

**MISS CHURCHILL;
A STUDY**

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Miss Churchill; A Study by Christian Reid

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BY

CHRISTIAN REID

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MISS CHURCHILL: A STUDY.

BOOK I.

AMONG THE PINES.

CHAPTER I.

To one unaccustomed to their aspect, there are perhaps few things more melancholy than the great pine-forests of the South. Their vast extent, their absolute monotony, the total lack of other growth or any picturesque features connected with the landscape, render them oppressive in the extreme to one who journeys through them for the first time, or who takes up his abode among them reluctantly. But to one who has lived long in their midst, or to the new-comer of poetic soul, there is a strange fascination in this region of apparent gloom. Stateliest of all evergreens, the giant trees rise to an immense height, giving a great sense of space below. Between their splendid trunks one walks as through the pillared aisles of a vast cathedral, while overhead the sea-like murmur of their plummy branches fills the air, and underfoot their fragrant needles, interspersed here and there with resinous

cones, cover the earth as with a carpet. Balsamic odors are inhaled with every breath, and some aspects of beauty strike the observant eye so strongly that they can never be forgotten—serried ranks of spear-like pines, ranged like embattled Titans against a stormy sunset; deep-green crests stretching with solemn majesty toward a far, golden horizon; or a close-girdling wood, full of the suggestion of infinite melancholy, as the trees lift their dark boughs against a cold, gray sky.

These pictures, and many more, came as familiar memories to a man who for the first time in twenty years found himself traveling through the pine-lands. All day long the railroad-car in which he sat had been filled with the unflattering comments of travelers, new to the country, on the gloomy and monotonous scenes presented to their view; but Bernard Lysle, who had seen pretty much everything that the world could show, from tropical jungles to Russian steppes, sat silent, gazing out of the window beside him and recalling the half-forgotten memories of his early youth. He had been a mere child when he first saw these somber forests, coming with his father from the far Canadian North in search of health for the latter. In the pine-lands—not then so well known as they are now for their salubrious qualities—Mr. Lysle gained, if not health, at least a longer lease of life; and here he spent the greater part of several years. Recollection of these years thronged upon Bernard as the great forest opened its interminable vistas to his gaze. They were recollections of scenes and people changed or vanished now in the storm of war that had burst over them. At the first muttering of that storm, Mr. Lysle had left the

country, taking the reluctant boy who, then of the mature age of thirteen, ardently longed to become a soldier. Ruthlessly making an end of these warlike aspirations, his father hurried away, and from that time to the present Bernard had not looked again upon the soft Southern sky, the solemn Southern pines.

When the death of Mr. Lysle occurred, a year or so later, the boy was sent to England for his education, and he had never returned to America until a few months before the day that saw him traveling through the pine-lands. It was not curiosity alone that had drawn him back to these scenes of his youth, but an interest which had been strong enough to survive the great length of time that had elapsed since his departure. Chief among the friends of those childish days had been the family of Governor Churchill, one of the foremost men of the State, to whom his father had carried letters of introduction, and who had made them welcome with the open-handed hospitality of the South, both in his summer lodge among the pine-lands and at his great estate upon the seaboard. To the last—the old seat of the family—Bernard had paid many visits, and his special friend had been Hugh Churchill, a boy two or three years older than himself, although at that time Bernard's quicker intelligence had made him seem the elder. The difference in age told, however, in the fact that, before the war ended, Hugh, like the rest of his class and generation, was old enough to bear arms and make a campaign or two, of which his friend at school in England heard with regretful envy. The war over, some communication passed between them; but young Churchill was absorbed in the terrible strug-

gle for existence of those days, and his friend's letters remained unanswered and finally ceased. Lysle, on his side, had many things to occupy him and drive old memories from his mind. But when circumstances at last led his wandering footsteps back to America, he at once recalled to mind his old friend, and wrote to him. After long delay a reply reached him, bearing the post-mark of a town in the interior of the State.

"I have been living here for ten years," Churchill wrote, "life on the sea-coast having become unbearable through the worthlessness and insubordination of the negroes. The sea-islands are abandoned, the rice-fields hardly worked at all; so, giving up in despair the hope of doing anything on the old estate, I came here, bought a few hundred acres, and manage to live. Will you come and see how? There is no one I would rather see than yourself, and my wife will be delighted to meet you. Did you know that I have a wife? I do not think that I have heard from you or written to you since my marriage. Come, then, and see me in my character of *pater familias*."

Lysle smiled over this letter, and felt that he should very much like to see the writer again. A few days later, therefore, found him traveling toward the small town of Oldfield, situated in the midst of the pine-belt. It was late in the afternoon of a soft autumn day when he reached his destination, and as he stepped from the train his hand was seized by a tall, handsome man with laughing eyes and bold, clear-cut features, whose slight shabbiness of dress could not conceal an air of personal distinction.

"Bernard, my dear fellow, how delighted I am to

see you again!" he cried, in a cordial voice. "This is what I call a compliment indeed—to come so far to look up an old friend."

"My dear Hugh, I would have gone much farther to look *you* up," answered Lysle.

And then, since the first moments of meeting, after long separation, are not usually moments of expansion, the two friends regarded each other silently for an instant. What Lysle perceived has been said: Churchill on his side saw a small man, slightly and elegantly built, with something peculiarly refined and even picturesque in his appearance, with keen dark eyes that seemed made to look through everything, and the air and manner of a thorough man of the world. It was the latter whose brief scrutiny ended first, and who spoke again.

"How much you are like your father, Hugh! I should have known you anywhere by that likeness; but how did you know me?"

Churchill laughed. "If you could see yourself," he said, "you would not need to ask. Not many people of your stamp appear in Oldfield. Then, after all, you are not greatly changed. And so you think I resemble my father? I am glad of that, though I shall never be the courtly gentleman that he was—God bless him! We have fallen on rough days, and they leave their impress on me as well as on others. But this way, Bernard. Here is my trap."

He led the way to where a Jersey wagon stood, in the back of which two negroes were laboriously assisting each other to place Lysle's luggage. The equipage, like its owner's coat, was somewhat shabby; but the

horses were handsome and well groomed. Churchill sprang in and took the reins, Lysle followed, and the next moment they were driving rapidly through the streets of Oldfield and thence out into the open country. When they left the little town behind, and the great pine-woods closed around them, filling the nostrils with aromatic odors, while the wagon rolled smoothly, the horses trotted briskly over the level road, Lysle had a curious sensation as if all the memories and feelings of his youth were waiting for him among those solemn and majestic trees.

"You see we are on a ridge," Churchill explained. "It is very healthy here, as the pine-lands mostly are; but on each side of us are valleys where malaria exists. Hence every one endeavors to live on the ridge. Oldfield is built on it, as you observe, and so is my house, though my plantation lies a mile or two away."

"I am sorry that you should have been forced to leave your beautiful old home," said Lysle. "But I hope that you are prospering now."

"So-so," answered the other, cheerily. "It has been a hard fight, but the worst is over. My marriage looked like simple madness at the time it took place, but Nettie—that is, my wife—was left an orphan, and I felt that, if I ever meant to take care of her, then was the time to do it. She has never repented our rashness, nor have I. 'Heaven helps those who help themselves,' and no man ever found a more willing and cheerful helpmate than she has been to me."

"Who was she? Did I know her people?"

"Of course you did—the Derringers! They were