

Weird Tales

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A Five-Minute Story

The Inn in the Wood

By C. I. MARTIN

IT STOOD by the white, dusty track which ran through the gloomy wood down to the wide gray sea of the Normandy coast. Before the door stood a man with a hunted face, and hesitated, glancing over his shoulder at the path which had led him here from the sea-shore.

Night was falling; in the shades of the wood it was already dark. He was wet and weary. The folds of his long cloak dripped on the dusty path as he stood. It was odd, he thought, that he had not marked the inn when he passed that way in the morning. But then he had not been alone, and had had that in his mind which might have taken him unheeding past twenty inns.

He shivered slightly as if with cold. There were many miles between him and the little fishing village he had left at dawn, and he had no fancy for retracing the path through the woods in darkness, and alone. The trees could hide many things. He would do better to spend the night here.

Yet the inn did not look very cheerful. He glanced up at the ereaking sign to discover the name, but the letters were too dim. The site too was

strangely chosen, for there appeared to be a graveyard on one side; dim gray shapes as of tombstones glimmered in the dusk. But what mattered that to him, if he could find warmth and shelter within? Through a window he saw a fire leap and glow. It decided him, and turning to the half-open door he was about to knock, when it was flung wide, and the host stood bowing in the doorway.

"You are welcome, *Monsieur*. Would *Monsieur* be pleased to enter?"

The traveler went in, and the plump little man barred the door. He was dressed in rusty black; a smile was on his face and his eyes shone as he looked at his guest, and rubbing his hands, predicted a terrible night. His manner was almost exulting, thought the other, and as he gazed at him he shivered, and almost wished himself out in the dark wood again, but that was folly.

He curtly demanded a room, wine and a fire by which to dry his garments. All these he could have, and that speedily. He followed his host up a flight of stairs, and still, though the door was barred below, he glanced with a hunted look over his shoulder.

At the top they entered a large room hung with faded tapestry. On it was represented the bottom of the sea, and as the wind stirred it, the fishes seemed to swim, and the long coils of seaweed to wave with the motion of the water. The traveler looked at it with distaste.

Monsieur did not like the tapestry? enquired the host. Alas! he had no other empty room, and when *Monsieur* slept it would not trouble him.

The other shrugged his shoulders and looked around. A fire leapt on the open hearth; beside it wine and glasses stood on a table; in a corner were two narrow beds, and through the open window came the distant roar of the sea.

The newcomer looked with surprise on these preparations, and his host, following his gaze, smiled and said, "*Monsieur* sees he was expected."

"But how——?" stammered the other. "I had no thought of coming here tonight."

"*Monsieur* would have found it hard to pass *this* door."

"Leave me!" he exclaimed, angry with the smile which seemed to triumph over him. "But first draw that window to. The sea roars too loudly for me tonight."

"Yet *Monsieur* has been closely acquainted with the sea today," said the little man as he advanced to do his bidding. "The sea is strong, *Monsieur*, but it does not keep all it holds."

The traveler shot a glance of terror at him, but the fat round face was as smiling as ever.

"What do you mean?" stammered the pale lips.

"Nay, what should I mean save that *Monsieur's* garments are wet? It is easy to see he has struggled," pointing as he spoke to a long rent in his cloak.

The traveler shuddered and threw the garment from him.

Still smiling, his host went out, closing the door behind him.

Once more he was alone. Drawing up a seat close to the fire he crouched over it to dry his clothes, but they dripped—and dripped—and never had done dripping. And the firelight glanced on the little pools until they looked like blood.

For a time he sat motionless, then groaned, and rising, paced to and fro. He stood still at length by the beds. In his trouble he had not before noted there were two, and he called the host up to explain.

"It is the custom of the house, *Monsieur*. No one here sleeps alone," he explained with a sidelong smile.

"I share my room with no stranger," was the haughty reply.

"He will be no stranger," said the little man as he closed the door.

The wind rose, and the sea sounded louder than before. He had not thought it was so near. He flung the window open, expecting to see it through the trees. The sign creaked below. It was nearer here, and as it swung toward him he read in dim letters: "Retribution"; above was a sword and scales. And then he saw on the road a sight that made his heart stand still—a double track in the dust. He would fly, but whither? On one side was the wood, on the other the sea. He moaned, and crouched in hopeless apathy over the dying fire.

All was still now, very still. There was a stir below. Was it the host coming up again? No, it was a step he knew. It came nearer, and ever nearer, with a plashy sound upon the stairs. He crouched in the farthest corner of the room, his eyes fixed on the door. Now there was but that between him and the thing without. It opened, and on the threshold stood the brother he had drowned, with wide, unseeing eyes, and a coil of wet seaweed in his dead hand.