. Not far away a little group of mountain ponies were grazing, while high overhead a buzzard soared on moth-like wings. A shepherd was gathering his sheep off the north face of the mountain; Carfax could see his tiny foreshortened figure on the plateau far below, and his shrill whistle as he worked his dogs was borne up to him on the wind. These things brought a sense of life and companion-ship, dispelling the feeling of loneliness that had been growing upon him since he left the train on the previous day. He took out his map and checked his position. He had reached the central massif of the range. From it, the long ridges stretched southward like the fingers of an out-spread hand. Between them, and to the west, lay two valleys, the Llan Fawr and the Llan Fechan, running parallel with Cwm Garon. As the weather seemed to have set fair, and there was plenty of time, he decided he would walk back down the Llan Fawr valley, cross the intervening ridge at a point well below Llangaron, and so return to the inn from the opposite direction. He found that the valley of Llan Fawr was physically very similar to that of Cwm Garon. If anything, it was even narrower, while the mountain walls were equally high. Yet somehow the atmosphere of the place seemed quite different; "more friendly" was the description which at once occurred to him. Obviously the improvement in the weather must be responsible, he decided; this mountain country was strangely temperamental. Owing to the more restricted area of cultivated land, the small farms were spaced farther apart than those in Cwm Garon, yet there seemed to be no lack of life and activity. A hedger at work beside the lane, and a swarthy individual leading a pair of jemietts with pack-saddles, bid him a lilting good day as he passed. In one farmyard three small children paused from play to stare round-eyed as he went by, while in a nearby field, sown with oats, a farmer was working a two-horse roll.

Finally, just before he turned off the road to climb back over the ridge, he met a woman driving three cows to the evening milking. When he had finished the climb and begun the steep descent, the sun was still lighting the fields on the farther side of Cwm Garon, but he noticed that they looked just as deserted as they had done that morning. There still seemed to be neither sight nor sound of any activity. Silence seemed to well up from the valley like water from a spring, in fact the distant murmur of the Garon seemed to sym-bolize and accentuate it. He began to recall all the small workaday noises which he had heard but not remarked in Llan Fawr, and the lower he descended, the louder his foot-falls seemed to sound. Despite the sunlight and the clear air he found the feeling of loneliness and of strange oppres-sion inexplicably returning. There was a sense of menacing constriction about the towering walls which hemmed in this valley and cut him off from the outer world, and yet, after his experience in Llan Fawr, he knew that it could not merely be a case of claustrophobia. He had not gone far along the toad back to Llangaron when he came in sight of a small public-house, and decided that a glass of beer would help him over the last lap of the way. Probably, too, he would find company there which would dispel this curious illusion that the valley was deserted. The dim, low-ceilinged room—there was no bar—was snug and spotless. The stone-flagged floor looked newly scrubbed, and the dark polished surfaces of table, settle and high-backed Welsh dresser caught the light of the cheerful fire which burned in the hob grate. But the room was empty and silent save for the small settling sounds of the fire and the measured ticking of the grandfather clock. Carfax coughed and scuffed his feet on the flags. A latch clicked in the back of the house, and as the unseen door opened he heard a deep rumble of male voices. A woman appeared, and when she had fetched his drink he made some trivial pleasantries, but she seemed either shy or taciturn, for she answered in monosyllables, and after standing awkwardly for a moment, retired again to what he imagined to be the kitchen. The indistinguish-able murmur of male talk went on. Carfax took a deep and gratifying draught, and then stooped to knock out his pipe in the ash-tray. As he did so, he realized that the dottle already in the tray was warm, and that the cigarette stub beside it was still smouldering. Looking round the room curiously, he then saw that a man's cap lay in the chimney-corner of the settle, and that two knarled hazel sticks were propped against the wall near the door. At any other time and place, Carfax would not have

