

# A LEGEND OF COAST HILL

## A Christmas Ghost Story.

One cold, frosty December evening, about the middle of the 19th century, a convivial little party, consisting of some eight or nine persons, were gathered around a blazing wood fire in the cosy parlour of Wotton Hatch Inn-which at this time was not only a rendezvous for the village farmers and their friends, but a club house of the neighboring gentry, who frequently met and dined here together.

With two exceptions, on this particular night, all the company were listening attentively to Farmer Garland-a stout, red-faced man, with iron-grey hair and stubby whiskers-who was holding forth, slowly and impressively; emphasising his discourse at intervals with a raised fore-finger of great length and thickness. The first of these two exceptions was the landlord-a tall, broad-shouldered man, who moved about the bar, attending to his customers' wants, with a merry twinkle in his eye, which indicated more good-humoured toleration than any great amount of interest. The second exception was the village schoolmaster, a long thin lantern-jawed personage, of a sad countenance-who, with ill-concealed impatience (shewn by short and spasmodic whiffs at his long 'churchwarden' pipe, and sundry contemptuous sniffs) seemed every moment inclined to break in upon the long-winded harangue of the speaker.

"I told her," Farmer Garland was saying, in a harsh, deep voice, "I says, now look you here, my girl; I've made my money b1890y farming, and to farming it shall go, and to nothing else. I'll have no young fool as thinks himself above doing what his father and grandfather did before him-making ducks and drakes of it, and so I tell you. Of course she flared up, and said Ben wouldn't care if she hadn't a brass farden to call her own. He wanted her for herself, she said, and a lot more, but I just wouldn't listen. I says, now don't you let me hear no more of this nonsense. You'll have to marry the husband *I* choose for you, and no one else. So don't you let me catch you having anything more to do with Ben Williams; if I do, or if he comes hanging round the place any more, why, I'll kick him out of it, that I will."

"Well, Master Garland," broke in the schoolmaster, as the former paused a moment to take breath, "some folks" (with a meaning glance around) "will think you're right, maybe, but for my part, I don't see what there is in young Ben to find so much fault with. If he can't take to the farming, why, there are three other brothers who can; and with all the good he's done at learning-why, if he feels he would like to raise himself by-"

"Raise himself," echoed the farmer, angrily interrupting the pedagogue, who was the only person in the parish who ever dared to differ from him, so great was the general respect for his opinion, or rather for his temper. "Raise himself, do you say? What call has he to want to be a better man than his father, or *his* father, I'd like to know? And could either of them so much as write their own names? Not they indeed! No, no, I tell you. I don't call it raising himself to turn his back on his rightful callin', all for the sake of handlin' a quill in Lawyer Grant's office over in Dorking town."

"I do then!" shouted the schoolmaster, in a determined attempt to make his voice heard. "I do, and I am proud to think my pupil has done so well for himself, that I am. I only wish I had a few others like him."

The farmer's ruddy face took an almost purple tinge, so great was his wrath at this audacious speech. He was about to make some furious retort, when suddenly there was a sound outside of hurried footsteps approaching the inn, the door was thrust violently open, and there rushed into their midst a sturdy young fellow, about eighteen or nineteen', clad in a grey smock-frock, whose wild looks, disordered mien, and face of unnatural pallor gave unmistakable evidence of some extraordinary and alarming event.

"Why, Amos, man! Bless my soul, what's the matter?" exclaimed the good-natured landlord, recognising a young carter in Farmer Garland's service. "Are you drunk or mad, man?" roared his master.

"He's took bad!" cried one of the company, excitedly, as Amos sank into a chair. "Give him a drop of brandy;" "No, no, he's had enough already;" and other such suggestions or surmises flew round the circle, that, open-mouthed and staring, surrounded the object of them.

“Here, drink this, man,” said Peter, the landlord's nephew and general factotum, a good-looking young fellow, who, from his unusual height and length of limb, was generally distinguished by the name of “Long Peter” by all the inhabitants of Wotton. “And now,” he continued as Amos tossed off the small glass of brandy, and drawing a long breath, seemed to recover himself a little; “now tell us what's the matter with you?”

. Amos sat upright, ran one hand through his thick mop of curly hair, and then glancing fearfully around, as though apprehensive of some unseen listener, faltered in trembling tones “I see a ghost!”

“A ghost!” echoed round the circle, in tones varying from scornful incredulity to those of nervous dismay.

“Now, look'ee, my lad,” said the farmer, planting his large, thick set form in front of his terror-stricken carter, “don't you come here tryin' on any of such nonsense. Ghosts indeed! Why, there bean't no such things!”

