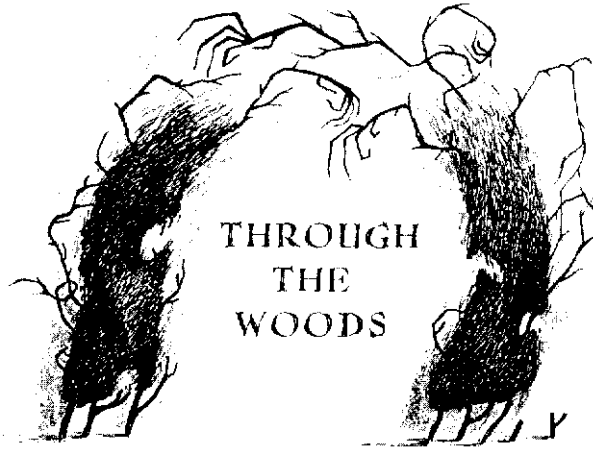
Uncle Montague's Tales of Terror

Chris Priestley

Published by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Extract

CONTENTS



The way to Uncle Montague's house lay through a small wood. The path coiled between the trees like a snake hiding in a thicket, and though the path was not long and the wood not at all large, that part of the journey always seemed to take far longer than I would ever have thought it could.

It had become a habit of mine to visit my uncle during the school holidays. I was an only child and my parents were not comfortable around children. My father tried his best, putting his hand on my shoulder and pointing various things out to me, but when he had run out of things to point at, he

was overcome with a kind of sullen melancholy and left the house to go shooting alone for hours. My mother was of a nervous disposition and seemed unable to relax in my company, leaping to her feet with a small cry whenever I moved, cleaning and polishing everything I touched or sat upon.

'He's an odd fish,' said my father one day at breakfast.

'Who is?' said my mother.

'Uncle Montague,' he replied.

'Yes,' she agreed. 'Very odd. What do you and he do all afternoon when you visit him, Edgar?'

'He tells me stories,' I said.

'Good Lord,' said my father. 'Stories, eh? I heard a story once.'

'Yes, Father?' I said expectantly. My father frowned and looked at his plate.

'No,' he said. 'It's gone.'

'Never mind, darling,' said my mother. 'I'm sure it was marvellous.'

'Oh, it was,' he said. 'It really was.' He chuckled to himself. 'Marvellous, yes.'

Uncle Montague lived in a house nearby. He was not strictly speaking my uncle, rather some kind of great-uncle, but as an argument had broken out between my parents about exactly how many

'greats' there should be, in the end I thought it best to simply call him 'Uncle'.

I have no recollection of ever visiting him when the trees of the wood between our houses were in leaf. All my memories of walking through that wood are when it was cold with frost or snow and the only leaves I ever saw were dead and rotting on the ground.

At the far side of the wood there was a kissing gate: one of the kind that lets only one person through at a time while ensuring that the gate cannot be left open and allow sheep to escape. I cannot think why the wood or the paddock it bordered had such a gate, for I never did see any creatures whatever in that field or anywhere at all on my uncle's property. Well, none that you could call livestock at any rate.

I never liked the kissing gate. It had a devilishly strong spring and my uncle did not have it oiled as often as he might. In any event, I never once passed through without feeling the strangest horror of being trapped. In the odd state of panic that came over me, I foolishly imagined that something was coming at me behind my back.

Of course, in no time at all, I managed to pull back the creaking gate and squeeze through, and

each time would turn with relief to see the wood unchanged beyond the small stone wall I had just passed through. Even so, in my childish way, I would turn again as I set out across the paddock, hoping (or rather perhaps *dreading*) to catch sight of someone – or something. But I never did.

That said, I did sometimes have company on my walk. The children from the village would occasionally skulk about. I had nothing to do with them, nor they with me. I was away at school. I do not wish to sound a snob, but we came from different worlds.

