

THE GIRL IN THE WOODS

H.J. Williams

Excerpt 2

Copyright © 2015 by H.J. Williams

All rights reserved.

No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission of the author, nor be otherwise circulated.

All characters and locations in this excerpt are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

25th to 30th September

Four days later there was a stark reminder of just how vulnerable to attack we still were (and are), despite the advances being made in Europe. A V-1 fell into a field very close to the village. It felt as if the whole place jumped a foot in the air and came back down again with a terrific jolt. The explosion made a crater the size of a football pitch and left a number of nearby houses with some pretty substantial cracks. Fortunately it harmed not so much as a cow, but it left everyone feeling frazzled. Of course we all just got on with it and thanked the Lord it had landed where it did.

The explosion was at about 10:15 am, and the dust had just about settled, as it were, by four when I went out on my rounds.

I think it was between my first and second call that I bumped into Mrs Matthews. I was pleased to see she looked less troubled than she had at the surgery but of course I stopped to ask her how Peter was getting on.

“He’s...well, better in way, but...”

I wondered what was causing her hesitance. “Has something happened?” I asked.

She had a strange look in her eye. “She’s gone,” she said. “The girl, I mean.” I realised her look was one of a muted delight. “I can’t say we’re sorry,” she went on. “But of course Peter’s beside himself.”

“I see,” I replied, thinking that her tone was almost one of, ‘that’ll teach him a lesson’. Of course her son had caused a lot of gossip and brought not inconsiderable shame on the family with his behaviour, but I was concerned she may not be taking enough account of his mental fragility.

“He went off in the middle of the night to find her,” Mrs Matthews said, “and she’d just up sticks and left. She’s probably moved on to corrupt the boys of some other unfortunate place, the dirty little didicoy!...He searched all over but he couldn’t find her. You should’ve seen the state of him by the time he came home.” She raised her eyes to the sky.

“And how is he now?”

“Moping, but he’ll get over it. I think he’s slowly coming to his senses. Having your heart broken can do that. He’ll be less unsettled now she’s out of the way I’m sure.”

“And what about his sight and hearing?”

“Probably about the same.”

“Do you want me to take a quick look at him? I can come by after my last call.”

“No, there’s no need, Doctor, what more could you do?”

“Well, that’s true. Until he’s seen by Dr Bryant, we can’t move forward a great deal. You should hear from him soon.”

“Yes, well, we’re hoping he’ll just come out of all this on his own now the girl’s gone.”

“Well, he may do, but I’m still concerned about his general state of mind. Even if he does recover, episodes like this can come back. So when you get the letter from the hospital please promise me you won’t ignore it, and that you will take him. It’s important.”

Mrs Matthews sighed and the creases in her face made her suddenly look far older than her years. This woman was worrying herself towards illness I

realised. “I know it is, Doctor, and I’m grateful for what you’re trying to do, but it’s the expense.”

I nodded. Unfortunately, when I’d first spoken to Dr Bryant he’d been quite plain that there was no chance whatever of his fees being covered. The Board were clamping down – no-one who was resident outside the London County Council bounds was to be treated for free. I’d already informed Mrs Matthews of this. “It’s unfortunate, but they have to be strict in these times – funds are precious,” I said, wishing I could offer some other solution. It even crossed my mind that I could lend the family the money myself, so adamant was I that Peter should be seen. Looking back I wonder if I had more than my patient’s welfare at heart. If Bryant confirmed the boy was delusional, wouldn’t that allow me to finally forget everything he had said as nonsense?

“I understand,” Peter’s mother said and, perhaps seeing how badly I felt about the situation, touched my arm. “You tried and we’re grateful. It’s not the end of the world. If I know my Peter, he’ll bounce back now. You see if he doesn’t.”

I smiled at her, thinking that it comes to something when you’re being reassured by your own patients. I knew I was walking around looking like I had the weight of the world on my shoulders. I had to find a way to shake off this terrible blue funk, to stop this foolishness. But the one thing that was giving me comfort was not sensible rationality but this news that the girl was gone.

“And he’ll still get his eyes and ears looked at, won’t he? – that’s the main thing,” Mrs Matthews was saying.

