

THE
SPARE HALF HOUR.

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London:

PASSMORE AND ALABASTER,
4, PATERNOSTER BUILDINGS.



GHOST STORIES FOR CHRISTMAS.

WE may be very wrong, but we confess a weakness for a ghost story, and cannot help listening to it, and all the more if it makes the blood curdle and blanches the cheek. It is a sort of stolen water, and that, as the wise man says, is sweet. We lived at one time among a people many of whom devoutly believed in apparitions, and wizards, and witches, and all that horrible rout, and often have we heard the most thrilling stories—stories, we believe, in more senses than one. We had sent us for review some little time ago a book upon apparitions, which claims to be a narrative of facts; and as we read it through we said, “Yes, these were facts *where they were done*,” and we put the book aside, to be looked up somewhat nearer the end of the year, when the Christmas number of our magazine might excuse our inserting

one or more of the aforesaid *facts*. We are afraid our readers will think us rather a Sadducee, although we are nothing of the kind, nor a Pharisee either; but we do not believe that in nine out of ten ghost stories there is a ghost of truth, and we are not quite sure that we believe the tenth one.

The Wesley family undoubtedly were favoured with a very noisy visitant of some sort, and we have no idea what it was, only there is no accounting for the noises which rats make in old houses any more than for the foul gases in new ones. When we meet with a thing which puzzles us we pry into the cause as far as we can, and generally find it out; and if we cannot read the riddle we lay it by to be solved another day, never flying to the old-fashioned resort of dragging in the supernatural. We traced a spirit song after much investigation to a foot-warmer filled with hot water, which was being used by an invalid. We sought out a band of celestial visitants, who whispered to us all night in a country house, and found them to be a nest of birds in a hole in the plaster of the wall at our bed head, which hole nearly came through into the room.

Nothing supernatural has ever been seen by our eyes, nor do we think we shall ever be blessed with such vision while in this body; for after seeing Robert Houdin and other wonder-workers we are casehardened against the whole set of tricks and sham spirits, and these are the parents of most of the marvels which set silly people's hair on end. As a general rule, when we hear of an apparition, or anything of the kind, we do not believe it to be other than an illusion or a falsehood. The most wonderfully well-attested narratives seldom bear investigation, they are built up with hearsay and tittle-tattle, and will not endure a strict examination; like most rumours, they fall like card-houses as soon as the hand of truth touches them. Perhaps a few of them appear to be so far true that we may safely say that they are not yet accounted for except upon a supernatural hypothesis, but we should hesitate to say more. Some are evidently the result of strong imagination, and are true to the parties concerned, affecting their fears and stamping themselves upon their minds too firmly to allow them to doubt.

In many cases religious delusions and errors create a tendency to visions and th-

like, and the most vigorous repression should be exercised by ministers and other persons of influence. A woman once called upon us in great trouble, for she had seen a human form at the foot of her bed. We suggested that it might be her own gown hanging on a peg. No, that could not be, she believed it was either the Lord Jesus or Satan. We remarked it did not matter a pin which it was, for many saw the Lord when he was on earth, and were none the better, and our Lord himself saw the devil, and yet was none the worse. To her, however, it was a test matter, and she informed us that she should have known all about it *if she had seen its head*. We enquired how that was, and to our astonishment she told us that she had a likeness of the Saviour, and she should have known him by it, and thereupon fetched out of her room a small woodcut which was supposed by her to represent the altogether lovely One. Our reply was an urgent entreaty to burn the horrid thing at once, and to feel certain that if ever she saw anybody at all like that she might be sure that it was as likely to be Lucifer himself as the Lord Jesus. She was

evidently greatly surprised, and we fell fifty per cent. in her estimation, for she had expected to have had the opinion of her own minister, a Methodist, contradicted by our authority. We told her that her minister was a very sensible man, and had dealt faithfully with her in telling her not to be deceived by optical delusions; we question, however, whether we shook her faith, for she had a budget of other wonders to tell us, only our declaration that they were "stuff and nonsense," and our plain statement of the spiritual character of true religion, made her cut the interview very short. Half crazy people come to us in any quantity with such marvels, and we hope we have cured a good many by a little kindly raillery, but a considerable number leave us with the impression sadly confirmed in our minds that there are more lunatics outside of asylums than in them.