I would sometimes see them among the trees, as I did this particular day. They did not come near and never said a word. They stood silently among the shadows. Their intention was clearly to intimidate me, and in that they were quite successful, but I did my best not to appear ruffled. I made a show of ignoring them and continued on my way.

The paddock was overgrown with long ragged grass and the dry brown seed heads of thistles and teasels and cow parsley. As I walked across the track of trampled grass towards the garden gate, I could see and hear the scampering movement of what I took to be rabbits or pheasants, rustling in the undergrowth.

I always paused at the gate to look at the house, which stood on its own little hillock as many churches do, and indeed there was something of the graveyard in its walled garden and something of the church in its arched Gothic windows and its spikes and ornaments. The garden gate was as much in need of oil as the kissing gate and the latch so heavy that it took all my boyish strength to lift it; the metal so cold and damp it chilled my fingers to the bone.

When I turned to shut the gate again, I would always look back and marvel at how my parents' house was now entirely hidden by the wood, and at how, in the particular stillness of that place, it seemed that there was no other living soul for miles about.

The path now led across the lawn to my uncle's door, past a strange gathering of topiary bushes. No doubt these massive yews had once been artfully clipped into the usual array of cones and birds, but for some years they had been growing wild. These feral bushes now stood malevolently about the house, inviting the imagination to see in their deformed shapes the hint of teeth, the suggestion of a leathery wing, the illusion of a claw or an eye.

I knew, of course, that they were only bushes, but

nevertheless I am embarrassed to say that I always found myself hurrying along the path that led between them, and was never tempted to look over my shoulder as I rapped the great hoop of the door knocker to announce my presence to my uncle; a hoop, I should say, which hung from the mouth of a most peculiar creature – the face, formed of dull unpolished brass, seemed to hover unnervingly betwixt lion and man.

After what always seemed an extraordinary length of time, and just as I was about to lift the door knocker again, the door would open and Uncle Montague would be standing there, as always, holding a candle and smiling at me, beckoning me to enter.

'Don't stand there in the cold, Edgar,' he said. 'Come in, lad. Come in.'

I entered eagerly enough, but to tell the truth there was little difference in temperature between the garden and my uncle's hallway, and if there *was* a difference I would say it was in the garden's favour, for I have never been so cold *inside* a building as I was inside my uncle's house. I swear I once saw frost sparkling on the banisters of the stairs.

My uncle set off along the stone-flagged hall and I set off in pursuit, following the flickering candle-

light as keenly as a moth. It was part of my uncle's many eccentricities that, though he clearly did not want for money, he never had any truck with electric light – nor gaslight for that matter – and lit the house by candle wax alone, and that sparingly. Following behind him, therefore, towards his study was always a disconcerting business, for in spite of being in the safety of my uncle's house, I did not feel comfortable to be left in the dark there and hurried my steps to keep in contact with both him and the light.

As my uncle walked through the draughty house the candlelight no doubt added to my jitters: its fluttering passage created all kinds of grotesque shadows on the wall, which danced and leaped about, giving the unnerving impression of gaining a life of their own and scuttling away to hide under pieces of furniture or scurry up walls to skulk in ceiling corners.

After more walking than seemed possible from the size of the house as it appeared from outside, we arrived at my uncle's study: a large room lined with shelves holding books and curios from the old man's travels. The walls were encrusted with prints and paintings, and heavy curtains smothered the leaded windows. No matter that it was still after-

noon – the study was as sunless as a cave.

The floor was covered in a rich Persian carpet and the base colour of that carpet was a deep red, as were the paintwork of the walls and the damask fabric of the curtains. A large fire burned in the grate and made the colour glow, throbbing rhythmically at the movement of the flames, as if this room were the beating heart of the house.

Certainly it was the only part of the house I ever saw that I could describe as comfortable, though I should say at this point that despite having been to my uncle's house many times this was in fact the *only* room I had ever been in (save for the lavatory).

This may seem odd, but it did not occur to me as such at the time. My meetings with Uncle Montague were less of a family get-together and more in the way of a business appointment. Uncle and I were very fond of one another in our way, but we both knew what had brought me: hunger – hunger for stories.

