



THE MILLER'S SON JAMIE M STEAD
A TALE FROM THE RYNGWOODE

Copyright © 2024 Jamie Stead. All rights reserved.

While the author retains full copyright over this story, its events and characters, you are free to distribute this file unedited. Send it to your family, friends, enemies, whoever. Just don't change it or charge for it. Or I'll send the wolves after you.

Read for free at: www.childrenofwolves.com:

* The Knight Of Ivy

* The Badger Knight

Author's note: This short story was a bit of an experiment, written over two sittings with no editing (other than to correct a bit of spelling). Kind of a "stream of consciousness" thing, to try and mimic how someone might actually tell a story, contradictions and all.

Hello, hello.

Apologies, it's busier than usual today.

Find a seat and I'll be with you soon. Got a quick tale for you today, straight from the horse's mouth ... kind of... well, you'll see...



No fancy intro with this one.

This is the tale of the miller's son...

I's seen them you know, seen them with my own actual eyes. The demons in the woods. The forest spirits. Whatever they's is. I's seen them and they ain't demons and they ain't spirits, they's worse than that. They's men. And there's nothing worse than men who act like demons.

Well, I say I's seen them, but I mean my friend, Alan, he saw them, and we've known each other since we was five summers of age, and we're both 12 summers of age now, so we've known each other... well, however long that is. We've known each other that long that we are pretty much blood, might as well be the same person. So what he sees, I sees, y'know? And out there, past the fields, past the mills, past the streams and becks and through the hamlets, and into the Ryngwoode, he's seen them. All in black, spikes breaking out their skin. White faces with eyes on fire with black flames, burning down their cheeks.

They's worse than anything else in the woods. No bandits or brigands will do to a man what they does. Seen it with my own eyes. Well, Alan saw them with his. But might as well be mine. Run through the trees they does, jumping from branch to branch, flying from tree to tree. They don't even need to touch the ground to kill you. Got magic, they have. Magic that makes you bleed from inside. That makes you go mad. Makes you see things that aren't there and never were nor never will be. They've killed bandits with this magic, bandits that used to think they was safe in the Ryngwoode. Now even the bandits have nowhere to hide. Not that I know no bandits, honest, it's just what I'd heard. Well, what Alan heard, y'know.

Every child around knows the stories from when they was babes. Stories telled to us to keep us away from the wood. The nursery rhymes about the wolves in the woods. The demons. And the spirits. They is all one though, and all man.

Why can't they be nice tales for once? Why is it always "don't go in the lake, the Drowned Lady will drag you under".... "Don't go to the marsh, the boggart will take you"... "don't go in the Ryngwoode, the demons will take your soul and bleed you from your eyes"... it's never "if you get lost in the woods a friendly spirit will bake you a pie", y'know. It's never something nice. It could be, y'know. Could be a nice tale for once. "If you get lost the wisp will guide you to your death", can't he, y'know, just once, guide you some place safe?

What I saw.... what Alan saw, it'll haunt me. Haunt us both. Till the end of our time. Men ripped apart. Blood, flowing like rivers in a storm. Bones snapped and broken like twigs. Lives taken in seconds. Eyes gouged with the spikes of the Ryngwoode demon men. Not that they is demons. They's just men. They must be. I saw. Well, Alan saw. They's must be just men. But men that does things to another man that only a demon would do. It wasn't justice. It wasn't punishment. It was just death.

Gives me shivers thinking about it. My eyes will never unsee what I saw. Well, what Alan saw. He told me, in great detail, everything. It's in my head as if my own eyes saw it. And me and Alan, we's like blood. So it's like I's seen it myself. And heard it. The blood curdling screams as they moved through the trees. The drumming. Such fast drumming. Maybe they is demons, and what I heard was the music of hell. Well, what Alan heard.

When I say Alan, I mean his uncle. It were his uncle who saw and heard it all. And he's Alan's blood, so it's like Alan saw it really. And me and Alan are like blood, so it's like I saw it too. But I wish I hadn't. I wish I hadn't.

