

The Country Child - Alison Uttley

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The dark wood was green and gold, green where the oak trees stood crowded together with misshapen twisted trunks, red-gold where the great smooth beeches lifted their branching arms to the sky. In between jostled silver birches - olive - tinted fountains which never reached the light-black spruces with little pale candles on each tip, and nut trees smothered to the neck in dense bracken. The bracken was a forest in itself, a curving verdant flood of branches, transparent as water by the path, but thick, heavy, secret a foot or two away, where high ferny crests waved above the softly moving ferns, just as the beech tops flaunted above the rest of the wood. The rabbits which crept quietly in and out reared on their hind legs to see who was going by. They pricked their ears and stood erect, and then dropped silently on soft paws and disappeared into the close ranks of brown stems when they saw the child. . She walked along the rough path, casting fearful glances to right and left. She never ran, even in moments of greatest terror, when things seemed very near, for then They would know she was afraid and close round her. Gossamer stretched across the way from nut bush to bracken frond, and clung to her cold cheeks. Spilt acorns and beech mast lay thick on the ground, green and brown patterns in the upside-down red leaves which made a carpet. Heavy rains had swept the soil to the lower levels of the path, and laid bare the rock in many places. On a sandy patch she saw her own footprint, a little square toe and a horse-shoe where the iron heel had sunk. That was in the morning when all was fresh and fair. It cheered her to see the homely mark, and she stayed a moment to look at it, and replace her foot in it, as Robinson Crusoe might have done, A squirrel, rippling along a leafy bough, peered at her, and then, finding her so still, ran down the tree trunk and along the ground. Her step was strangely silent, and a close observer would have seen that she walked only on the soil between the stones of the footpath, stones of the earth itself, which had worn their way through the thin layer of grass. Her eyes and ears were as alert as those of a small wild animal as she slid through the shades in the depths of the wood...Author: Uttley, Alison
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