

The Haunted House

by John Greenleaf Whittier, 1807-1892

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The beautiful river, which retains its Indian name of Merrimack, winds through a country of almost romantic beauty. The last twenty miles of its course in particular, are unsurpassed in quiet and rich scenery, by any river in the United States. There are indeed, no bold and ragged cliffs, like the Highlands of the Hudson, to cast their grim shadows on the water—no blue and lofty mountains, piercing into the thin atmosphere, and wrapping about their rocky proportions the mists of valley and river—but there are luxuriant fields and pleasant villages, and white church-spires, gleaming through the green foliage of oak and elm—and wide forests of Nature's richest coloring, and green hills sloping smoothly and gracefully to the margin of the clear, bright stream, which moves onward to the Ocean, as lightly and gracefully as the moving of a cloud at sunset, when the light wind which propels the trial voyager is unfelt on earth.

It was on the margin of this stream, during the early times of Massachusetts, that a stranger—a foreigner of considerable fortune—took up his residence. He had a house, constructed from a model of his own which, for elegance and convenience, far surpassed the rude and simple tenements of his neighbors;

and he had a small farm, or rather garden, which he seemed to cultivate for amusement, rather than from any absolute necessity of labor. He had no family, save a daughter—an interesting girl of sixteen.

Near the dwelling of Adam McOrne—for such was the stranger's name—lived old Alice Knight—a woman, known throughout the whole valley of the river, from Plum Island to the residence of the Sachem Passaconaway, on the Nashua—as one under an evil influence—an ill-tempered and malignant old woman—who was seriously suspected of dealing with the Prince of Darkness. Many of her neighbors were ready to make oath that they had been haunted by old Alice, in the shape of a black cat—that she had taken off the wheels of their hay-carts and frozen down their sled-runners, when the team was in full motion—that she had bewitched their swine, and rendered their cattle unruly—nay, more than one good wife averred, that she had bewitched their churns and prevented the butter from forming; and that they could expel her in no other way, than by heating a horse-nail and casting it into the cream. Moreover, they asserted that when this method of exorcism was resorted to, they invariably learned, soon after, that goodwife Alice was suffering under some unknown indisposition. In short, it would be idle to attempt a description of the almost innumerable feats of witchcraft ascribed to the withered and decrepid Alice.

Her exterior was indeed well calculated to favor the idea of her supernatural qualifications. She had the long, blue and skinny finger—the elvish locks of gray and straggling hair—the hooked nose, and the long, upturned chin, which seemed perpetually to threaten its nasal neighbor—the blue lips drawn around a mouth, garnished with two or three unearthly-looking fangs—the bleared and sunken eye—the bowed and attenuated form—and the limping gait, as if the invisible fetters of the Evil One were actually clogging the footsteps of his servant. Then, too, she was poor—poor as the genius of poverty itself—she had no relatives about her—no friends—her hand was against every man, and every man's hand was against her.

Setting the question of her powers of witchcraft aside, Alice Knight was actually an evil-hearted woman. Whether the suspicions and the taunts of her neighbors had aroused into action those evil passions which slumber in the seldom-visited depths of the human heart—or, whether the mortifications of poverty and dependence had changed and perverted her proud spirit—certain it was, that she took advantage of the credulity and fears of her neighbors. When they in the least offended her, she turned upon them with the fierce malison of an enraged Pythoness, and prophesied darkly of some unknown and indescribable evil about to befall them. And, consequently, if any evil did befall them in the space of a twelve-month afterward, another mark was added to the already black list of iniquities, which was accredited to the ill-favored Alice.

With all her fierce and deep-rooted hatred of the human species—one solitary affection—one feeling of kindness, yet lingered in the bosom of Alice Knight. Her son a young man of twenty-five—her only child seemed to form the sole and last link of the chain which had once bound her to humanity. Her love of him partook of the fierce passions of her nature—it was wild, ungovernable and strong as her hate itself.

Gilbert Knight inherited little from his mother, save a portion of her indomitable pride and fierce temperament. He had been a seaman—had visited many of the old lands, and had returned again to his birth-place—a grown up man—with a sun-burned cheek—a fine and noble figure, and a countenance

rude and forbidding, yet marked with a character of intellect and conscious power. He had little intercourse with his mother—he refused even to reside in the same dwelling with her—and yet, when in her presence, he was respectful, and even indulgent to her singular disposition and unsocial habits. He had no communion with the inhabitants of his native town—but, stern, unsocial and gloomy, he held himself apart from the sympathies and fellowship of men, with whom indeed, he had few feelings in common.

