

Springtime.

Old Winter hath left us; the monarch has fled  
Far down the lone valley, the fold of the past:  
And now, having shown him that nature must rule,  
Glad Springtime is with us, triumphant at last.

The sunlight is pleasant, the robins have come,  
And now all around us how sweetly they sing!  
While earth, like a matron, rejoicing and glad  
Is crowned with bright flowers, the wreath of the spring.

The welkin above us is fleecy and blue,  
Except when a shower comes up from the west:  
The sunsets are golden with marvellous hue  
When hallow Aurora sinks down to his rest.

The trees are receiving their glory of green;  
The winds, as they wander, are pleasant and bland;  
While hill-sides and valleys are ready for seed  
Which holds in their keeping the life of the land.

Then welcome, sweet Springtime, a welcome to thee,  
Whose presence has cheered us so often before;  
Oh, teach us to harbour deep feelings of praise,  
That God has appointed thy coming once more.

SELECT STORY.

The Haunted House.

PEAKING of spirit bell-rings and wrappings, said grandmother, I listened to something quite as startling years before spirits resolved themselves into an institution. Then every ghost was independent. Not one of them thought of coming at set times to read, write or attend lectures; but whenever one did appear, at such irregular hours as suited its convenience, it created a sensation. A spirit of this kind would not 'down' at the bidding of ever so many Macbeths.

When I was eighteen, Mr. Marvin, one of our neighbors, owned a farm in 'Gray Owl Dell,' a couple of miles from his homestead. He generally had a tenant upon the place, but in the year to which I have reference, having found no one willing to pay so high a rent as he demanded, he had allowed the house to remain empty, his boys, his hired man, or himself going over occasionally to attend to the farm.

It requires no great knowledge of human nature to assure one that a house standing remote from all others, in a lonesome and shadowy dell, could not long remain untenanted by humanity without acquiring the reputation of being haunted. The feline tribe is intimately associated with ideas of the supernatural, and cats, astonishing in size and number, began to be seen about the premises at Gray Owl Dell. The birds of Minerva, too, that perched now and then on the decaying buildings, were suspected of wearing their feathers merely as cloaks of deception, while the witch-spirit looked mockingly out of their great, round eyes.

Will Ashly, who had attended Margaret Rivers from singing-school to her home on the back road, affirmed that whilst returning across lots, for a shorter cut, he had seen an owl as large as Mr. Marvin's brindle ox, sitting on the chimney-top, of the old farmhouse. This bird was no doubt the incarnation of a witch-spirit; and however much Will's dilated eyes may have magnified its proportions, it was lucky for poor old Polly Ruggles, the scold of the neighborhood, and an abominable hag altogether, that Salem fashions had lost their predominance in New England. The uncomfortable dame might out-scold the north wind, but unlike those of her profession in earlier days, she stood do chance of being dragged on a ropes end across a river, or perched between two planks till she should acknowledge her iniquity—after confessing, the pressing to go on worse than ever. Sad encouragement to untruth!

One way and another the opinion became prevalent that something evil hovered about the place. Widow Stebbins who hired the privilege of fastening her cow there, testified that the cream yielded by this domestic animal was upon a certain occasion bewitched. The pious widow churned long in vain. Then she prayed; then she churned again. But the familiar spirit had not been exorcised by her devotions—perhaps she had lacked faith. Finally, she heated a horse-shoe, till it glowed like the star Arcturus, and all flaming as it was, dropped it into the cream. Such a hissing and screaming, said the good widow, you never heard; and the butter came at once. No doubt some incantation was used, and the hissing

sing and screaming directly pointing to such a conclusion, especially with the excellent woman, who had never been in a blacksmith's shop.

During the summer, however, we young people were in little dread of the 'supernatural,' and as the old place had tempting raspberries and apples, we often visited it, yet kept at a good distance from the house. But when winter had set in, putting imagination in shadow, and the days appeared like dim windows between the long, dark nights, I think we took pleasure in the full indulgence of credulity. Who cares for a July ghost, or looks for a withered witch in a field of blooming corn? The Thane of Glamis met the 'weird sisters' upon a blasted heath; and the idea of evil spirits is ever associated with desolation and darkness.

I well recollect the advent, about this time, of a mysterious animal that our townspeople called a tiger cat. We felt a kind of sacred pleasure in believing it not wholly of earth; and, indeed, there was much in its nightly operations to warrant such an opinion. It seemed an enemy of nothing but dogs, and it became a usual occurrence for a farmer on going out in the morning to find his dog dead on the doorstep, yet without any discoverable wound.

My cousins, Thomas and John Conway, lived with their father, who was a neighbor of ours; and I remember hearing John call to his brother, one bitter cold morning, saying:

Tom, Tom! the tiger cat has killed 'Cupid!' meaning their little dog.