Alan's father is a farmer, supplies me own father, the miller. One day, from over a nearby wall, suddenly, some bandits clamber. Six or seven of 'em. They cuts down one of

the farm workers in the field and starts grabbing whatever they can handle. Alan's father and uncle runs out with scythes and runs straight at 'em, at the bandits. I guess the bandits weren't expecting that cos they upped and ran, back over the wall and followed the beck back down towards the main road.

Alan's father's farm is one of the last here now y'know, one of the last between here and the Ryngwoode. Travel the straight path from the farm to the wood and you'll pass many abandoned small holdings, a couple of mills, none turning for all this past season, and a few empty hamlets. All cos of the bandits. They come further and further and not a soldier to stop them. Local guardhouse says they has no one to keep a patrol, says most the soldiers have headed north to New Castle, ready for whatever Scotland brings. But what are they gonna eat if there ain't no one to protect the farmers and the millers? And no farmers and no millers means no food.

Anyway, Alan's uncle heard talk at the tavern of the bandits getting more and more brazen and heading further from the wood itself these past months, which is why there's so much empty now between here and there. He said, from what he's been telled, that something in the Ryngwoode was driving the bandits out. The demons. The spirits. People had seen them, haunting the trees. So Alan's uncle rounds up a few other locals and they arms themselves and they heads to the Ryngwoode. He said he'd either kill the bandits or kill the demons or be killed himself. They weren't going to be driven out of their farm like the others, it had to stop somewhere.

Alan's uncle is a big man. Can sling a pregnant sow over his shoulders and carry her like she were a babe. Could probably pull the cart to market quicker than their old horse could. So he rounds up some of the other local men. Grabs scyths, rakes and a few swords they

had stashed away, found in the fields from battles a the past. Grabs them and then they walks to the Ryngwoode itself.

And that's how I saw whats I saw, well what Alan saw. From what his Uncle saw I mean. Just as they got close to the wood's edge they saw some bandits, possibly the same ones what raided their farm, entering the woods. No one travels the Ryngwoode Road now, no one with any sense anyway. It was quiet. So Alan's uncle and the others slowly follow the bandits into the wood, keeping theirs distance. As they got deeper they could see the bandits getting agite... agitat.... nervous. They seemed to have got lost themselves and in the clearing afor them was figures of men, made from twigs and vine. All around the clearing were corn men, effigies Alan's uncle said. Strange word. And dancing through the air was the sound of a hundred chimes, tinkle, tinkle, tinkle. Blowing in the breeze.

The bandits started to kick down the stick men, and hack at the corn men and pull at the chimes. And then, there in broad daylight, with his own eyes, which might as well be Alan's cos they is blood and might as well be mine cos me and Alan might as well be blood, Alan's uncle saw the demons emerge from the trees. The chimes all went silent and then the screams started. First the screams of the demons, then the screams of the bandits. Screams of rage and anger followed by screams of fear and pain.

The demons were all black save for their white faces. White like chalk. Blackened eyes like the dead staring from the darkness of the grave. With little effort they tore the bandits apart and the screaming stopped. Both the screams of rage and anger and the screams of fear and pain.

Alan's uncle and the others were hidden back down the path, looking through the trees into the clearing, when one of them let out a noise. Either a whimper or a cough. Whatever

it was, it was enough for the demons to notice them. But they did nothing. They stood there and stared, unmoving. Alan's uncle stared back, stared right back into the darkness where their eyes should be. That's when he realised they were no demons, no spirits. They were just men. But men that act like demons. They started to turn around and walk deeper into the forest, with the last one staring straight at Alan's uncle and putting a finger to his mouth, as if telling him to be silent. He too then turned and was gone into the darkness of the thick treeline. Alan's uncle stood, realising everyone else had already fled, back the way they'd come and back to the road.

Slowly, and silently, he walked the path, not knowing why they had been spared. It was the edge of night by the time he got back to the farm and told his story. He filled his belly, sat round the fire with Alan's father and the other farm workers, telling the story what I just told you. He drank his ale and took to his bed. Never to wake again.

Day after, Alan lost his sight.

Day after that, I lost my sight.

And now I sit here, telling you my story in the hopes for a coin or a corner of bread or a swig of water or ale. Telling you there's worse than demons in the woods. There's men.

The End