

THE HAUNTED TREE.

About fifty years since, upon one of the plains which overspread large portions of the south-western part of Maine, certain mysterious things obtruded themselves upon the notice of the community. They startled the thoughtless, puzzled the philosophic, set the superstitious all agog, and made the timid tremble. Unaccountable sounds were heard there; unnatural signs were seen; and often, without any visible cause, dogs, cattle and horses were terribly affrighted.

A pine tree, which stood by the roadside, and which overshadowed the way with its spreading branches, marked that spot which was noted for its wonders. It was tall, straight, and well proportioned—as fair to look upon as its neighbors—and still under its deep shadows all these unaccountable phantoms appeared. The surrounding forest was thickly studded with the same stately growth. In the light of day it was harmless. When the sun pressed its bright rays through that forest, when all natural objects were unmistakably distinct and visible, no fearful sight nor sound alarmed the passing man or beast.

But when the eve of day was closed, when deep night—doubly thick and heavy under those green overshadowing tree-tops—wrapped all things in sable curtains, then these disturbing forces infested the place and let loose these marvels.

It must be affirmed, however, that this tree did not stand in the most dreary, frightful spot traced by that lonesome highway.

It was not in the middle of that gloomy forest. It stood nearer the side which bordered on the thickest settlement. Not far above it lay a dark, deep, chilly hollow—often entered with a shudder—which all would declare was the fit home of ghosts and hobgoblins, and where practical robbers would naturally select their ambush. Still, it soon became notorious that this apparently innocent and promising tree was a haunted tree—marked as such by all the surrounding inhabitants and heralded as such through all that region.

It must be added that this spot, which rose into such puzzling notoriety, was about two miles from a dull, unpretentious hamlet, where stores were kept, in which some useful merchandise could be found; but the great article of trade at that time, as it was everywhere, was ardent spirits. Many then regarded strong drink as the elixir of life, while it was surely gliding them into graver difficulties than frights and heart-beatings at the haunted tree. But business at the shops, at the post office, and most of all at the stores licensed to keep and sell the fashionable, much-loved beverage, would draw the rustics thither after the toils of

the day were ended, many of whom had to pass this haunted tree.

As a child could pass it harmless when the light of the day guarded the place, they would start in season to pass it before the dusky and fearful hour of night licensed the appearance of these terrors. But if they went on foot they would always have their dog accompany them, and then not return alone if they could find company. But after taking a social glass, doing their business, listening to the gossip of the day, hearing the last-reported "scare" at the tree, they would linger to discuss these mysterious appearances, *pro and con*, and avow their belief or disbelief in them.

Some who were constant attendants upon the preaching of the uneducated, unpolished, but deeply pious minister of the place, would take a still more serious view of these things. They would say: "These mysterious sights and sounds mean something! They augur of crime—secret, dark, and heaven-daring. God is making inquisition for blood. Murder will out; and till the awful secret is divulged that spot will be haunted."

This would disturb the serenity of the man behind the counter. He prided himself as above belief in ghosts, witches, and phantoms; as too intelligent to swallow down such admissions of spiritual manifestations, or of supernatural appearances, and he would say, "Nonsense, nonsense! It is all imagination—all whims, all superstition!"

But at length his own turn came to try these troubles, and to see if it was all bosh and gammon. Returning home one evening upon that road, as he approached the haunted tree his horse stopped short, and stubbornly refused to pass it. It would no more go forward than the beast upon which Balaam rode, when the angel of the Lord, with a drawn sword in his hand, confronted him. This perplexed and disconcerted our merchant; but it was no place to be angry. Though he neither saw nor heard anything unusual himself, his noble horse was trembling with fear and unwilling to advance, as if the road was bristling with armed hobgoblins. He whipped and goaded him on till, with a desperate plunge, he dashed out into the thick scraggy bushes; rushed by the obnoxious tree, and ran at the top of his speed, until he brought up, panting and trembling, at his own stable door.

Another incident, which is hard to put aside as a mere phantasm. An elderly man, of a bold, defiant spirit, was passing that way in a partially intoxicated state. A son of six or eight years and his faithful dog were with him. As they drew near the tree a light was seen, as if some invisible hand was holding a lantern. The old man cheered his dog to an attack. Bristling and barking, he