“But I see 'un,” protested the wretched Amos; “I wor a-comin' up the hill, and all on a suddin, there as plain as could be-”

And here he broke off and shuddered violently. “Where? Go on,” urged the schoolmaster. “Where did you *think* you saw this-this apparition?”

“It were just under the big beech-tree,” Amos resumed, “at the top o' the hill nearly-”

“And what might you be doing there, I'd like to know?” sternly inquired his master.

Amos proceeded to explain, with many stoppages and hesitations (for he had a wholesome fear of his autocratic master), that the head carter had sent him that evening on a message to the Rookery Farm. He had performed his errand, and was returning home, when just as he had nearly reached the summit of what is now called Coast Hill, he had suddenly been terrified, almost out of his wits, by seeing a tall white figure, standing quite motionless, within a few yards of him. He was (to use his own expression) “struck dazed-like” for a few dreadful moments, then had taken to his heels and fled, never stopping until he had reached the friendly shelter of the “Hatch”. When questioned as to further details, he was unable to give any beyond the fact that the figure was unusually tall, and seemed to have some sort of loose white covering over its head; and this was all that he had noticed in his panic.

Now the effect of this story upon his listeners was more or less varied. Some laughed, and suggested that it was a stray sheep or cow that he had encountered; others were silent, and looked uncomfortable; whilst the landlord, his nephew, and Farmer Garland inclined to the view that it was all pure imagination on the part of Amos. The farmer, in particular, was most loud and forcible in expressing his disbelief in the possibility of any supernatural visitation; asserting that his father, now dead and gone, had always set *his* face against such things as ghosts, and moreover had, from his (Farmer Garland's) earliest youth, repeatedly impressed upon him that he need have no fear of such, as he never would, or could, be likely to see anything worse than himself. Which assurance Farmer Garland (overlooking its rather doubtful application as a compliment to his vanity) evidently considered so clinching as an argument that, after having delivered himself of it, he forthwith took his departure from the “Hatch”; whilst no less than five sympathizing friends escorted home the ghost-stricken Amos.

All those who had believed Amos's story had their belief still farther strengthened when, three evenings later, another person announced that he had seen “the ghost”. This was Joe White, a young carpenter, who, returning late from some work at Westcott, encountered the same figure, in exactly the same spot as described by Amos. But Joe, being a more plucky youth, had, after the first moment or two of alarm, summoned up courage, and advanced a little nearer to the mysterious form. Whereupon it had immediately retreated, and, to use his own description, “sort of melted away” over the fence, in the direction of the churchyard. The neighbourhood of this last, no doubt, gave an additional gruesomeness to the affair, and very soon a panic seized almost all the entire population of Wotton, for every other evening or so fresh visitations of the “ghost” were reported. Before long, scarcely a person would venture

past the "Hatch" after dark. All those whose business took them to Dorking or Westcott hurried back before dusk, and a general feeling of uncomfortableness pervaded the parish.

Three or four persons, however, still remained unmoved in their opinion that it was not anything of a harmful or a spiritual nature, therefore there was nothing to be so frightened at. Among these were the landlord and his nephew Long Peter; the latter especially declaring that if *he* ever saw the ghost, why "the ghost" should pretty soon know it, that was all! But loudest and most emphatic in this opinion was Farmer Garland. It was like the shewing of a red rag to a mad bull even to mention the subject within his hearing, He discharged poor Amos' from his service, as the cause (so he declared) of all the scare, and talked himself hoarse every evening in the bar of the "Hatch" arguing the matter with the schoolmaster, who, partly in a spirit of contradiction, inclined to an opposite opinion.

Now regularly every Thursday the farmer attended the Dorking market. He drove there and back, starting about eleven, and it was generally as late as eight o'clock before he returned home. His wife and daughter always looked forward to this particular day in the week as the one on which they enjoyed an immunity from his incessant bullying and faultfinding. On the other hand, they dreaded the one following, when, owing probably to the number of healths drunk with his cronies at the Chequers Inn, the farmer was invariably extra quarrelsome, ill-tempered, and disagreeable.