'Sit yourself down, young fellow,' he said (as he always did). 'I'll ring and see if Franz will consent to bring us some tea and cakes.'

Uncle pulled on the long sash by the fireplace and as usual I strained to hear a bell sound far away in the house. Footsteps gradually became audible

and grew in volume as they slowly progressed towards the study door. They stopped outside and there followed a long pause and then three alarmingly loud knocks.

The door handle turned, rattling as it did so, and the door opened. From where I sat the door blocked my view and all I could see was my uncle standing by the open door, whispering our request before the door slowly closed once more and the footsteps faded away into the distance, oddly mingling with their own echoes to produce a strange scampering sound.

I should like to have told you something of Franz's appearance, as I am sure you will be wondering if he was tall or fat or fair-haired, but I am afraid that never on any of my visits did I so much as catch the merest glimpse of Franz.

By the time my uncle and I had exchanged some pleasantries and he had enquired as to the current state of my schooling, there were three more sonorous knocks at the door, and Uncle, getting up to answer it once again, returned with a tray, on which there was a large tea pot, cups and saucers, and a plate of cakes and biscuits. There was no milk jug because Uncle and I both took our tea black. There was a bowl of sugar lumps and, though I

never saw him actually take one, my uncle must have had a considerable sweet tooth, for they were always entirely gone by the time I left, and I never took sugar at all, even as a small boy.

We sat either side of the fire, my uncle and I, with the tray on a small table between us; my uncle with his elbows on the arms of his chair and his fingertips together. When he leaned back, his face disappeared into shadow entirely.

'Your journey here was uneventful, I trust?' he asked.

'Yes, Uncle,' I said.

'You saw . . . nothing – in the woods?'

Uncle Montague often asked this question, and my reply was always the same.

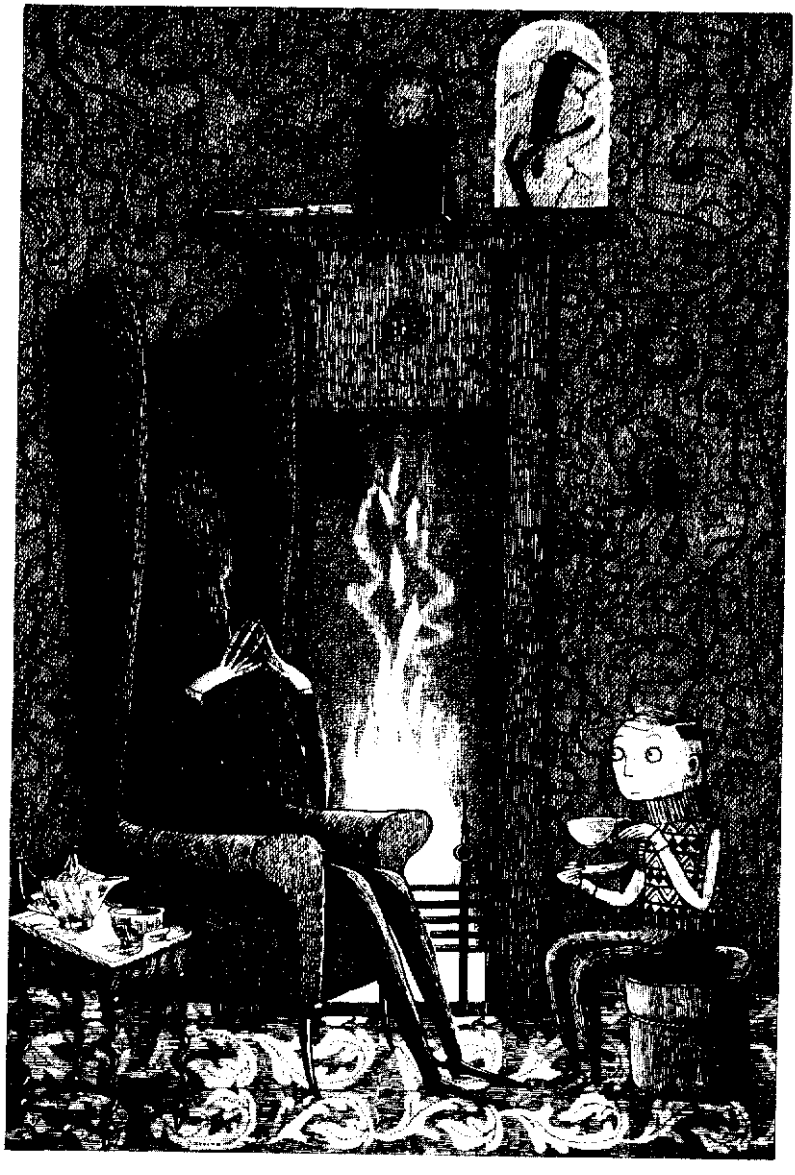
'No, Uncle,' I said, not seeing the need to mention the village children, as I could not imagine they would be of interest to a man like my uncle. 'I did not see anything in the woods.'

