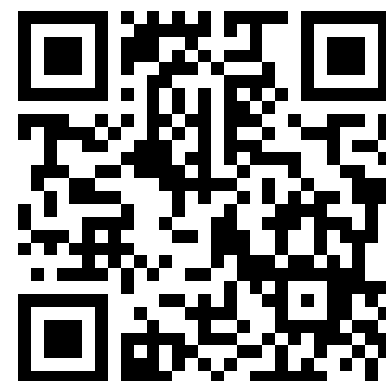

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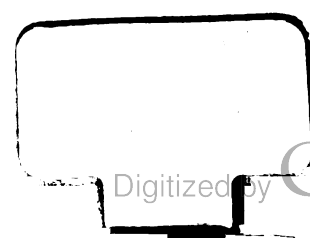
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W., F. W.: The story of the old woman of Delamere forest. (Mary Anne Hollingworth).

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By A. Delamere
for a Bazaar

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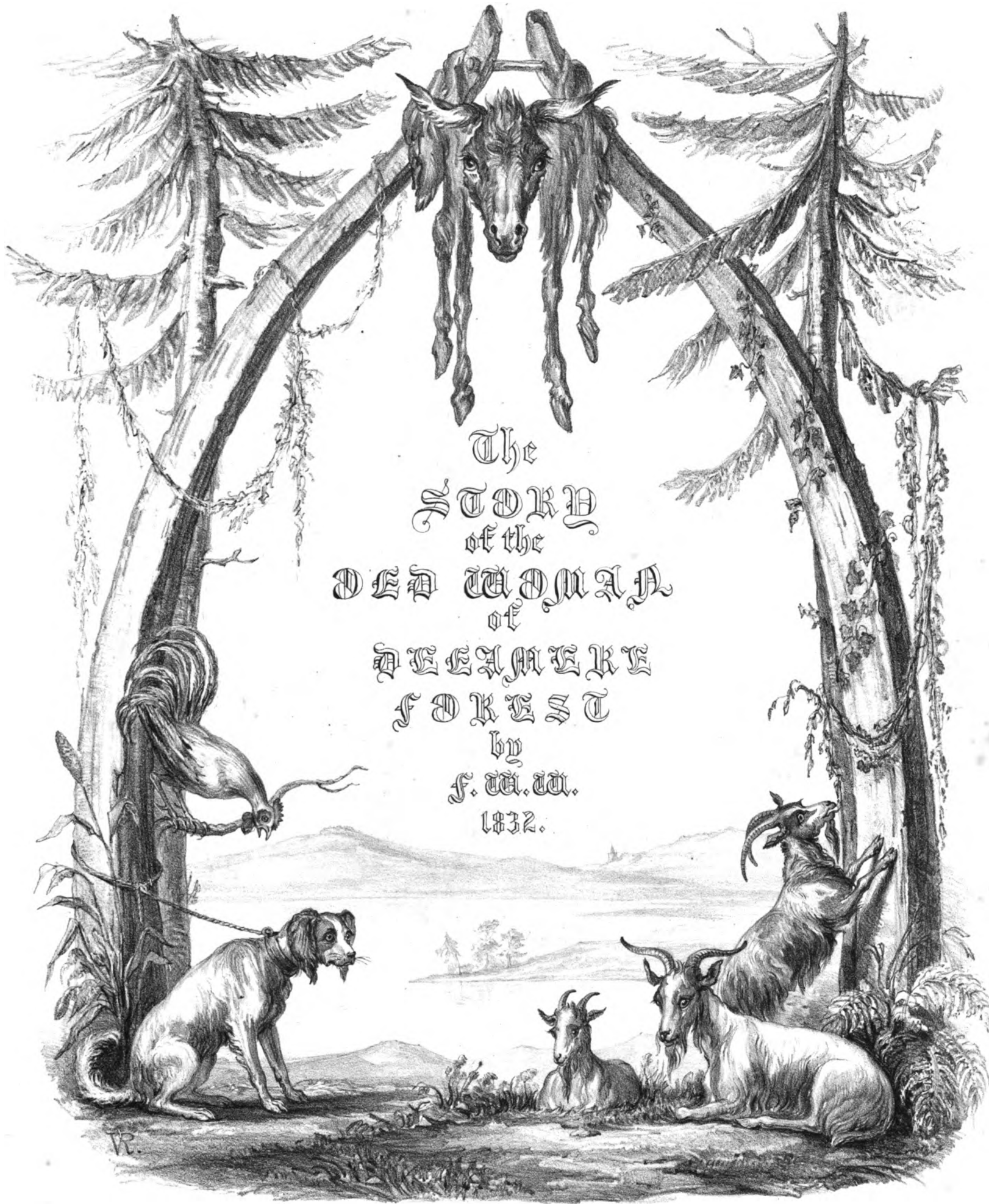
St. from Ratheld



MARY ANNE HOLLINGSWORTH.