We do not affirm that ghosts have never been seen, for no one has any right to hazard so broad a statement; but all spirits, as such, must be invisible, and the two sorts of human spirits which we know of are both by far too seriously occupied to go roaming about this earth rapping

on tables or frightening simpletons into fits. As for angels, though they also as spirits are not cognizable by the senses, no doubt they have been made visible to men, and there is no reason why they should not be made so now if God so willed it; it would certainly be a wonder, but we do not see that any of the laws of nature need to be suspended to produce it. We can readily believe that those messengers who keep watch around the people of God would be rendered visible to us and to others if some grand purpose could be accomplished thereby, and if the safety of the saints required it. Whether in these days angels or departed spirits ever do assume forms in which they can be seen is the question, and we have as yet *seen* nothing to lead us to believe that they do. Others assert that they have seen such things, but as they generally admit that they would not have believed unless they had seen for themselves, we hope they will allow us to exercise the same abstinence. Our two stories are so nicely balanced *pro* and *con*, that when they are read by the advocates of the positive and negative sides we hope they will admire our judicious impartiality.

The first story is from "Apparitions: a Narrative of Facts,"* and it is entitled

THE MYSTERIOUS HORSEMAN.

"The *Traethodydd*, or 'Essayist,' a Welsh quarterly periodical for 1853. contains a biographical memoir of the late Rev. John Jones, of Holiwell, Flintshire; and in that memoir there is an account of as remarkable an interposition of Providence by means of an *apparition*, which resulted in the preservation of life, as any on record.

"I think it will be best to allow Mr. Jones to relate the incident in his own words, as he was often wont to do, merely premising that he was a minister of high principle and unblemished character, and renowned throughout the Principality for his zeal and fervour as a preacher of the gospel, and one who showed by his life his just appreciation of what Plutarch has so finely said respecting—

'Truth,
Than which no greater blessing can man
receive or God bestow.'

* *Apparitions: a Narrative of Facts.* By the Rev. Bouchier Wrey Saville, M.A., author of "The Truth of the Bible," etc., etc. London: Longmans and Co.

““One summer day, at the commencement of the present century, I was traveling from Bala, in Merionethshire, to Machynlleth, in the neighbouring county of Montgomery, in order to attend a religious meeting. I left Bala about 2 p.m., and travelled on horseback, and alone. My journey lay through a wild, desolate part of the country, and one which at that time was almost uninhabited. When I had performed about half my journey, as I was emerging from a wood situated at the commencement of a long steep decline, I observed coming towards me a man on foot. By his appearance, judging from the sickle which he carried sheathed in straw over his shoulder, he was doubtless a reaper in search of employment. As he drew near, I recognised a man whom I had seen at the door of the village inn of Llanwhelilyn, where I had stopped to bait my horse. On our meeting he touched his hat and asked if I could tell him the time of day. I pulled out my watch for the purpose, noticing at the same time the peculiar look which the man cast at its heavy silver case. Nothing else, however, occurred to excite any suspicion on my part, so, wishing him

a "good afternoon," I continued my journey.

"When I had ridden about half-way down the hill, I noticed something moving, and in the same direction as myself, on the other side of a large hedge, which ran nearly parallel with the road, and ultimately terminated at a gate through which I had to pass. At first I thought it an animal of some kind or other, but soon discovered by certain depressions in the hedge that it was a man running in a stooping position. I continued for a short time to watch his progress with some curiosity, but my curiosity soon changed to fear when I recognized the reaper with whom I had conversed a few minutes before, engaged in tearing off the straw-band which sheathed his sickle.

"He hurried on until he reached the gate, and then concealed himself behind the hedge within a few yards of the road. I did not then doubt for a moment but that he had resolved to attack—perhaps murder—me for the sake of my watch and whatever money I might have about me. I looked around in all directions, but not a single human being was to be seen; so reining in my horse, I asked myself in

much alarm what I could do. Should I turn back? No; my business was of the utmost importance to the cause for which I was journeying, and as long as there existed the faintest possibility of getting there, I could not think of returning. Should I trust to the speed of my horse, and endeavour to dash by the man at full speed? No; for the gate through which I had to pass was not open. Could I leave the road and make my way through the fields? I could not; for I was hemmed in by rocky banks or high hedges on both sides. The idea of risking a personal encounter could not be entertained for a moment, for what chance could I—weak and unarmed—have against a powerful man with a dangerous weapon in his hand? What course then should I pursue? I could not tell; and at length, in despair rather than in a spirit of humble trust and confidence, I bowed my head and offered up a silent prayer. This had a soothing effect upon my mind, so that, refreshed and invigorated, I proceeded anew to consider the difficulties of my position.

