

2 The Heart of the Ancient Wood

twice or thrice repeated under the round October moon, or the noise of some great wind roaring heavily in the remote tops of pine and birch and hemlock. Few and slender were the rays of sun that pierced down through those high tops. The air that washed the endless vistas of brown-green shadow was of a marvellous clarity, not blurred by any stain of dust or vapour. Its magical transparency was confusing to an eye not born and bred to it, making the far branches seem near, and the near twigs unreal, disturbing the accustomed perspective, and hinting of some elvish deception in familiar and apparent things.

The trail through the forest was rough and long unused. In spots the mosses and ground vines had so overgrown it that only the broad scars on the tree trunks, where the lumberman's axe had blazed them for a sign, served to distinguish it from a score of radiating vistas. But just here, where it climbed a long, gradual slope, the run of water down its slight hollow had sufficed to keep its worn stones partly bare. Moreover, though