Sometimes on frosty evenings, when the stars shot down with skilentin' light, a belated traveller would be startled by a momentary glimpse of some undefined shape that rushed past him like a cannon ball, and he felt that he had seen the tiger cat. As one of our neighbors was returning at a late hour to his home a weird, strange object shot between his feet and instantly disappeared. The frightened man ran with all his might, and no logic could have convinced him that old Dame Ruggles had not darted between his boot tops in the shape of a monstrous cat.

A being half of this world and half of a world unknown, always appears more terrible to us than the wholly supernatural, in which is no mingling of earth. But about this so-called tiger cat, there was certainly something unaccountable. That such a being existed I have not the least doubt; yet why it killed the dogs, or how it could effect its purpose and still have no outward sign of injury, I cannot imagine.

There was, and still is at the entrance of the seaport village near which we lived, a stone bridge, upon which it became usual to find in the morning a number of dogs, all slain as by pestilence, like the warriors of Sennacherib. One night, a Mr. Manchester resolved to watch at this place. He had taken unusual care in the preparation of his gun—had screwed in the lock a new flint that would make the sparks fly in showers. Moreover, he was a cool, resolute man, and one whose word was accepted by the villagers almost as readily as the evidence of their own senses.

As the clock struck twelve, the tiger cat appeared, dragging along a small dog. He set his captive on end, gave it two or three taps of the paw, and the dog rolled over dead. There had apparently been no attempt at resistance. Mr. Manchester said that at this moment he considered the tiger cat his certain prize. Bringing up his gun with the alacrity of an old sportsman as he was, he snapped it. To his surprise it missed fire. Twice more he essayed, yet not a spark left the flint. He lowered the weapon with a feeling of dread, examined the lock for a moment, and on looking up, discovered that the creature had vanished. Raising his piece, he snapped it once more but this time from mere curiosity. The flint threw out a host of sparks and the gun was discharged as usual. I doubt not there are many old people, who, like myself, have heard Mr. Manchester relate the circumstance.

What bond of sympathy, if any, existed between Dame Ruggles and the tiger cat, I cannot say; but that the old woman was really a witch seems very probable. It was averred that the rendezvous of the weird sisterhood was in Gray Owl Dell; and Michael Gerry, Mr. Marvin's hired man, (and, by the way, in that early time the only Irishman in the town), going one morning to attend to the sheep at the farm, said that he heard voices over his head, and distinguished among them that of Dame Ruggles. Michael who always stood for the last word with friends and enemies, shouted out:

Come down here, Mistress Ruggles, ye iudacent owid scowld, and I'll war-rum ye wid a taste o' me pitchfork ye hag!

Whereat there was a loud, jeering laugh, so near his head that Michael threw his pitchfork with vengeance, hoping to hit some of his invisible tantalizers; but he was surprised to see the implement sail around in the air as if some witch had bridled it for a horse. Yez have got me forruk, yer wild

bastes! cried Mike; but be the houlty St Dennis, come down here thin; it's all I axes of yez, and I'll tan yer owid hides till yez scrame agin!

At mention of St. Dennis, the witch merriment subsided into total silence, and Michael's 'forruk' lay at his feet as quietly as if it had been ridden in air by these 'posters of the sea and land.' Such was Mike's story, but it had often been hinted that his love of truth was no match for his imagination.

It was, however, asserted by one in whose veracity the whole neighborhood reposed implicit confidence, that he had seen the form of Dame Ruggles stretched at full length across the chimney of Gray Owl Dell farmhouse, while her spirit was far away on some iniquitous mission. This may have been the very shape which Will Ashly had once mistaken for an owl of unearthly aspect; or, reversing the case, the owl may in the last instance have been taken for the dame—so uncertain are things which we know nothing about.

But whether witch or not, there was in the circumstances attending the death of Dame Ruggles, which occurred that winter, something unaccountable. During her brief illness the old woman had been more querulous than ever, and the attempt of any kind Samaritan to draw the least appearance of gratitude from her jagged mind, was like trying to 'grab' a handful of shingle nails out of a keg.

As her dissolution approached, the watchers, who had heard that no one can see a witch die, were alert for the closing scene. The night was cold, the bedclothes were supposed insufficient, the fire upon the hearth, kindle it as they would, refused to burn brightly, and they therefore lighted a furnace of charcoal in the centre of the room. Did they a moment relax their vigilance, they would find their patient stretched upon her back across this flaming furnace, as if she loved fire, and felt her present agony soothed by this foretaste of her future inheritance. How her clothing fared remains an open question to this day, but she herself snapped and crackled like burning whalebone.

She must go soon, said one of the watchers, when for the last time the old woman had been removed from the furnace to her bed. 'We shall certainly see her die.'