observed such trivialities, and even if he had he would have attached no importance to them. But now they bred in him a disquieting suspicion which refused to be dispelled. It was that his approach had been discreetly observed by the late occupants of the room, and that for reasons best known to themselves they had retreated to the kitchen. The uncomfortable feeling of unwelcome intrusion which this suspicion prompted scarcely encouraged him to linger. The room seemed to have grown suddenly hostile, so much so that he did not even pause to refill his pipe, but drained his glass and set out once more upon his way. The sunlight had now crept away from the fields, so that although the higher slopes of the eastern ridge were still suffused with golden light, the shadows in the valley were already thickening into twilight. His experience at the inn had exerted a curious influence over his mind, he discovered, for although the farms he passed seemed as still and deserted as those he had seen that morning, they no longer gave him the impression of being uninhabited. On the contrary, he imagined that every window concealed a watcher, that every house was the centre of some intense and secret life which, at his approach, was instantly suspended. The farther he went the more certain did he become that his every movement was the subject of furtive scrutiny, yet it was a certainty which his reason was powerless either to confirm or to disprove. Time and again he would stop and look back quickly, hoping to surprise the swaying of a curtain, the movement of a door, or to see in the shadows of tree or hedge some tangible shape. He looked in vain. Yet the feeling and the fear continued to grow upon him despite his senses' negative evidence. It was no longer confined to the houses he passed and to the people who might or might not lurk within them; it was a fear distilled by the valley itself. The brooding mountains, the still pines, even the heavy, windless air itself seemed to have suspended some secret activity to join in this silent and malign watch. As he walked resolutely on, fear stalked at his elbow, and he felt as if he was the focal point of some great burning-glass of hostile forces. Just as the first lightning flash and thunder-clap puts a welcome end to the breath-bating suspense that precedes the storm, Carfax found himself wishing that something, however fearful, might happen. But no material event took place, and he reached the inn at Llangaron in good time for dinner. In the cheerful light of the dining-room he felt inclined to dismiss the matter as so much hallucination, but he could not deny that, as his fellow-guest had prophesied, his first impression of the valley had undergone radical revision. "Well," queried Elphinstone as they drew their chairs to the fire after dinner, "what's the verdict now?" Carfax hesitated. Considered in retrospect, his fears seemed so intangible and groundless, that he felt foolish and doubted his ability to express them in so many words. With the other's encouragement, however, he presently gave as detailed and faithful an account of his day as he was able. During his narration Elphinstone nodded occasionally, but seemed to evince no surprise. When Carfax had finished speaking he remained silent for a few moments, pulling at a thin, black cheroot. "Interesting," he said at length. "Very interesting, but not, I can assure you, a unique experience by any means. For years, I might safely say for centuries, strangers have been made aware, by some such means as you describe, that they were not welcome in this valley." "But it's not just the people," put in Carfax. "It's as though the valley . . ." "I know, I know," the older man cut him short. "It's not as simple as that, is it? An angel satyr walks these hills," he quoted; "know who wrote that? Why Kilvert. 'Angel satyr'—a curious association of opposites—what do you suppose induced a mild little Victorian curate to use such a term?" "I think I can understand now," Carfax admitted. "And yet," he went on, "I refuse to believe that this sense of evil is a natural emanation of the place itself. As a Christian, I hold that both good and evil are human concepts, and that they do not exist in nature." "Well put," said the other, "and probably true, but if, as a Christian, you believe that there are spiritual as well as material powers, then don't you think it possible that man might abuse and pervert the former no less than the latter?" Carfax nodded. "Yes," he agreed, thoughtfully, "I suppose such a thing is possible." "I am sure of it," Elphinstone went on, "and what's more I consider that this valley can prove my contention." "Go on," prompted Carfax.