Mary, the daughter of Adam McOrne, seemed alone to engage the attention of Gilbert Knight.

She was young, beautiful, and, considering the condition of the country, well-educated. She naturally felt herself superior to the rude and hard-featured youth around her—she had tasted enough of the sentiment, and received enough of the polish of education, to raise her ideas, at least, above the ignorant and unlettered rustics, who sought her favor.

Despised and spurned at, as the mother of Gilbert Knight was, still her son always commanded respect. There was something in the dignity of his manner, and the fierce flash of his dark eye, which had a powerful influence on all in his presence. Then, too, it was remembered that his father was a man of intellect and family—that he was once wealthy—and had suddenly met with reverses of fortune. These considerations gave Gilbert Knight no little consequence in his native village; and Adam McOrne, who ridiculed the idea of witches and witchcraft, received the occasional visits of Gilbert with as much cordiality as if his mother had never been suspected of evil doings. He was pleased with the frank, bold bearing of the sailor; and with his evident preference of his dwelling, above that of his neighbors—never so much as dreaming, that the visits of Gilbert were paid to any other than himself.

It was a cold, dark night of Autumn, that Gilbert, after leaving the hospitable fire-side of McOrne, directed his steps to the rude and lonely dwelling of his mother. He found the old woman alone—a few sticks of ignited wood cast a faint light upon the dismal apartment—and an old and blear-eyed cat was at her side, gazing earnestly at her unseemly countenance.

„Mother,“ said Gilbert, seating himself, „’tis idle—’tis worse than folly to dream of executing our project. Mary McOrne will never be my wife.“

„Ha!2 exclaimed Alice, fixing her hollow eye upon her son—„Have I not told you that it should be so, and must be? You have lost your courage; you have become weaker than a woman, Gilbert. I tell you that Mary McOrne loves you, as deeply, as passionately as ever man was loved by woman!“ Gilbert started. „I do believe she loves me,“ he said at length, „but she will never be my wife. She dreads an alliance with our family. She has said so—she has this night solemnly averred that she had rather die at once, than become the daughter-in-law of—of“—Gilbert hesitated.

„Of a witch!“ shrieked Alice, in a voice so loud and shrill that it even startled the practiced ear of Gilbert. „’Tis well—I will not be stigmatised as a witch with impunity. That haughty Scotchman and his impudent brat of a daughter shall learn that Alice Knight is not to be insulted in this manner! Gilbert, you shall marry her, or she shall die accursed!“

„Mother!“ said Gilbert, rising and fixing his dark eye keenly on that of his mother—„I understand your threat; and I warn you to beware. Practice your infernal tricks upon others as you please—but Mary McOrne is too pure and

sacred for such unhallowed dealing; and as you dread the curses of your son, let her not be molested.“

He turned away as he ceased speaking, and instantly left the dwelling. He had seen little of his mother for many years—he knew her disposition but imperfectly; and, while in public he ridiculed the idea of her supernatural powers, he yet felt an awe—a fear in her presence—a certainty that she was not like those around her. He knew that the breath of her displeasure operated to appearance like a curse—that she did, either by natural cunning, or supernatural power, mysteriously distress and perplex her neighbors. He saw that her proud spirit had been touched; and that she meditated evil against McOrne and his daughter. The latter, Gilbert really loved—as deeply and devotedly as such a rude spirit could love; and he shuddered at the idea of her subjection to the arts of his mother. He therefore resolved to press his suit once more, and endeavor to overcome the objections which the girl had raised; and, in the event of his failure to do so, to protect her from the wrath of his mother.

But Mary McOrne—much as she loved the dark-eyed stranger, and his tales of peril and shipwreck in other climes—could not associate herself with the son of a witch—the only surviving offspring of a woman, whom she verily believed to be the bond slave of the Tempter.

And so she strove with the strong feeling of affection within her—and Gilbert Knight was rejected.