Commonly called

THE OLD WOMAN OF DELAMERE FOREST.



Lithog by W. Crane - Chester.

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In the Summer of 1815 odd rumours were spread about a strange Woman, who was come to live in a Cart, in the midst of Delamere Forest, and before a week had elapsed she was raised to the rank and dignity of a Heroine in disguise, by the gossip of the common people. On the 17th of July, the mysterious stranger came on foot to Vale Royal, bringing a letter, of which the following is an exact copy :—

“ Madame, Madame, Thumley,

“ At Vale Royal, Cheshire.

“ Most Honerth, Highborn Lady, My Lady Thumley,

“ As I have heard, that I am at the present tim, at your property, namly at
“ the Oakmare,—We are latly, comen out of Germany, ware I lost my
“ Husbunt. As I came into England, I vind Rents so high, that I do not
“ know how to do for to live, without Charaty, as the same way as most of
“ the people live abroad, so I am gone about, to seek some waste ground,
“ for then I can live, and provide for myself, for I have a little to make a
“ small beginning with, but Halas ! I vind, that all the Commons are verbid.
“ Now I am at rest, and this place I am able to live, if I may be there, but
“ do not mean to make myself a Parish, for I never intent to submyt to Parish
“ keping, for I belong to a foring Chapel, in London, but I may yet do for
“ myself, if I am permyted Therefore, I humbly beg, Noble Lady, you
“ would not denie me this favour, to stop here a few weeks, till I write up to
“ London, for I cannot pay for Lorging. I humbly beg, that your honour
“ may send some of your trusty servants to enquire, and to see ware we are.

“ We shall not trouble any body, for any thing, nor hurt, nor destroy any
 “ thing, rather protect the remanes of the Trees, most noble Lady, I humbly
 “ begg, deny my not a little rest, at this peacable place.—I am,

Your most obligint and humble Stanger,

MARIA HOLLINGSWORTH.”

Oakmere, July 17th, 1815.”

The poor Woman's appearance bespoke great poverty, but her miserable garments were tidy, and did not conceal the faded remains of beauty ; her manners and language were evidently very much above her present wretched situation, and her little tale was told with much shrewdness, and even with some degree of elegance.—She stated herself to be the daughter of a Lutheran Clergyman, of Leuwarden, in West Friesland, where she was born in 1765. She married an English soldier of the 22nd regiment, which formed a part of an expedition to Germany, under the command of Lord Cathcart, and followed him through many dangers and difficulties, till he fell at Bergen op Zoom, leaving her with two children, a boy and a girl—with them, she came to England, and having been, through some Hanoverian friends, recommended to the protection of Queen Charlotte, she obtained a small pension, and her son was bound apprentice to a carpenter in Hanover. The Woman then detailed the motives which had induced her to form the wild project of seeking a solitary spot, where she and her daughter might live without expence. She said that she had contrived to procure a small Cart, drawn by a Donkey, which conveyed them and their small stock of worldly goods, and afforded them shelter by night. They were followed by two Goats, whose milk furnished the chief part of their nourishment. Thus they wandered in search of a place of rest, but whenever they had been tempted to prolong their stay in any one place, the parish officers had interfered, and driven them away as vagabonds. Disappointed and heartsick, the poor widow, fearing