At this moment a tumult of voices outside drew the watchers' attention. Cats wailed, owls hooted, and there were strange screams intermingled with malicious laughter—yet no living creature was visible. They were about turning to their patient, when, as they averred, a something, having the appearance of a red hot ball, shot past them and out at the window. This window, though closed, showed no mark of the singular exit. On reaching the old dame's side, they perceived that her spirit had departed.

Now, continued grandmother, I always took this story with some allowance; but, that unaccountable things have been done by people called witches, I have not the least doubt. I am by no means sure that Dame Ruggles's familiar spirit did not stir up a great commotion in the elements on the night of her death.

It happened that early in the evening, a party of us had set out in two double sleighs for a ten-mile ride, with a view to a merry collation at a country tavern—'hotel,' you call it now. Will Ashly was with us, but blue-eyed Margaret Rivers, whom he had attended home on the night that he saw the witch owl, was not of our number. Some trifling misunderstanding between the comely farmer lad and the maiden of his love, had grown to a downright quarrel. Margaret had 'wept the weary day,' not doubting that this silly quarrel was the one great calamity of her life, which should shadow all nights and days to come. The jingle of our sleigh bells was like the dirge of all her joys, and she sat down to find what consolation she could in the 'Children of the Desert.' One must indeed be far gone who comes to that!

Will Ashly, no less miserable, appeared as the escort of Anna Franklin, between whom and Margaret there existed a feud. Will had been at some pains to place himself in a position, the misery of which can be appreciated by every spiteful lover, who has not only flung away his peace but drawn to his side a perpetual reminder of his folly. Anna Franklin's ill-concealed regard was like the bitterness of wormwood to poor Will. He tried to be gay, while Anna did her best to amuse and fascinate; but not all the attractions of her wit and beauty

Were worth one pearl-drop, bright and sheen,  
From Margaret's eyes that fell.

Before our party broke up, a furious snow storm set in. This great storm, on the night that Dame Ruggles died, was long talked of in the neighborhood. As we proceeded homeward, our way was often blocked by drifts that had formed in the narrow sleigh track since we had passed at twilight. The clouds swept almost down to earth, and great trees, which we could hardly see for the driving

snow, creaked and groaned outright in the cold, roaring wind. We had to pass Gray Owl Dell, some of our party living a mile or two beyond. Just as we came opposite the witch-haunted farmhouse, Dick Lee, the dare-devil of our party, who, while the rest of us were almost chilled to death, had all the way been singing snatches of frightful old ballads, pointed out a gigantic poplar, bare black by the highway, and writhing in the storm: then he shouted dramatically:

'A murderer yonder was hung in chaynes,  
The sunne and the winde had shrunke hys veynes;  
I bit off a sinew; I clipped hys hayre,  
I brought off hys ragges that danced in the ayre.'

As the last word left his lips the tree came crashing down, completely blocking our way. It seemed a judgment upon our party for Dick's presumption in repeating a witch's song at such an awful hour.

Further progress with the sleigh was impossible, neither could we walk to our homes in such a tempest. Mr. Marvin's sons were of our party, and suggested that we should find shelter in the house. One of them entered through a back window, and opened the door to the party. Abundant fuel was at hand, and we kindled a fire, while the horses were led to the stables. Dry walnut sticks blazed, crackled, and fell asunder in the middle, while smoking coals fell out upon the hearth. But as outward comfort increased, our inner consciousness awoke to a keener sense of our peculiar situation. 'When the mind's free, the body's delicate'—and 'vice versa.'

We discussed the singularity of our position, most of us with growing uneasiness, while two or three treated the affair humorously. Will Ashly became abstracted; gazing now into the fire, and anon starting and peering into the corners of the room, or looking at the doors as if he expected them to open. He was thinking of Margaret Rivers, and anticipating some ghostly visitation for his momentary perfidy. The unearthly owl he had seen on the chimney top of this same house, while yet the course of love run smoothly, was a bird of evil omen; the falling of the great tree which had stopped our way, boded sorrow to some one, and Will doubted not that he himself was the Baalim on whose account some unseen spirit had barred the road. Suddenly, we all started to our feet.

What was that? asked Anna Franklin, looking terrified.

Did you not hear a bell? said another. It certainly was a bell. Dear me! I am frightened to death!

What is the matter? cried Dick Lee. What did you all jump up for? I thought the old one himself was coming. Don't you know any better than to scare a fellow out of his senses?

Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle, went the bell again.

Who on earth can be ringing a dinner bell this time of night? continued Dick. Well, I must give in; the old gentleman has really come for us; but he won't hurt me; he and I have had too many good times together. He will be calling the roll soon, so prepare. We must answer to our names, as I once heard the Irish aldermen at a meeting of the board, when I was in Cork in a ship: Will Ashly? Ere, sir! Dick Lee? Ere, yer honor! And so he will go through the company.