A short time after, the tenants of the dwelling of McOrne were alarmed by strange sounds and unusual appearances. In the dead of the night they would hear heavy footsteps ascending the stair case, with the clank of a chain—and groans issued from the unoccupied rooms of the building.

The doors were mysteriously opened, after having been carefully secured—the curtains of the beds of McOrne and his daughter were drawn aside by an unseen hand; and low whispers of blasphemy and licentiousness, which a spirit of evil, could only have suggested, were breathed, as it were, into their very ears. The servants—a male and female—alike complained of preternatural visitations and unseemly visions. They were disturbed in their daily avocations—the implements of household labor were snatched away by an invisible hand—they saw strange lights in the neighborhood of the dwelling. They heard an unearthly music in the chimney; and saw the furniture of the room dancing about, as if moving to the infernal melody. In short, the fact was soon established, beyond the interposition of a doubt, that the house was haunted.

The days of faery are over. The tale of enchantment—the legend of ghostly power—of unearthly warning and supernatural visitation, have lost their hold on the minds of the great multitude. People sleep quietly where they are placed—no matter by what means they have reached the end of their journey—and there is an end to the church-yard rambles of discontented ghosts.—
„That creep From out the places where they sleep—To publish forth some hidden sin, Or drink the ghastly moonshine in“—And as for witches, the race is extinct—or, if a few yet remain, they are a miserable libel upon the diabolical reputation of those who figured in the days of Paris and Mather. Haunted houses are getting to be novelties—and corpse-lights and apparitions and unearthly noises, and signs and omens and wonders, are no longer troublesome. Ours is a matter-of-fact age—an age of steam and railway and

McAdamization and labor-saving machinery—the poetry of Time has gone by forever, and we have only the sober prose left us.

Among the superstitions of our ancestors, that of Haunted Houses is not the least remarkable.

There is scarcely a town or village in New-England which has not, at some period or other of its history, had one or more of these ill-fated mansions. They were generally old, decayed buildings—untenanted, save by the imaginary demons, who there held their midnight revels. But there are many instances of „prestigious spirits“ who were impudent enough to locate themselves in houses, where the hearthstone had not yet grown cold—where the big bible yet lay on the parlor-table; and where, over Indian-pudding and pumpkin-pie, the good man of the mansion always craved a blessing; where the big arm chair was always officiously placed for the minister of the parish, whenever he favored the family with the light of his countenance; and where the good lady taught her children the Catechism every Saturday evening. This was indeed, a bold act of effrontery on the part of the Powers of Evil, yet it was accounted for on the ground, that good men and true were sometimes given over to the buffetings of the enemy, of which fact, the case of Job was considered ample proof.

The visitations to the house of McOrne became more frequent and more terrific. The unfortunate Mary suffered severely. She fully believed in the supernatural character of the sights and sounds which alarmed her; and she looked upon old Alice Knight as the author: especially after hearing a whisper in her ear, in the darkness of midnight, that, unless she married Gilbert Knight she should be haunted as long as she lived. As for the father, he battled long and manfully with the fears which were strengthened day by day—he laughed at the strange noises which filled his mansion, and ridiculed the fears of his daughter—but it was easy to see that his strong mind was shaken by the controlling superstitions of the time; and he yielded slowly to the belief, which had now extended itself through the neighborhood, that his dwelling was under the immediate influence of demoniac agency.

Many were the experiments tried throughout the neighborhood for the discovery of the witch.

The old, experienced grand-mothers gathered together almost every evening for consultation, and divers and multiform were the plans devised for counteracting the designs of Satan. All admitted that Alice Knight must be the witch, but unfortunately there was no positive proof of the fact. All the charms and forms of exorcism which were then believed to be potent weapons for the overthrowing of the powers of Wickedness having failed, it was finally settled among the good ladies that the minister of the parish could alone drive the evil spirits from the dwelling of their neighbor. But Adam McOrne was a sinful man; and his oaths had been louder than his prayers on this trying occasion: and, when it was proposed to him to invite the godly parson to his house, for the purpose of laying the spirits that troubled it, he swore fiercely, that rather than have his threshold darkened by the puritan priest, he would see his dwelling converted into the Devil's ball-room, and thronged with all the evil spirits on the face of the earth or beneath it.

And, with shaking heads and prophetic visages, the good women left the perverse Scotchman to his fate.