They’ll find nothing wrong, I said to myself, answering in the affirmative and trying to look hopeful but knowing I had completely failed to bring the boy’s mother with me in going down a psychological route to Peter’s treatment.

To underline this, she brought the discussion to a close by saying, “Any slates off your roof after that big bang?”

We stood there and exchanged our experiences of the near miss. She told me about a rumour that the doodlebug had been tipped by a Tempest. We joked about fighter pilots who thought the countryside around London was an unpopulated wilderness and speculated that anywhere between the White Cliffs and the capital was as at risk as London itself these days. It was a somewhat staid conversation, awkward, because we both knew there were things we were leaving unsaid about her son.

Anyway, the next time I heard about Peter Matthews, it would seem that one of us had been vindicated.

It was on the following Friday, September 29th, that Mrs Matthews sent her daughter Helen to the surgery, to ask me, if I had time, to drop by to see Peter at the end of my rounds.

My spirits had been better since hearing that the girl was gone, though I couldn’t really explain why, but when the message came I thought the worst. My brief time with Peter had stayed with me, like the smell of something bad you can’t wash off your fingers.

I went to the Matthews’ little cottage next to the pub at the earliest opportunity.

“I came as soon as I could,” I said when Mrs Matthews opened the door.

“Oh, you didn’t need to rush, Doctor,” she replied and I could see that much of the heaviness that had been hanging about her face the week before was gone.

“But I thought...”

She tutted. “That girl! What did she say to you? I told her to say only if you had time, you know after you’d finished for the day.”

“Oh. Well, actually that may be what she did say. It’s not her fault – I just assumed there’d been some change in Peter.”

“There’s been a change all right.” She stood to one side with a smile. “Come in and see – unless you need to get off to see someone else.”

“No, I can spare some time,” I said and stepped into the house. The cottage was modest but well kept and the hallway was full of delicious baking smells.

“It was the strangest thing – Peter disappeared off again on Wednesday night, and he was gone until well into yesterday afternoon,” Mrs Matthews explained as she led me along the hall and up a tight little staircase. “We were at our wits end, about to call the police, when he rolled back of his own accord. And as soon as he walked through the door I just knew that...well you can see for yourself.”

She pushed open the door of a sunny room with a sloping ceiling, saying, “Dr Critchlow’s come to see you, dear.”

I stepped into the room, shielding my eyes from the light, and there, sitting up in bed, reading a book, looking rather pale and tired but otherwise quite well, was Peter Matthews. The old Peter Matthews – the polite, contented boy I had known for most of his young life. I knew from the first instant, from the first glimpse of his face, that he was all right; just as I had known from my first sight of him in my office just a week before, that everything had been wrong. If his descent into the illness had been swift, his recovery was bordering on the miraculous; if I hadn’t witnessed it myself I might have doubted that it had happened at all.

Peter smiled at me. It was like the sun coming out. The sweet-natured lad who everyone liked was back. And the purity of that smile almost extinguished the memory of the lunatic grin that had haunted my dreams for so many days. “Hello, Doctor,” he said quietly, closing his book and putting it to one side. It was as if the episode had never happened. His eyesight and hearing, it was apparent, were back to normal. The restlessness was banished. The emptiness in his gaze a distant memory.

I was elated to have him back, and that the weight had been lifted from this good family. And yet that elation was tainted. The recovery was wonderful, amazing, astonishing. But I doubted it. It was too quick, too complete. A number of thoughts rushed through my head in that moment – that I was missing something, that the recovery was too swift to be lasting, even that it might be fake. And beneath those ideas lurked the possibility that such a change might mean there had been no illness in the first place – that something else was going on here.

“I’m sorry about my behaviour the other day,” Peter was saying with a look of touching regret.

“There’s no need to apologise, Peter.” I said. “You were unwell. I don’t suppose you remember much about coming to see me do you.”

The briefest frown crossed his brow. “Oh, I do ‘s matter of fact,” he said. “I remember the things I said to you, and I...” he seemed to bring himself up short and I noticed a fleeting exchange of looks between him and his mother. He grinned. “But no, you’re right. I wasn’t really myself!”

Unsure what to make of this, I pursued a professional line: “So you’re feeling much better, Peter,” I said.