Christmas Eve, in this particular year, happened to come on a Thursday, and Farmer Garland set off as usual, driving his old bay mare, who was totally blind with the right eye, and not able to see very much with the left, but who knew every inch of the road between Wotton and Dorking. He put up and dined at the old Chequers Inn, spent a busy day bargaining (and arguing), and being Christmas time there was some extra drinking of healths, of course. The church clock was chiming a quarter past seven when at length the farmer rattled out of the Chequers' yard in his crazy old gig, and whipping up the mare, jogged down West Street, past the Vicarage, and out on to the Westcott Road. Oh! how the wind swept and whistled over the bare stretch of country through which the road ran. The farmer pulled up his thick comforter around his capacious throat, and thought regretfully of the cosy bar of the inn that he had just quitted, as the mare trotted along, Now they have reached Westcott Village - up and down the steep hill on which the church now stands-(the people then had no place of worship of their own, only the choice of walking either to Wotton or Dorking on Sundays)-past the Rookery gates, over the bridge, and presently toiling up the steep ascent of Coast Hill.

It was not a dark night; for though the clouds hid the face' of the moon, they were not sufficient to quench her light, which revealed all surrounding objects pretty clearly, But as the farmer neared the summit of the hill, the trees, even though bare of leaves, interlaced their branches so thickly across the road, that they made almost complete darkness around him; and it was just at this precise moment that there came into his mind the fact that he was just about to pass the spot where the apparition was usually seen. For one who so entirely disbelieved in it, it was rather odd that at this point Farmer Garland should have suddenly and sharply whipped up his mare, apparently with the intention of getting as quickly as possible past the great beech-tree. The next moment he started violently, and a half muttered exclamation arose to his lips; for there, just under the tree, plainly visible in the misty light, stood a figure, looking unnaturally tall, clothed from head to foot in some flowing white garment. Yes, there it stood, directly facing him in the narrow road, and as he gazed terror-stricken, it slowly raised its arm, as if to arrest his progress. The whip fell from Farmer Garland's trembling hold, and clattered down, unheeded, on the footboard of the gig, and to make matters still worse, his start of horror gave such a jerk to the reins that the old mare came to a standstill in the middle of the road, albeit wondering much as to the reason of such an unusual proceeding; for the figure was on her blind side. As for the farmer, his condition was indeed pitiable. His hair bristled up almost on end, great beads of perspiration stood out on his brow, and cold shivers of fear ran down his back and legs. He tried hard to think of some pious words with which to exorcise the spirit, for he no longer doubted that this was some visitant from another world. But his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth, and moreover not a single word could he bring to mind at the

moment, except such portions of the Catechism which had been so effectually flogged into him by his parent before alluded to, that he had never: quite forgotten them; - and still the awful figure kept its ground, with arm upraised before him; till at last, after what seemed hours of agony, it began to move slowly toward the fence, and in another moment had vanished suddenly away. Then, and not till then, did the farmer rally a little his scattered senses, and with an agonised tug at the reins of his patient steed, and a cut with the whip such as she had seldom felt before in her long and chequered existence, dashed off and never slackened his headlong pace till he arrived before the door of his own house.

About the only person who cannot with any certainty reckon upon an undisturbed enjoyment of Christmas Day within the bosom of his family is a doctor, And certainly it was hard for Dr. Allwork on this particular one that followed Farmer Garland's adventure. For had not the dinner been postponed from its usual time of one o'clock to the dissipated hour of four, in order that he might get all his work done first, and settle down to a cosy merry evening? And yet, just as this hard-worked practitioner was actually inserting his carving-knife into the tempting looking brown bosom of a portly goose-under the fixed and hungry gaze of no less than eight little pairs of eyes belonging to his excited family-Cook, with her ample visage still flushed with the exertion of "dishing up" the aforesaid biped, appeared at the door of the dining-room, with the ominous information, "You're wanted, please, sir!"

"Dear me! how very provoking!" cried the doctor's wife-a lady whose whole air, manner, and appearance indicated great habitual anxiety of mind. "Just as we are sitting down to dinner. Tell them to wait a moment, Jane."

"Yes, ask whoever it is to sit down for a few moments," added the doctor.

"Please, sir, I did, but he can't. It's Peter, sir, from Wotton Hatch. His aunt's took awful bad, he says, and please will you come *directly*," said Jane, in that peculiarly cheerful tone in which her class is apt to communicate vexatious intelligence. "He's got the gig with him to take you back, sir."

So there was no help for it. With one hurried injunction to "keep some hot for him, and he would be as quick as he could," the doctor was off, and in another moment or two bowling swiftly down the dark and deserted High Street by the side of Long Peter - leaving his disappointed wife to bewail over the stuffing and apple-sauce.

"How was your aunt taken ill?" the doctor asked, abruptly, as Peter guided his fast-going cob down West Street.