Notwithstanding his bold exterior, the heart of Adam McOrne was daily failing within him.

The wild, nursery tales of his childhood came back to him with painful distinctness—and the bogle and kelpie and dwarfish Brownie of his native land, rose fearfully before his imagination.

His evenings were lonely and long; and he resolved to invite Gilbert Knight—the fierce sailor, who feared neither man nor fiend—to take up his residence with him: in the firm belief that no power, human or superhuman, could shake the nerves of a man, who had wrestled with the tem-pest upon every sea; and who had braved death in the red battle, when his shattered deck was slippery with blood and piled with human corpses.

Gilbert obeyed the summons of McOrne with pleasure. He had heard the strange stories of the haunted mansion, which were upon every lip in the vicinity; and he felt perfectly convinced that his mother was employed in disturbing the domestic quiet of the Scotchman and his daughter—whether by natural means, or otherwise, he knew not. But he knew her revengeful disposition, and he feared, that unless her schemes were boldly interfered with, she would succeed in irreparably injuring the health and minds of her victims. Besides, he trusted that, should he succeed in accomplishing his purpose and laying the evil spirits of the mansion, he should effectually secure to himself the gratitude of both father and daughter.

Gilbert was received with much cordiality by Adam McOrne. „Ye may weel ken,“ said the old gentleman, „that I am no the least afeared o‘ a‘ this clishmaclaver, o‘ evil speerits, or deils or witch-hags; but my daughter, puir lassie, she’s in an awsome way—a the time shakin‘ wi‘ fear o‘ wraiths and witches and sic like ill-faured cattle.“ And Adam McOrne made an endeavor to look unconcerned and resolute in the presence of his guest, as he thus disclaimed any feeling of alarm on his own part. He could not bear that the bold sailor should look upon his weakness.

Even Mary McOrne welcomed the presence of her discarded lover. Yet, while she clung to him as to her only protector, she shuddered at the thought that Gilbert was the son of her evil tormentor—nay more, the horrible suspicion would at times steal over her that he had himself prompted his wicked parent to haunt her and terrify her into an acquiescence with his wishes.

But, when she heard his frank and manly proposal to watch all night in a chamber, where the strange sights and sounds were most frequent, she could not but trust that her suspicion was ill-founded, and that in Gilbert Knight she should find a friend and a protector.

Adam McOrne, secretly overjoyed at the idea of having a sentinel in his dwelling, ordered a fire to be kindled in the suspected chamber; and placing a decanter of spirits on the table, he bade his guest good night, and left him to the loneliness of the haunted apartment.

It matters not now what thoughts passed through the mind of Gilbert, as he sat silent and alone, gazing on the glowing embers before him. That his mother was engaged in a strange and dark purpose, in regard to the family of McOrne, he was fully convinced—and he resolved to unravel the mystery of her midnight adventures, and relieve the feelings of the Scotch-man and his daughter—even, although in so doing he should implicate his own mother, in guilty and malicious designs.

The old family clock struck one. At that moment a deep groan sounded fearfully through the room.—Gilbert rose to his feet and listened earnestly. It seemed to proceed from the room beneath him; and it was repeated several

times, until it died away, like the last murmurs of one in the agonies of death. In a few moments he heard footsteps on the stair case ascending to a long, narrow passage at its head, which communicated with his apartment.

„I will know the cause of this,“ said Gilbert, mentally, as he threw open the door, and sprang into the passage. A figure attempted to glide past him, appareled in white, uttering, as it did so, a deep and hollow groan.

„Mortal or devil!“ shouted Gilbert, springing forward and grasping the figure by the arm—„you go no further. Speak, witch, ghost, whatever you are—declare your errand!“

The figure struggled violently, but the iron grasp of Gilbert remained unshaken. At that moment the hurried voice of the old Scotchman sounded through the passage.

„Haud weel, haud weel, my braw lad; dinna let go your grip—in God's name haud weel!“

„Let me go,“ said the figure in a hoarse whisper—„Let me go, or you are a dead man!“ Gilbert retained his hold, and endeavored to discover by the dim light which streamed from his apartment, the countenance of the speaker.