"I believe," the other continued, "that some evil force dominates Cwm Garon. I think it is a natural force which man, in some remote time, released and harnessed to secret and perverted ends. For centuries this dark power has been, as it were, dammed up in this valley until it has soaked into the very stones of the place. That is why a more superficial mind than yours might imagine that it is a natural phenomenon. Outside interference has an effect upon it like that of a stone flung into a still pool. That's why Cwm Garon and its people have always implacably resisted intrusion." He paused. "But is that really so?" queried Carfax. "What evidence have you?" "Apart from many

similar experiences to your own," the older man replied, "there is ample historical evidence. Take this Abbey, for instance." He made a sweeping gesture. "It did not survive until the Dissolution. What happened ? The community dwindled. Its numbers could not be maintained. Finally, a new Abbey of Llangaron was built in the safe, flat lands beside the Wye, and the old was abandoned. It has been said that it was too solitary, too open to attack by wolves or raiding hillmen. Do you find that explanation convincing ? Do you think that a Church which deliberately sought the solitudes, and which established flourishing communities at such places as Valle Crucis or Strata Florida would be defeated merely by the loneliness of Cwm Garon ? No, I suggest that they went because they feared something more potent but less tangible than wolves or robbers. "You say you saw the ruined church at Capel Cwm Garon ; do you know the history of that ? It was built by a nineteenth-century religious sect headed by a man who called himself Brother Jeremy. What happened ? History repeated itself; the community dwindled ; misfortune followed misfortune. The eventual result you have seen for yourself. It's not only the efforts of the Church that have failed," he went on. "On the slope of the mountain just behind here you'll find the ruins of a house. There's not much to see, but it is all that's left of the place that Alaric Stephenson the artist tried to build for himself. I say ' tried ' because it was never finished. He apparently had some grandiose notion that he was going to make a sort of miniature paradise for himself here, but he soon found he was mistaken. Everything went wrong. No local contractors would work for him. What was done during the day was undone at night. Even the trees he tried to plant were uprooted. I could quote several other examples of the same kind of thing, but the repetition would be boring." "But do these . . . these forces manifest themselves in any way ? " questioned Carfax. "That depends," was the answer. "Unless you deliberately seek them or try to interfere with them, I should say no ; you might stay here a month without experiencing any more than the sense of hostility and surveillance which you felt to-day I " Elphinstone rose to his feet and lit the candle on the side-table. "What is this extraordinary influence, and how exactly does it affect the people who live in Cwm Garon ? " Carfax persisted. The other was standing in the doorway about to bid him good night. His keen eyes glittered in the flickering candle flame as he smiled and shook his head. "I cannot answer that question," he replied. "At least, not yet. I think I have a shrewd idea, but one day—soon perhaps—I hope to know." - The conversation had filled Carfax's head with disturbing speculations, and despite his long day in the mountain air it was some time before he lost consciousness. Even so, it must have been a light doze instead of his usual sound sleep, for he presently awoke and, glancing at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch, saw that it was nearly midnight. He became aware of stealthy movement in the room overhead at the top of the tower, movement betrayed by sounds so slight that he could never have detected them but for the profound stillness. Then he heard the pad of stealthy feet descending the stone stairs. A thin pencil of light flickered momentarily beneath his door and was gone. Carfax climbed softly out of the bed and crossed to the open window. He was in time to see a tall, slightly stooping, figure which he recognized unmistakably as that of Charles Elphinstone, cross the grass below and disappear beyond the ruined wall of the cloister garth. As he watched, he suddenly recalled the association of the name which had eluded him all day—Professor Charles Elphinstone, probably the greatest authority on folk-lore and magic since Frazer. "One day—soon perhaps—I hope to know." He seemed to hear an echo of his last words. Though Carfax was by no means of a timid disposition, he felt a reluctant, even envious feeling of admiration for the intrepid old man. Admittedly, on the face of it, a midnight stroll in this quiet Welsh valley seemed to call for no particular display of courage. The night was clear and brightly moonlit, the scene the same as before, the same black shadows of the nave arches on the dew-laden grass, the same black grandeur of mountains framed in the gaping east window, the same stillness. Yet this time, Carfax had no thought of Vaughan or Traherne, for he knew the fear that lurked in this silence. Were those lights, moving and dancing along the slopes of the mountains, or was it merely a trick of moonlight shining upon stone ? Somewhere near at hand an owl hooted mournfully, and there came into his mind a line from the thirteenth chapter of Isaiah : " Owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there." He shivered, and returned to the welcome warmth of the bed. The Professor did not appear at breakfast. Doubtless he was making up for lost sleep thought Carfax, but the reflection could not dispel a vague sense of uneasiness which refused to be quieted. He deliberately loitered in the dining-room, hoping Elphinstone would come. When, at half-past ten, his place was still empty, Carfax determined to settle his fears. He climbed the tower stairs to the Professor's room. A can stood outside his door. It was full, and the water was quite cold. He knocked softly, then more loudly. There was no response. Turning the handle very gently