“Oh yes. Thank you.” Another glance at his mother as if to check that he was permitted to answer. “Whatever it was, I must’ve got it out of my system.”

“I see. And what about your vision and hearing? Back to normal now?”

He nodded. “Clear as you like.”

I turned to Mrs Matthews who was beaming at me happily but also with an ‘I told you so’ gleam in her eye. Was this why I’d been summoned here, I wondered – just to be shown that I had been wrong? Well I was glad I’d come anyway, because I knew something was amiss and that shadowy dread, that had receded over the weekend, had its hand on my shoulder again. “It’s quite remarkable,” I said to her. “My experience of such cases is limited but I’ve never heard of anything like it.”

“I knew he’d bounce back, once that floozy was out of the way,” she said with a self-satisfied air.

“Well, he certainly has. He’s right as rain, what a relief!” I said with the sincerest smile I could muster. She seemed happy with that and I turned to Peter. “You gave us all a lot of worry, my boy. Let’s have no more nonsense of that sort in the future, eh?”

“Course not,” he said, looking shame-faced.

At that moment, Helen called up the stairs, asking for help with the baking.

Mrs Matthews rolled her eyes. “That silly girl!” she exclaimed and left the room.

I turned to Peter. “I’m glad to see you feeling so much better,” I said.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“I must admit you even had *me* worried for a while there. You were in quite a bad way and I wasn’t altogether sure what to do with you.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Good gracious, don’t be sorry. It wasn’t your fault. I’m just relieved to see such a change.”

“Well, that’s all down to *him*,” said Peter.

“Down to who?”

He suddenly looked serious. “...I don’t know if I should say,” he mumbled.

A chill slipped over me and a cowardly part of my mind wasn’t sure if it wanted him to say either. I cleared my throat. “Well, I’m your doctor, Peter. You can tell me in confidence. Do you know what that means?”

The boy nodded. “It means you won’t tell no-one else.”

“That’s right.”

He shifted himself on his pillows. “All right. Well... when I wandered off on Wednesday night I was in a right state. Blind and half mad with missing *her*. It was awful. I didn’t honestly know what I was going to do next. I was thinking p’raps I ought to just find a deep pond and...Anyway, I’m not sure how I got there, I couldn’t see a damn thing, but I found myself at the edge of the village. I’ve never been so low, I swear it. And just when I was ready to pack it all in, I heard this little voice. ‘It’s all right, Peter,’ it said. I didn’t know who it was at first, I just thought, What’s this little child doing out in the middle of the night? ‘It’s all right,’ he says, ‘I know who you’re looking for. I know where she is, I can take you to her.’ Well I fell at his feet and begged him to take me. I’d have gone off with the devil himself if he’d told me he’d take me to her.”

“Yes, I see,” I said, my voice constricted. A cold sweat had broken out on my back.

The boy went on: “Even so, I asked, ‘Who are you? How do you know where she is?’ I suppose it’s just instinct to check, ain’t it? And he says, ‘Why, I’m her brother.’”

“The girl’s brother,” I breathed.

“Yes, Doctor. And I went with him. He led me, by his cold little hand, out of the village...But he didn’t take me to her.”

I took a step closer to the bed with trembling legs, and murmured, “What did he do?”

“He took me off into the middle of nowhere.”

I nodded, watching muted horror steal over Peter’s face.

“I didn’t know where on earth I was. Not that I cared – all I cared about was seeing her! I didn’t know he had no intention of taking me there. Eventually we stopped. I could hear running water and wind in the trees but I couldn’t tell you where we were. But it was cold and damp with no sound of life. I asked him – ‘Where are we? When am I going to get to see her?’ ‘...You’re not,’ he says. I think I knew by that time I’d been led a merry dance, and anyway what he said wasn’t the worst thing. The worst thing was his voice.”

“His voice?” I murmured.

“It...this is going to sound mad...it wasn’t a little child’s voice anymore. It didn’t sound natural. It sounded...Oh, blimey.” Peter shook his head distractedly and just for a second a tinge of his previous malady returned to his expression.

“It’s all right, Peter. You can trust me,” I tried to reassure him, sitting on the bed.