“At this juncture my horse, growing impatient at the delay, started off: I

clutched the reins, which I had let fall on his neck, for the purpose of checking him, when happening to turn my eyes, I saw to my utter astonishment that I was no longer alone. There, by my side, I beheld a horseman in a dark dress, mounted on a white steed. In intense amazement I gazed upon him; where could he have come from? He appeared as suddenly as if he had sprung from the earth. He must have been riding behind and have overtaken me. And yet I had not heard the slightest sound: it was mysterious, inexplicable. But the joy of being released from my perilous position soon overcame my feelings of wonder, and I began at once to address my companion. I asked him if he had seen any one, and then described to him what had taken place, and how relieved I felt by his sudden appearance, which now removed all cause of fear. He made no reply, and, on looking at his face, he seemed paying but slight attention to my words, but continued intently gazing in the direction of the gate, now about a quarter of a mile ahead. I followed his gaze, and saw the reaper emerge from his concealment and cut across a field to our

left, resheathing his sickle as he hurried along. He had evidently seen that I was no longer alone, and had relinquished his intended attempt.

“All cause for alarm being gone, I once more sought to enter into conversation with my deliverer, but again without the slightest success. Not a word did he deign to give me in reply. I continued talking, however, as we rode on our way towards the gate, though I confess feeling both surprised and hurt at my companion’s mysterious silence. Once, however, and only once did I hear his voice. Having watched the figure of the reaper disappear over the brow of a neighbouring hill, I turned to my companion and said, “Can it for a moment be doubted that my prayer was heard, and that you were sent for my deliverance by the Lord?” Then it was that I thought I heard the horseman speak, and that he uttered the single word, “*Amen.*” Not another word did he give utterance to, though I tried to elicit from him replies to my questions, both in English and Welsh.

“We were now approaching the gate, which I hastened to open, and having done so with my stick, I turned my head

to look—the *mysterious horseman was gone!* I was dumbfounded; I looked back in the direction from which we had just been riding, but though I could command a view of the road for a considerable distance, he was not to be seen. He had disappeared as mysteriously as he had come. What had become of him? He could not have gone through the gate, nor have made his horse leap the high hedges which on both sides shut in the road. Where was he? Had I been dreaming? Was it an apparition, a spectre which had been riding by my side for the last ten minutes? Could it be possible that I had seen no man or horse at all, and that the vision was but a creature of my imagination? I tried hard to convince myself that this was the case, but in vain; for, unless someone had been with me, why had the reaper resheathed his murderous-looking sickle and fled? Surely no; this mysterious horseman was no creation of my brain. I had seen him; who could he have been?

“I asked myself this question again and again; and then a feeling of profound awe began to creep over my soul. I remembered the singular way of his fir-

appearance—his long silence—and then again the single word to which he had given utterance; I called to mind that this reply had been elicited from him by my mentioning the name of the Lord, and that this was the single occasion on which I had done so. What could I then believe?—but one thing, and that was, that my prayer had indeed been heard, and that help had been given from on high at a time of great danger. Full of this thought, I dismounted, and throwing myself on my knees, I offered up a prayer of thankfulness to Him who had heard my cry, and found help for me in time of need.

“ ‘ I then mounted my horse and continued my journey. But through the long years that have elapsed since that memorable summer’s day I have never for a moment wavered in my belief that in *the mysterious horseman* I had a special interference of Providence, by which means I was delivered from a position of extreme danger.’ ”

Our second extract is from the “ Christian at Work,” a very lively, interesting, vigorously conducted paper, of which

Mr. Talmage was the editor when I saw the story. It is entitled—

A TRUE TALE OF A GHOST.

“The first settlers of many of the New England towns laid out their graveyards at the centre of the town, and built up the village around the burying ground as if to keep in sight and have a tender and watchful care over their dead. Upon this public square—a part of which was consecrated to burial purposes—were usually erected all the public buildings.

“About the time of which we write there was much being said and published about witches and ghosts in various parts of the country; very exciting accounts of their being seen and of their strange doings were told, until ghost stories became the topic of gossip in the shop, at the tavern, and at all the village gatherings by night and by day. About this time the ghosts made such a demonstration at Morristown, New Jersey, as to call forth a printed pamphlet of some fifty pages, giving the details of their midnight behaviour, etc., which was read and discussed by old and young, by mothers and grandmothers, until many actually

became so timid that they dared not venture out after dark, and children would not go to bed alone. The more people talked about them, the more ghosts were seen; but always at night, and usually when it was very dark.