he opened the door a few inches and looked in. The room was empty. Some instinct prompted Carfax to set out on his search in the same direction as he had taken the previous day, towards the ruined church of Capel Cwm Garon. He was still trying to reassure himself that his fears were groundless. Though Elphinstone had not, it appeared, warned the inn of any intended absence, he might well have decided to stay out on such a fine morning, while even involuntary absence might be caused by no worse mishap than a sprained ankle. Yet the feeling of foreboding would not be appeased. He realized that the date was May the first, that last night, in fact, had been "Eve of May" of ancient celebration, and somehow this knowledge by no means allayed his concern. Meanwhile, his senses observed the same atmosphere of hostility and watchfulness, but now, pre-occupied with fresh fears, he no longer turned to peer at vacant windows or into the shadows beneath the trees, knowing that to do so would be fruitless. So he strode on until he came in sight of the crags of Black Daren which towered above the ruined church. As his eyes roamed over the precipice, he thought he detected a movement among the boulders of the screes below. He fumbled for his binoculars, and focused them hurriedly. Two men appeared to be bending over some-thing which lay behind a rock, invisible to him. "No doubt a sheep has fallen from the crags," whispered reason, but dread lent wings to his feet. Professor Charles Elphinstone had obviously slipped and fallen from a great height in attempting to scale the crags, and his body lay against the rock in that attitude of macabre abandonment which betokens shattered bones. His hat had fallen off; and the luxuriant white hair was matted with congealed blood. Carfax, who was familiar with death in many forms, was not dismayed by these gruesome commonplaces of violent dissolution. What drained the blood from his face and impelled him quickly to replace the sack which covered the body, was the expression on the face. He would not have believed that the features he had lately seen so calm and self confident, could have been moulded by terror to such hideous contortion.

It may be thought that Carfax would have no desire ever to revisit the valley; he would certainly have subscribed to this view himself when he left Llangaron on the day following the tragic accident. Everything about Cwm Garon had become repulsive to him and, as many others, it seemed, had done before him, he retired defeated. Never did the mundane environment of the outside world seem so friendly and welcoming. When the train pulled in to the little station at Pont Newydd he could scarcely resist the impulse to run up to the footplate and shake the driver by the hand. Yet—and to those who have never visited Cwm Garon this will seem the most improbable part of this strange story—as the weeks went by after his return to London, fear turned to curiosity, and repulsion to an attraction which he found increasingly difficult to resist. It was almost as though some powerful influence was luring him back.

Be that as it may, Carfax did return to the valley, and a sultry night on the eve of August the first found him once again walking up the lane toward Capel Cwm Garon. The heat in the valley that day had been stifling. Everything had felt hot to the touch, and the outlines of the mountain ridges shimmered in a haze which mingled with the acrid smoke of a heather fire. Never had the atmosphere seemed so surcharged with still suspense. Even the interminable voice of the Garon had been muted by weeks of drought. Only occasionally, far away over the mountains toward Radnor, faint thunder growled and muttered. At evening a grey veil of cloud had spread slowly across the sky so that the night fell black and starless. Yet the heat was still insufferable and there was no breath of wind. Everything, from towering mountain to individual leaf or grass blade, seemed poised in tense expectancy as though awaiting some tremendous event.