He gave me an uncertain smile and carried on. “Well, it was sort of like an impersonator, you know like if a man puts on a woman’s voice. But different. More like...Like if something that wasn’t a human tried to pretend to be a human.” He looked up at me and saw the baffled look on my face. “I’m not explaining it very well,” he said, looking down at his hands. “It wasn’t just the voice. There was this smell – like a mouldy old cellar – and I kept thinking it was coming from him. And the sound of his footsteps was so heavy and sort of clumsy. But I couldn’t see anything, so...maybe it was my imagination.” He faltered then, as if it was all becoming too much for him.

“Go on,” I prompted him, my mouth dry as sand.

Peter closed his eyes for a moment then continued: “‘You’re not going to see her,’ he says. ‘What do you mean?’ I asks. ‘What are we doin’ here then?’ ‘I’ve brought you here to help you,’ he says, his voice right deep and rough now. And I’m thinking maybe I shouldn’t stay. ‘There’s no need to run away,’ he says, almost as if he could tell what I was thinking. ‘And how far do you think you’d get anyway?’ he says. ‘What do you want?’ I asks. ‘I told you,’ he says, ‘I want to help you. You’re in a bad way, aren’t you, Peter? You’re blind. And you can’t do anything because you can’t stop thinking about my sister. Am I right?’ I says yes, he is right. ‘You’re at your wits ends and don’t know where to turn,’ he says. I couldn’t deny it, could I? ‘Well I can make all that go away,’ he says. ‘How?’ I asks. ‘It’s easy,’ he says, ‘all you have to do is lay down. And I’ll cure you. You see you’re ill, Peter, terribly ill. You can’t go on much longer like this can you?’ I just shook my head and started crying. ‘It’s all right,’ he says. ‘I can help. I can make your eyes better, stop the fretfulness, put you back together again. And best of

all, I can stop you from caring about *her*. All you have to do is lie down for me here, and I can cure you and you'll sleep and when you wake, it'll all be over. Would you like that?' 'Yes,' I says, 'Yes I would. Very much.' So then he comes up right close to me and the stench is enough to make me sick to the stomach, but all I want is to be right again. 'Get down on the ground,' he says, but his voice is so broken up now I can hardly understand him. Anyway, I did what he said. And that's the last thing I remember." Peter sighed and looked up at me. "Except..."

"Except what?" I asked, feeling like I was watching the conversation from somewhere else.

"The pain."

"He hurt you?"

"Yes. Whatever he did, it 'urt something terrible," he blanched, his face tense and unmoving. "I remember the pain, but nothing else."

"Oh Peter," I said, putting my hand over his. Both were trembling.

"But it worked!" my patient said, and a smile broke through his distress. "I *am* cured. You can see I am, can't you?"

"Yes," I said, nodding, hoping my expression didn't betray my uneasiness.

"Yes, Peter."

"So it was worth it. I mean, what would have become of me anyway?"

I had a dozen questions on my tongue, but Mrs Matthews was coming back up the stairs.

He glanced anxiously that way and whispered, "Mum said I shouldn't tell you any of this."

"Did she now?" I said with chagrin. "Well I'm glad you did. And don't worry, I won't let on." I smiled at him and squeezed his hand.

His mother returned, pausing in the doorway. "Oh look at him there," she gushed. "My little angel, back with us!"

"Mum!" he complained with an embarrassed tilt of his head.

I laughed but an unbidden thought had popped suddenly into my mind, like a face leering out of the night: *sounds like your little angel took a walk with a devil.*

I pushed it away and stood up. "Well I must be off to see my other patients," I said.

"Yes, of course," said Mrs Matthews. "Don't let us keep you. Others need you a lot more than we do now."

"Indeed. I only wish all my cases resolved themselves as easily as this," I said pointedly.

Did I see the faintest narrowing in her eyes? I couldn't be sure. "I'll show you out, Doctor," she said and led me downstairs and out of the house.

I walked on to my next call, past the Hare and Hounds. I must confess nothing would have given me greater pleasure than to have walked in there, a lone woman or not, and ordered a bottle of something strong. However, I felt Eversley was about to have enough on its plate without its village doctor turning to drink.