“It was late in the month of November that some persons in Guilford, Conn., returning from a party one dark, dismal night—when the winds whistled and the signs creaked upon their hinges as they passed the graveyard—saw a large white object moving slowly about among the tombstones, and they all unhesitatingly pronounced it a ghost. It could be nothing else. Such an object in such a place, at such a time of night, must be a spirit of some departed one. Owing both to the fact of the parties being persons of character, and to the feverish state of the public mind, no small sensation was created in the usually quiet old town, and even the more intelligent people were made to wonder what it all meant. The next night it was seen again, and for several succeeding nights, by different persons, whose statements of the facts could not be questioned. At last curiosity ran so high, and the fact was so unquestioned, that

there was a real live ghost to be seen every night about midnight in the graveyard, that several young men of respectability, who supposed they possessed courage, agreed to arm themselves with lanterns and clubs, and go out the next night and ascertain what it really was that had wrought up so many minds to such a degree of apprehension; and if it was the unquiet spirit of some departed one, to learn, if possible, what it wanted or what was its object in coming every night to disturb the peace and quiet of so many harmless people. They accordingly all met a little before midnight to carry out their plan, but seemed rather reluctant to set forth upon their desperate errand. However, they approached the graveyard; but they had not proceeded far when, sure enough, there was the very identical ghost confronting them, and slowly moving towards them. This brought them all to a halt, trembling with the cold chills of fear, in the stillness of midnight darkness, not a word spoken by any one. In a moment more they all simultaneously turned and fled.

“The very next night after these brave young men had failed to communicate

with the ghost, just at twelve o'clock, in the dead darkness of midnight, when the silence of the sepulchre brooded over the town, the people were aroused from their slumbers by the tolling of the bell high up in the belfry of the old 'meeting-house,' upon the other end of the public square. The next night the same thing occurred again, and, in connection with the current stories of the ghost, now began to excite no small degree of interest among all classes of the community. Several arose from their beds and went to the meeting-house, and there called to the sexton to know what it meant. But they found the doors all locked and no sexton there. Was the town haunted? At last it was unanimously resolved that something must be done to unravel the mystery. So the next night six of the most resolute dare-devils in the town were bargained with to go into the graveyard and await the approach of the ghost, and when he appeared, to respectfully demand his business, and what his ghostship really wanted.

"The night was fearfully dark and dismal, and when all the inhabitants had retired for the night—with not a light to be seen in any dwelling, and the profound

stillness of midnight darkness spread over the borough—these six young fellows walked out and took a stand where the ghost had several nights been seen, and waited with no small degree of anxiety for nearly two hours, with their eyes turned in every direction, when, behold! in the dim distance was seen approaching a large white object moving slowly towards them, or towards the spot where they stood. They all watched with fearful tremor. They were near the centre of the grounds enclosed. No one spoke aloud or moved a limb. Some began to feel cold chills creep over them as they cast about in their own minds for a chance to retreat now, as the object, with a heavy tread, approached, and uncertainty began to take possession of them all. But here they were, and they had all sworn to see the end of this mystery or perish in the attempt: and the end seemed fast approaching that was to put their courage and manhood to the test. The object on which all eyes were fixed, to discern through the darkness something more clearly, had now approached very near them, and as several were on the eve of turning to run, Fred. Meigs, one of the party, who never knew

fear under any circumstances, burst out laughing, when they all stepped forward, and, behold! Mr. Lot Benton's old white mare, that for several nights had found her way out of the barn-yard near by, and quietly walked out to graze on the high grass in the graveyard. And here was solved the puzzle of the ghost. But the bell tolling at midnight in a quiet old New England town for three successive nights, without the aid or knowledge of the sexton, yet remained an unsolved mystery. So the next day after the interview with the ghost, that matter was taken in hand, and with more boldness since the ghost had been discovered, when the fact was developed that a reckless fellow, who had become familiar with the excitement that had for some time existed concerning the ghost in the graveyard, had one night, after dark, undiscovered, climbed, by ways ~~best~~ known to himself, into the belfry, tied a twine string to the tongue of the bell, descended again to the ground and led the string to his chamber window, and there he sat for three nights fanning the excitement of the ghost stories by tolling the great church bell at midnight, until the whole town became alarmed or

frightened with a superstitious dread of something—they knew not what. With these discoveries all interest in ghosts and witches ceased, and the people settled down into their usual quietness and sober orthodoxy.”

Let the reader decide for himself whether ghost stories are all fudge or no; but in any case, if he be a Christian, let him never fear, for he spake truly who said, “Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, neither divination against Israel.” “Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night” is a divine promise which only needs faith in order to be realized by every child of God.