that her object was not to be attained in England, determined to try another Hemisphere, and bent her weary steps towards Liverpool; from whence she hoped to get a passage in some American vessel. Delamere Forest lay on her road, it was at that time unenclosed, a dreary waste, without any habitation for miles; having found a sheltered spot, near the large pool called Oakmere, the little Cart was stopped, and she intended to stay a day or two to wash her clothes in the Mere. Delighted with the wild dreary solitude, the hopes of the poor wanderer revived, and when upon inquiry she found the land adjoining to be extra-parochial, the property of Lord Delamere, she felt that if she could but obtain his sanction to live upon it, she should no longer have any thing to dread from parish officers. Having obtained permission from Lord Delamere to live on his land, she set to work to make for herself a permanent abode. Upon a rising bank near the Mere, sheltered by a few Scotch Firs, there stood two Ribs of a Whale, which had been placed there by Philip Egerton, Esq. of Oulton, who had rented the land from the Cholmondeley family. Between these ribs Mrs. H. formed a rude kind of dwelling, making a wall of sods, and a roof of boughs. By degrees she became an object of great curiosity to the neighbourhood, and the most absurd fables were circulated, it was even said that Napoleon was concealed under this strange disguise. Visitors of all ranks were, in time, induced to seek the humble dwelling of the old Woman of the Forest, and charity prompted them to contribute some trifle towards the relief of her wants. As her means increased, the miserable abode was a little improved, the turf walls were raised, a door and a small casement were introduced, the hide of the donkey, which had died (probably from starvation) was stretched over the slight roof, and made it a little more weather tight. A fence of sods was constructed to enclose the dwelling, and about half an Acre of ground for a garden, the produce of which, added to that of a few fowls given by

the neighbours, enabled the mother and daughter to live ; the latter going occasionally to Tarporley Market, to sell their Eggs and Vegetables, could sometimes afford to purchase a little tea and sugar, which were great luxuries to them. Some precautions seemed necessary for the security of two Women living in such a lonely situation ; a dog, and a pair of pistols were procured, the latter not merely to serve as a scare-crow, for the mother always said that she should, without the least hesitation, shoot any person who tried to molest her, and her determined manner made this no vain threat. Thus, during several years, lived Mrs. Hollingsworth and her daughter, in a hut barely sheltered from the storm, not above eight feet by ten square, and little more than five feet high, but they had decorated the interior with flowers, stones, fern, and such rude ornaments as they could collect, which were disposed with some ingenuity and taste. No events marked their tranquil life, except the visits of the curious, and sometimes the arrival of a charitable supply from those who had known the poor cottager in better days ; among others a packet of warm clothing from Viscountess Bulkeley, cheered the first dreary winter. In process of time, Delamere Forest having been enclosed, a few cottages were built in the neighbourhood of Oakmere ; and Mrs. H. who had completed the education of her daughter, (whom she had taught to read and write English, French, and German) offered to give some gratuitous instruction to the children of these cottagers, who were too poor to pay for any education. She continued for three or four years to teach them reading and writing, till unfortunately, some differences arose, and quarrels with all her neighbours ensued. In the year 1820, Mrs. H. received a letter from her son, telling her that he was leaving Hanover, and that he should embark for Liverpool, and hoped soon to come to her little abode. The mother delighted at the thought of seeing her long absent son, kept an anxious watch from a neighbouring eminence, examining every person who

chanced to stray from the High Road towards that unfrequented spot. After many disappointments, she saw one Summer evening, a stranger with a satchel of carpenter's tools on his shoulder, coming across the Forest, evidently in search of some dwelling, and as he came nearer, both mother and daughter felt convinced that they saw him, whose arrival they had so long expected. When they thought he was coming up to them, they saw him turn off to a neighbouring cottage, apparently to enquire his way. The owner, who evidently invited the traveller to enter his dwelling, was unfortunately one of those with whom the old woman was most at variance, one of whom she had a bad opinion, and of course her anxiety became very great to see her son safe out of the house of her enemy. She watched all the evening in vain, and when night came on she returned to her hut, concluding that she was again disappointed, and that the traveller was not her son—still she was not satisfied, but feeling afraid of venturing to go alone to make enquiries in the house of a man, whom she believed capable of any act of wickedness, she went to her wretched bed, but not to sleep. Her watchful ear having caught the sound of distant footsteps, she got up quietly, and creeping along the fence of her little garden, by the light of a bright moon, she saw her neighbour and his son carrying a heavy sack between them, to the Mere—she heard them walking to some distance through the water, which was very shallow in this part—she saw the sack thrown into the Mere, and she heard its heavy splash. The two men watched some time, they seemed to consult together; when being apparently afraid that the depth of water was not sufficient to conceal their mysterious burthen, they took it out again, and returned to their cottage, carrying the sack as before. The poor Woman still followed, concealing herself from their observation among the fern and heath, which were rather high on this part of the Forest, and saw the men come out again from the house, still bearing the sack, and