O, for heaven's sake, do stop, Dick! cried Mary Moore. How can you make light of such things? I am almost dead with fright!

His rich voice added greatly to the mournful power of the lines, as to our consternation he sung that dear old English ballad, which, however beautiful, is not precisely the thing that one loves to hear in a haunted house.

'Twas at the silent, solemn hour  
When night and morning meet,  
In glided Margaret's grimly ghost,  
And stood at William's feet.'

Ere the singing ended, the bell-ringing was again heard, together with other sounds, apparently approaching the cellar stairs. Dick looked startled, but resolutely continued his singing—the rest of us standing in silent terror.

'This is the dark and fearful hour  
When injured ghosts complain—'

(Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle—tramp, tramp, tramp—louder and nearer—but Dick was stout-hearted, and went on.)

'When dreary graves give up their dead,  
To haunt the faithless swain.'

But at this moment, the cellar door swung wide open. Dick looked over his shoulder, uttered a yell and rushed headlong from the room. All save Will Ashly and myself followed him out into the storm. Will, who had been scarcely less terrified by the ballad than the unaccountable sounds, imagining that restitution for his faithlessness was now at hand, and perhaps asking his own heart, like the Moor, why should honor outlive honesty?—let go all, sank powerless upon the floor. Why I did not fly with the others, I cannot tell. Perhaps the reason exists in some law of metaphysics which I do not understand. My eyes were fixed in unspeakable amazement,

upon the spectacle that arose before me. Through the shadowy passage to the cellar, rose a black, frightful face, crowned with horns that curled all round his head. Back of this apparition were others, all with long, wistful faces, apparently half-human and half-brute, with eyes like great pieces of brass. Utter silence prevailed in the room, save so far as broken by the raging storm without. There I stood, confronting I knew not what, and feeling as if in a trance. Presently Will Ashly spoke.

O, Mr. Devil, said he, I did not mean it—I did not mean to quarrel with Maggie! Let me off this once, and I will go right back and tell her how sorry I am!

Em-ba-ah! said the spectre, and came clattering right out on the kitchen floor, while a bell under his neck tinkled furiously. The other heads crowded fast after him, the cloven feet clattering as they leaped from the upper stair into the room. I looked at Will, and Will at me. There was a queer expression upon his face—a shadow of lingering terror blended with an exceedingly foolish look of mortification. Still the strange visitors increased in number, stamping and bleating, and apparently looking for something to eat. Then Will laughed wildly like an insane man, exclaiming:

O, the fool that I have been! 'Tis Mr. Marvin's flock of sheep! I heard a day or two ago that they were lost, and somehow they must have got into the cellar!

I, too, had heard that three days before Mr. Marvin had missed his entire flock. The same day there happened a fall of snow, so that he could not track them. Our terror was now entirely gone, and Will, rendered by the reaction more courageous than ever before in his life, volunteered to go into the cellar and examine. I was surprised, for he seemed as bold as a lion; but this I supposed was consistent with so inconsistent a thing as human nature. I was a farmer's daughter and not afraid of sheep, so he left me with them while he went down with a blazing brand. At the back of the house he found that a portion of the cellar wall had fallen. Through the aperture thus opened, the old leader must somehow have stumbled, followed, of course, by the whole flock. The opening was soon hidden by the falling snow, and as no one visited the house, the sheep had been in danger of starvation. It was not difficult for them to ascend the short stairway, above which, as the upper part of the door was glass, they had seen our light. A blow from horns or feet had caused the opening of the door.

Our panic-stricken companions had pursued their flight no further than the barn, and after a time, discovering that we were missing, Dick Lee and one or two others came back in search of us. When the matter had been explained to the whole party, the young men brought armfuls of fodder, and succeeded in enticing the hungry sheep from the house to the barn.

Once more we all assembled around the fire, but my companions had much to tell of a frightfully great cat that they could see on a beam in the barn, though she sat in pitch darkness. Perhaps they saw her more with the mind's eye than the natural organs. Presently another came and sat down beside her; then another and another and another and another; and there they remained in awful silence, with eyes horribly bright, and faces expressive of malignity softened by some great sorrow.

At last, the central cat, the immense creature at first seen, uttered a cry so long-drawn and hideously mournful that no mortal could describe it. It was echoed by all her four companions; and in a moment the entire company of unearthly felines vanished in the blackness of that witch-ridden darkness. This must have been about the hour that Dame Ruggles died; and I have sometimes wondered if the central animal of the group was not the famous tiger cat, and if so, what relationship she bore to the witch dame.

I must say, though, that Dick Lee told me next day that the reason the cats vanished was that he threw a piece of board at the biggest one, knocking her heels over head, and they went out through a hole in the loft—but I never knew whether to believe him or not. I have only to add that Will Ashly and Margaret Rivers were married in the spring.

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