"Well, sir, it was about an hour or so after dinner she was first took," answered that worthy. "She couldn't so much as fetch a single breath for a minute or two. And then she said her heart was all in a bubble like." Peter paused here, as if expecting some comment, but, somewhat to his surprise, the doctor appeared little concerned at the description of this certainly rather remarkable physical sensation. "We got her upstairs, uncle and me, and she lays there groanin' awful, and can't take nothing. Uncle tried to give her a little of our old cherry brandy, but it was no use," concluded Peter, lugubriously shaking his head.

The doctor still remained silent, but thought a good deal.

"Queer go this about Farmer Garland," Peter presently remarked, as they began to ascend Coast Hill.

"Why, what's that?" enquired the doctor, who was well acquainted with the farmer and his family. "Well," began Peter, "you know, p'raps, how set he's been against Polly's having anything to do with Ben Williams, at Westcott there, 'cause he's bent on marryin' her to Eli Baines, up at the Crossways. He's old enough to be Polly's father, is Eli. Well, old Garland even went as far as to tell Ben that he'd kick him out of Wotton if he ever so much as dared to shew his face there again. And lo! and behold!" continued Peter, waxing eloquent, "this morning, after church, Polly comes flying in to tell aunt that her father's come right round all of a sudden, and says she may marry Ben now if she likes! What do you think of that, sir? But Polly's worried, because old Garland seems so changed and strange-like. She says he looks precious queer and white, and seems all of a tremble. Something's up with him."

“Poor old fellow! Perhaps he's ill,” said the kind-hearted doctor. “I might drop in as I am here, and have a look at him” (forgetful in his compassion of the waiting goose). “Don't you think I might, Peter? I'll say - why, God bless my soul, *what's that?*”

What was it indeed? A tall, unearthly-looking figure, all in white, standing motionless in the road just in front of them! At sight of which the cob shies so violently, that Peter has all his work to do for a minute or two to quiet him. But at the next, he has hastily thrust the reins into the hand of his bewildered companion, and with one flying leap is out of the gig, making straight for the mysterious figure, with hand outstretched to grasp it. But it glides swiftly from him, and in an instant is over the fence, speeding rapidly towards the churchyard, and Peter after it. For a slight sound, as of one of the timbers of the fence creaking beneath some weight, has convinced him of what already he had suspected -that this is no visitant from another world, but pretty substantial flesh and blood. Over the meadow, where a damp white mist is rising, it flies, and on goes Peter, his long legs steadily decreasing the distance between them; till suddenly - can he believe his senses? - it disappears as if by magic from his sight. Has the earth opened and swallowed it up? Or is it indeed what Amos and others believe? Peter begins to feel queer, when suddenly the moon, which has all this time been hiding herself behind a heavy, dark cloud, looks out, and reveals to Peter's astonished eyes a dark form scudding swiftly along in front of him. Now or never, Peter! Once more those long legs of yours do good service. Less and less grows the distance between pursuer and pursued, till at last, with a whoop of victory, Peter catches up his quarry, and has seized in his iron grasp-his old friend and crony Ben Williams!

No one, excepting Ben and Polly, ever knew the real reason of Farmer Garland's sudden consent to their marriage. Polly managed the whole business admirably, so that it came about by almost tacit consent that Ben kept the secret of his encounter with the farmer on that memorable Christmas Eve, and the latter kept his word to Polly, and his reputation for always being right. For did not the revelation of Ben's pranks prove the truth of his theory respecting “the ghost,” and all others, the schoolmaster included, wrong?

To do Ben justice, the first alarm he had occasioned was unintentional. He had simply, in order to disguise himself that night, put on an old white top-coat that had belonged to his father, the deep cape of which the wind had, in a playful moment, blown over his head, just as Amos came within sight. But on hearing from Polly what a terrifying effect this had had on that individual, Ben had seized the idea of keeping up the deception, in order to meet his sweetheart with safety and secrecy. A large white sheet had afterwards proved an even better aid, and his sudden and spirit-like disappearances had been nothing more nor less than a dexterous whipping off of this, whenever anyone had shewn a desire for a nearer inspection. Polly had wished to take Peter into their confidence, but Ben had an opposite desire to “try it on” with that individual, with what result we have seen. He had been waiting for Polly, who, owing to the festivities of the day, had been unable before to communicate to him the good news of her father's consent, when Peter and the doctor encountered him.

It was remarked, however, of Farmer Garland, in the many years he lived and prospered after Polly's marriage, that he always avoided the subject of ghosts, and tried to turn the conversation into another channel whenever it veered in that uncanny direction. But for many years the spot of his son-in-law's diversions went by the name of “Ghost Tree” and “Ghost Hill,” the latter, according to local tradition, having been softened by usage-like many another place-name-into “Coast Hill.”

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