each of them provided with a spade. The wretched mother convinced that they were going to bury the body of her murdered son, followed them at a distance to the most unfrequented part of the Forest, determined to see the end. However she was soon outstripped by them, and lost sight of the men for some time, but still watching, she saw them returning to their cottage carrying the sack empty. Mrs. H. horror struck, remained some time brooding in silent grief over the dark deed which she believed to have been perpetrated. At the end of a week finding that her neighbour had bought a cart, that his tattered garments were exchanged for a good suit of clothes, and that he did not assign any cause for this obvious increase of means, she felt her suspicions much strengthened. She took a spade and went to dig round the spot where she conceived the contents of the sack to have been buried, but every night she was interrupted by some of her neighbours. She then went to Mr. Wilbraham, of Delamere House, to whose charity she had been before much indebted, to ask his assistance as a magistrate, in searching for the body of her son, and told him that all her suspicions were confirmed by a vision which she had had in a fever, from which she was just recovering. This circumstance shook the faith of Mr. Wilbraham, as to the truth of her story, but willing to humour the fancy of the old woman, he sent the overseer with a labourer to dig wherever she might direct. This search proved wholly fruitless, but soon after, Mrs. H. was informed that the body of a man had been found in a Pond at Marbury, near Whitchurch; she went there, saw the corpse, and asserted that it was that of her son, which having been first buried in the Forest, was afterwards removed by the murderer, and thrown into this Pond. Mr. Wilbraham thought it his duty to investigate this matter more fully; finding that the mother had been at Liverpool, and said that she had discovered that a person exactly answering to her description of her son had landed from a Hamburg ship, on the very

day on which she had seen the traveller in conversation with the supposed murderer, and that this man had asked his way to Delamere Forest, he wrote to the chief of the police at Liverpool, stating all the circumstances, and requesting that a strict enquiry might be made. In reply, the police-officer informed Mr. Wilbraham that a German had certainly landed on the day specified, but that all the rest of the story was a fabrication. Soon after, Mr. W. being in London, called upon Mr. Goltermann, who was employed to dispense the Charities of Queen Charlotte to the distressed Germans in this Country, and told him the whole story. At the request of Mr. W. this gentleman wrote to Hanover, to make some enquiries about young Hollingsworth, the result of which was, that he was still there alive and well!!! Mr. W. obtained the address of the young man, and wrote to him, strongly urging his return to England, in order to satisfy the mind of his mother, and to set the matter at rest. Some weeks after this, a person calling himself Hollingsworth, walked over to Delamere House with his sister, who, as well as the mother, fully recognised him, though the latter did not express pleasure at seeing him, as his appearance disproved her story; still she persisted in the assertion, that though her son had not been murdered, a murder had been committed by her neighbour. The young man soon after went over to Manchester, where he got employment in his trade as a Carpenter: such are the facts. In the strange story of the mother it is not easy to discover where delusion ended and deception begun; certain it is that she persists to this day in refusing to acknowledge the young man as her son, stating, that although at the moment, compelled by circumstances to receive him as such, she never could consider him otherwise than as an Impostor. Her daughter joins in this assertion, which they both repeatedly made to the writer within the last few months. Soon after this strange occurrence, Mrs. H. sent her daughter to London to be confirmed, and to seek a service,

which she soon found ; and at the period when the accompanying sketch was made, the mother was living quite alone in her hut. She seemed happy in being allowed to read a very intelligent letter from her daughter, written partly in German and partly in English, in which she described her first impressions on seeing London, her gratitude for the kind reception she had met with from the Clergyman of the Dutch Chapel, who had just placed her in a respectable family.

After her departure, the Old Woman, finding her perfect solitude very irksome, and even dangerous, as age and infirmities increased, applied to the Clergyman above-mentioned, and to some other friends, who still remembered her, and by their interest obtained an admission to one of the Dutch Alms-houses in London: there she was living in June, 1832, but seemed in a very bad state of health. Before she left Oakmere she brought to Vale Royal a German Prayer Book, in which was written, " This Book was given to A. M. Hollingsworth by the Countess of Munster, through the verteous Mrs. Golterman,"—which she begged Lady Delamere to accept as a tribute of gratitude. She likewise sent the last of her family of goats, with the following lines :—

" THE PERTITION OF A KIDD.



A lonesome stranger creves a boon,
To rove within the shade ;
In jour spacious park allone,
And hopes jour frendly ade.
My frendly dame is going to leve
The place ware I did dwell :
I humbly begg do me resieve,
And use a Stranger well.
Then I will in return agien
Cheer jour lonesome walk ;
In als my nature still remane,
And in innocence with you talk.

A. M. HOLLINGSWORTH, Oakmere."

J. FLETCHER, PRINTER, CHESTER.

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