I will not attempt to analyse Carfax's state of mind as he strode on through the dark of the high-banked lane. Though still beyond the reach of his five senses, his reason no longer questioned the reality of a malign, unsleeping watch. Yet still, "For lust of knowing what should not be known", he held on purposefully. Somewhere above the invisible crags of the Black Daren a heather fire was still burning, a livid wheel of flickering flame twisting snakelike across the face of the mountain. But Carfax also saw other lights in the darkness, moving points of light which no comfortable theory could explain. They appeared to move swiftly along and down the mountain walls, converging, it would seem, upon the church at Capel Cwm Garon. There must, he thought, be another fire just beyond the church, for the ruined walls were visible against its dull red glare. As he approached more closely, however, he saw, with a new fear stirring in his heart, that he was mistaken, and that the light was actually coming from within the church itself.

While fascination fought with terror within him he drew nearer, leaving the lane for the short turf of the field where his footfalls made no sound, until he reached a position from which he

could see into the roofless nave. In the centre of the church stood a brazier which glowed redly and sent up swirling clouds of smoke whose pungent aromatic odour drifted across to where Carfax stood. Around and about the brazier moved a considerable company of men and women. They were naked, and as they moved, their bodies seemed to capture and reflect the ruddy glare of the fire as though they were lacquered. When he glimpsed them momentarily in the firelight, Carfax thought that the faces of a few of the taller ones seemed vaguely familiar, but the majority of the company appeared to be very short in stature, so short, in fact, that at the first instant of vision he thought they must be children. Their bodies, however, belied this impression, as did their faces, for their countenances were such that Carfax was grateful for the smoke which prevented him from seeing them clearly. Sometimes the company moved in slow and stately dance, sometimes the pace quickened to a frenzy accompanied by gesture and posture indescribably obscene. Naked feet moved silently and there was no sound of music, yet always they seemed obedient to the measure of some inaudible rhythm. Now and again the smoke whirled aside to reveal, in the shadows beyond the brazier, a horned figure seated upon some kind of throne. Carfax marked this inhuman shape with a renewed access of fear until he realized that it was a man clothed in skins and wearing a horned head-dress. He knew then that he was beholding the celebration of rites unbelievably ancient, and temporarily his interest overcame his revulsion and his fear. But only momentarily, for it dawned upon him that this spectacle, for all its diabolic depravity, was human, and that it inspired a purely physical emotion, whereas the malignant power which brooded over the valley itself was something more or less than human. These forms which writhed in the firelight might conjure or appease that power, but they were not the power itself; their monstrous celebration had not abated the tense expectancy of the stillness. The valley still awaited some greater event.

Suddenly, a blinding flash of lightning, followed immediately by a crash of thunder tore through the veil of darkness and silence. Reverberating like great drums, the mountains took up the roar of sound and flung it from wall to wall, echoing and re-echoing down Cwm Garon. The figures round the fire had ceased their dance and flung themselves prostrate on the ground. The fire itself burnt low. The thunder died away with a sound like the closing of some vast door, and with its passing there seized Carfax a terror of the soul so abject that it was as though the valley yawned like the mouth of hell. For there fell about him a silence that was like the soundless desolation of outer space, and a sightless darkness blacker than any midnight. Though his eyes were blinded and his ears heard no sound, he knew that there stalked through the valley something intangible, unearthly, monstrous and very terrible. Though no leaf moved, something stirred in his hair. It seemed to pass as a storm cloud passes, sweeping down Cwm Garon, and with that passage the spell which had bound senses and held limbs from motion lifted. Carfax screamed, and, slipping and stumbling, he ran towards the crags of Black Daren. At the sound of his voice, two squat figures left the circle round the fire. Their pale forms glimmered in the darkness as they followed lithely after, moving in swift silence over the scree.