My uncle smiled strangely and nodded, taking a sip of tea. He sighed wistfully.

'There is nothing quite like a wood at night, eh, Edgar?' he said.

'No,' I replied, trying to sound as though I might have some knowledge of nocturnal woodland.

'And where should mankind be without trees?'



he continued. 'Timber is the very engine of civilisation, Edgar: from the plough to paper, from the wheel to the house, from tool handles to sailing ships. Man would have been nothing without trees, lad.' He went to put another log on the hearth and the flames seemed to almost leap out and wrest it from his grip. 'After all, what could symbolise man's separation from the animal world more than fire – fire's warmth and fire's light?' We both looked into the fire, mesmerised for a while by its dancing flames.

'The Norse people believed that the world was suspended in the branches of a great ash tree. Did you know that, Edgar?'

'No, Uncle.'

'Yes,' he said. 'The people of the northern forests have always had a special relationship with the tree. After all, those ancient wild woods were their storehouse of building materials and fuel and food . . . But they were also dark and mysterious, filled with bears and robbers and who knows what else . . .'

'Do you mean . . . witches, Uncle?'

His eyes twinkled. 'Witches, warlocks, wizards, wood sprites, werewolves –'

'Werewolves?' I said with a little gulp.

'Perhaps.' Uncle Montague gave a little shrug.

'The point is they respected the forest and they respected trees – feared them – worshipped them.'

'How did they worship them, Uncle?' I said, taking a biscuit and noticing that the sugar was already gone.

'In many ways, I am sure,' he said. 'The Roman historians tell us of sacred groves, of oak trees splashed with blood –'

'Blood?' I said, spluttering a little on my biscuit.

'Yes,' said Uncle Montague. 'They tell of sacrifice – sometimes human. The Celts were partial to taking the heads of their enemies as trophies in battle. To them, the hanging of the heads on an oak was probably as festive as the hanging of baubles on a Christmas tree is to your dear mother.'

I raised a doubtful eyebrow on both counts and Uncle smiled.

'But why worship a tree?' I said.

'I can think of many things less deserving of worship,' he replied. 'Look at how long some trees have been alive. Think of what they have seen. Why, there are yew trees in churchyards that may be more than a thousand years old; older still than the ancient church nearby. Their roots are in one millennium and their branches in another. And who cannot stand in awe when they see a great oak

or ash or elm standing alone like a mournful giant?'

He tapped his fingertips together and I saw his wolfish smile in the shadow. 'I know a story about just such a tree,' said my uncle. 'Would you like to hear it, Edgar?'

'Very much so.' After all, that was why I was there.

'It may be a little frightening for you.'

'I don't mind, Uncle,' I said with more courage than I felt, for I was like someone who, having been hauled to the highest point of a fairground ride, was beginning to have second thoughts.

'Very well,' said Uncle Montague, looking into the fire. 'Then I shall begin . . .'