

# THE LOST GLEN

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IN the early afternoon, the tide having fallen, we gathered up our luncheon dishes and started on our return to the Valley. It was June, and the afternoon was before us. When we were seated in the car, my companion, with a long look at the retreating sea, said: "Which way shall we return?" "Any way you like," I replied. "We have the whole afternoon."

So we mounted the steep road leading over the mountains. At the top we stopped to look back at the tiny fishing village, with its white cottages clustered around the harbour far below us. Then we turned to the east, and slowly entered the forest.

The mountain range, behind which lay our destination, is deeply serrated with winding ravines. The sides of these ravines are overgrown with oak, birch, maple and spruce, and a thick growth of various kinds of shrubs. During the Spring and Autumn streams of considerable volume, flecked with hurrying foam, flow down them to the beach. When the tide is full, the streams fling their concentrated wrath with a steady roar against the ocean, as if they could overcome planetary forces; but when the tide recedes, they silence their bugles and, deploying their battalions over the foreshore, pursue their enemy in fancied victory.

The road we took was one of many that led to scattered farms which in simpler days yielded a comfortable living, but now furnish the bare means of existence. The young men and women, discouraged with the prospect, have gone away to the towns and left the farms in possession of the old men and women and the young children.

The forest has invaded the little orchards, so that you will find old apple trees that once, pruned and shapely, yielded their annual harvest of juicy gravensteins, but now drop only a few sour survivors to the matted grass. Partridges steal out to them in the late afternoons and, having filled their crops with the buds, roost all night in the branches. The buildings are grey and dilapidated. Sagging gates, each describing its quadrant in the road, have to be lifted and pushed open and shut. Well-sweeps with chains and buckets attached are silhouetted against the sky. Stable doors hang open, and hens straggle in and out. Run-out hayfields, having overgrown the little flower-gardens, sweep up to the front; doors and the scanty grass, urged by the breezes that

blow in from the sea, bows before them mutely and waits in vain for them to open. Thin processions of boys and girls, with tinkling dinner-pails and soiled books, walk in Indian file along the side of the road as the car goes by, and gaze, wide-eyed and silent, at its occupants.

About mid-afternoon we came suddenly to the edge of one of the ravines. The road was made of blue slate-stone, and the traffic of years had bound it hard and smooth like that of a well-kept park. It dipped over the edge of the ravine and, seeking an easy descent, wound here and there beneath overhanging trees. Then we turned a corner and were in the glen. Steep banks covered with rhododendrons, sumach and mountain ash, rose on either side. Below and in front of us, the dark blue road turned and, doubling back at a lower level, enclosed a grassy, unfenced plot, in the midst of which stood a little church. White birch trees leaned above the black spruces, and their boles gleamed through the interstices. High above us, where they clung to the sides of the ravine, the poplars ceaselessly turned their silver leaves. At the lower opening of the glen stood a cottage. White curtains and red geraniums were in the windows, and in the open door a small girl held a baby on her knee, both of them fast asleep.

At the last corner we stopped and looked back. A faint mist from the brook swam up and obscured the farther distances, and the wild cherry blossoms seemed to hang poised in its dimness like pallid stars. Then, as I looked, the spruces seemed to grow darker, the birches turned paler, and the whole glen took on the look of something imperishable, as though even the children would never grow old.

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Some years afterward my companion and I lunched again near the little harbour, seeking, by common consent, the same spot. We waited again for the tide to turn from its daily attack on the mountain before we prepared to return. When we were seated in the car my companion said, looking straight ahead: "Which way shall we take?" I replied, "Any way you like, we have the afternoon before us." He continued to look ahead as though he was waiting for something, so I said: "Do you remember one day we lunched here, and on the way back we took a sort of man-o'-war cruise, for to admire and for to see—and do you remember that on the way we came to a glen with white birches and a little church?"

"Yes," he replied, and I knew from his tone that he too had seen something he would never forget. "Well," I said, "let's find

it; I'd like to see it again." "I was waiting for you to suggest it," he said.

We mounted the hill, turned to the east and entered the woods. We passed a number of ravines, descending and ascending their steep sides. We met processions of school children, the girls clinging to their teachers and the boys following. We passed the old farms and noticed that the forest had encroached a little more on the orchards. The ruts were a little deeper. The buildings were a little greyer. The grass was a little scantier, and still bowed timidly at the urging of the sea breeze before the silent unopening doors.

We searched all the mountain ravines through the long afternoon, but we never found the glen.

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Our old friend Lao Tze says that the real glen was not there till I looked back and saw it. He tells us that everything possesses a "subtle essence", and that I must strive to see that essence.

Plato says that the glen before I looked back at it was entrapped in matter, but remained unsullied in its reality. He tells me that it is my business to discern the real glen within the defective glen of the senses.

Jesus once stood on the wind-blown hills of Galilee among the nodding lilies, and told His friends to look again and they might see something whose glory surpassed the glory of Solomon.

A poet tells me to keep my eye undimmed and I shall "see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wildflower."

Looking back, as I sit here, over the years that have passed since that fruitless search, I confess that I was very foolish to think I could find the lost glen.