

*The Hairy
Man
in His Den*

pass that way. And you watched with exquisite terror a little fellow who always carried with him on his adventures a shining tin dipper, for he never knew when he might need a drink, or the protection of sunlight reflected dazzlingly from the tin into the bewildered eyes of some prowling beast. And as he drew nearer and nearer you held your breath and listened eagerly to every word, for you knew that the Hairy Man was crawling yearningly and cunningly up the sides of the well-like entrance to his den and that the moment the little boy, lured on by a determination to see what was in the hole, should come near enough a great hairy hand, with long fingernails like claws, would dart out and snatch the boy, just as a spider might snatch a gnat that has wandered into the web. But the boy outwits the Hairy Man, for by an adroit movement he flashes some sunlight into the Hairy Man's eyes, and then during the second or two of blinking he strikes him full on the head with the dipper and sends him kerplump down, down, down to the very bottom of the den. Then was the time to laugh and gloat. And Christopher laughed, too, after first roaring and hiccoughing and drawing with great gusto at the blackened stem of his old clay pipe.

After everyone had settled down again, Christopher would begin to recite in slow, even rhythm:

There was an old woman all skin and bone,
Who went one day to church alone.
As she looked up, as she looked down,
She saw a corpse upon the groun';
And going up to it she said,
"Shall I be like thee when I am dead?"
"Oh, yes, oh, yes," the corpse it said,
"Thou shalt be like me when thou art dead."
And with that she gave a yell and died.

The yell, which was half shriek, that Christopher would emit always made the boys shrink under the skin, and kept ringing in their ears until they would fall asleep, hours and hours afterwards, to dream of goblins and graveyards yawning.

Christopher was born a story-teller. But how often he lacked an audience. Think of all the hundreds of nights that he sat there alone, doing nothing but drinking and smoking and settling down into his thoughts. Perhaps that explains how the cider at last undermined him. But with or without evident cause, he slipped away, and we put what he represented of Devonshire beside the fragment of Cornwall, yonder upon the hill. The spot overlooks what were his own acres, where we used to help ourselves to his marrow fat peas, his tender white turnips, and the Astrachans that hung red and luscious under a harvest moon.

*Devonshire
beside
Cornwall*