„Die, then, unnatural wretch!“ shrieked the detected Alice, snatching a knife from her bosom, and aiming a furious stab at her son. Gilbert pressed his hand to his side, and staggered backward, exclaiming, as the features of his mother, now fully revealed, glared madly upon him—„Woman, you have murdered your son!“

The knife dropped from the hand of Alice, and with a loud and almost demoniac shriek, she sprang down the stair case and vanished like a spectre.

Adam McOrne hurried forward, the moment he saw the white figure disappear, and followed Gilbert into his apartment. „Are ye hurt?—are ye wraith-smitten?“ asked the Scotchman; and then, as his eye fell on the bloodied dress of Gilbert, he exclaimed—„Waes me—ye are a' streakit wi' bluid—ye are a dead man!“

Gilbert felt that his wound was severe, but with his usual presence of mind, he gave such directions to McOrne and his daughter, as to enable them to prevent the rapid effusion of blood, while a servant was despatched for the nearest physician. Mary McOrne seemed to forget the weakness of her sex, while she ministered to her wounded lover with a quick eye and a skillful hand. It is on occasions like this—when even the strong nerves of manhood are shaken—that the feeble hand of woman is often most efficient. In the hour of excitement and turmoil, the spirit of manly daring may blaze out, with sudden and terrible power—but in the deep trials of suffering humanity—in the watchings by the bed of affliction—then it is that the courage of woman predominates—the very excess of her sympathy sustains her.

The arrival of the physician dissipated in some degree the fears of McOrne and his daughter.

The wound of Gilbert was not considered as dangerous; and he was assured that a few days of confinement would be the only ill consequence resulting from it. The kind hearted Scotchman and his kinder hearted daughter watched by his bed until morning, at which time Gilbert was enabled to explain the singular circumstances of the night; and at the same time he expressed a wish that McOrne should visit the dwelling of his mother, who, he feared would resort to some violence upon herself, in the belief that she had, in her frantic passion, murdered her son.

Adam McOrne, convinced by the narration of Gilbert that human ingenuity and malice, instead of demoniac agency, had disturbed his dwelling, sallied out early in the morning to the rude and crazy dwelling of his tormentor.

He found the door open—and on entering, the first object that met his view was the form of Alice Knight, lying on the floor, insensible and motionless. He spoke to her, but she answered not—he lifted her arm, and it fell back with a dead weight upon her side.—She was dead—whether by terror or suicide, he knew not. „Ugh!“ said Adam McOrne, in relating the discovery—„there she was—an ill-faured creature—a’ cauld and ghaistly, lookin’ for a’ the world as if she wad hae thankit any Christian soul to hae gie’n her a decent burial.“ She was buried the next day in the small garden adjoining her dwelling, for the good people of the neighborhood could not endure the idea of her reposing in their own quiet grave-yard. The minister of the parish indeed attended her funeral, and made a few general remarks upon the enormity of witchcraft and the exceeding craftiness of the great necromancer and magician, who had ensnared the soul of the ill-fated Alice—but when he ventured to pray for the repose of the unhappy woman, more than one of his hearers shook their heads, in the belief that even their own goodly minister had no right to interfere with the acknowledged property of the Enemy.

It is said that Alice did not sleep peaceably, nathless the prayers of the minister. Her house was often lighted up in the dead of the night, until „Through ilka bore the flames were glancing,“ and the wild and unearthly figure of the old woman herself crossed more than once the paths of the good people of the neighborhood. At least, such is the story, and it is not our present purpose to dispute it.

The manner in which old Alice contrived to perplex the Scotchman and his daughter, was at length revealed by the disclosures of the servants of the family. They had been persuaded by the old woman to aid her in the strange transactions—partly from an innate love of mischief, and partly from a pique against the worthy Scotchman, whose irritable temperament had more than once discovered itself in the unceremonious collision of his cane with the heads and shoulders of his domestics.

Gilbert recovered rapidly of his wound: and a few months after, the house, which had been given over to the evil powers, as the revelling-place of demons, was brilliantly illuminated for a merry bridal. And the rough, bold sailor, as the husband of Mary McOrne, settled down into a quiet, industrious and sober-minded citizen. Adam McOrne lived to a good old age, stoutly denying to the last that he had ever admitted the idea of witchcraft, and laughing, heartily as before, at the superstitions and credulity of his neighbors.

