Voyages

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In sooth my tale is built on simple facts,
The actors are no puppets of my will;
I but record what I myself have seen,
And laughed at in my days of youthful glee.

Poor old Hannah! I see her now before me — her short stout figure, framed as it was for labour — her round red face, which long exposure to the weather had so befreckled and betanned, that not one tint of her original complexion was left — her small, deep-seated, merry grey eyes, and the little turned-up impertinent-looking nose, that gave, by its singular elevation, such a grotesque and humorous expression to her countenance. Often have I stolen out into the fields to listen to her odd tales, a pastime which I infinitely preferred to the detested task of conning my lessons. I can see her now before me, as she sat crouched on her three-legged stool, milking her favourite red cow, Strawberry, beneath the shade of the noble old ash in the meadow. They were happy days when I paused delighted by the side of the little white gate, leading into the garden, to catch the snatches of her old songs — to shudder at the treachery of False Anachin, and to enter, heart and soul, into the tragedy of Lord Thomas and fair Ellen.

Hannah first initiated me in ghostly lore. From her I
learned that village-maids had sweethearts, and that men—“heaven save the mark!”—had died for love. Even at that tender age, this last piece of legendary information seemed an inscrutable mystery. But Hannah, for a while, satisfied my doubts, by telling me that “I was young at present; before I died I should know all about it.” From Hannah I learned that gipsies could actually tell fortunes—that Fridays were unlucky days to travel on—and that charms were infallible.

I verily believe that the old woman had tried every species of this kind of necromancy, from the age of fifteen to fifty, without obtaining, through the potent influence of magic, the desired effect—a husband! Hannah was a spinster—or, as the country people denominate a single woman, who has to support a family—a grace widow.

Charms were with this antiquated graceless damsel, a cure for every complaint that afflicts humanity. For the cramp, she wore the cramp-bone of a sheep, so placed as to touch the part affected; for head-ache, a parcel of mustard seed, sewed up in a small flannel bag, and fixed under her cap on the crown of her head; and, if her teeth pained her, she forthwith proceeded to the orchard, and culled from the oldest codling-tree a small withered apple, which she deposited by moonlight on the gate-post of a distant field, whither she expected chance would never direct her steps again. But for the ague, that terror of the poor, a host of magical remedies were resorted to, with pretty equal success. The unerring cure, however, for this cruel disorder, shocked my organ of benevolence, with its selfishness, even when I was a child; but Hannah, though very charitable, felt no such scruples. Here it is:—“Any person afflicted with the ague, and wishing a fair riddance of this evil disorder, must, when the shaking fit is on, go down into a marsh, or low meadow, through which flows a running stream that has a plank over it for the benefit of foot passengers. The person, male or female, must cross the bridge without looking behind, and, standing on the bank, with face to the sun and back to the rivulet, suddenly throw the plank to the opposite shore, chanting these lines:—

OLD HANNAH; OR, THE CHARM
‘Ague! Ague! Ague! seize, I pray,
The first living thing that comes this way,
And throws the plank across the river,
But cease to plague me now for ever.
Take them, and shake them — torment them sore,
But, Ague, return to me no more.’

“The afflicted person is then to return home, carefully avoiding the road by which he came; and the first man, woman, or child, who is so unfortunate as to pass that way, and throw the plank over the stream, receives the evil spirit, which, like the hobgoblins of yore, has not the power to cross a running brook.”

At Hannah’s instigation, as I advanced towards womanhood, I have placed my shoes, “going and coming,” when resting in a strange bed, in the vain hope of beholding in my sleep my future spouse. For the same wise purpose, I have picked up a white stone, when passing over ground I had never before trodden, and, on my return home, deposited the prize under my pillow, as a mystic treasure that could reveal to me the secrets of futurity. I have blunted many a good penknife by cutting fern roots aslant, and paring apples, to try for the initials of the favoured swain by waving the parings nine times over my head, and casting them, with a sudden jerk, over my left shoulder. And then, the pips! When seated round a cheerful fire, at the present social season of the year, how often has that potent spell passed from girl to girl, as bright eyes and rosy cheeks bent anxiously over the roaring blaze, expecting, with ill-concealed impatience, the result of their invocation!

“If he loves me, crack and fly!
If he hates me, lie and die.”

And I, with whom laughter was almost a disease, have often, out of bravado, reversed the charm, yet listened, with a beating heart, to the snap that annihilated my hopes.

Charms of deeper importance no persuasions from Hannah could ever induce me to try. All her rhetoric, enforced with the true Suffolk whine, and a long pause between every letter, could never prevail on me to eat the
apple before the looking-glass at midnight to behold my sweetheart peeping over my left shoulder. The very idea of the thing rendered me nervous. I considered it a crime little short of mother Eve's eating the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden, and had I seen any reflection in the glass, I should have devoutly taken the apparition for no less a personage than the prince of darkness. However, one new year's eve, a clergyman (an old bachelor to boot) presented me with a piece of bridecake, which had been drawn nine times through the wedding-ring by the bride; proposing, on the whim of the moment, that we should both try the efficacy of the charm by dreaming upon it that very night. I eagerly entered upon the visionary speculation and dreamed — Queen Mab herself must have inspired the dream — that I was married to the King! The donor of the cake was less ambitious, and less fortunate. He imagined that a swarm of wasps maliciously invaded his bed, and devoured the cake from beneath his pillow. This, with the mad levity of sixteen, I treated as a just visitation, and emblematical of the forlorn state, falsely denominated "single blessedness."

But to return to Old Hannah. — The winter had closed in with severe frosts and snow. Every thing wore a cheerless aspect but Hannah's red face, which exhibited unusual signs of hilarity. Her work went briskly off her hands, and you might hear her voice all over the house singing her favourite old catches. No one could divine the reason why Hannah appeared as airy and as gay as a lark, when the inhabitants of the mansion, and even nature herself, had assumed a graver aspect — Hannah was in love! The bailiff who superintended the farm attached to the mansion, was a hale, middle aged man, and a widower withal. Proctor had whispered soft things in Hannah's ear, and she once more resolved to have recourse to one of her most potent charms to learn the sincerity of his intentions. She made me her confidante, and vain were all my efforts to dissuade her from the silly scheme. Hannah was no sceptic: she would have doubted her own existence, as soon as the power of her spells. She slept in a lonely garret, some
way apart from the rest of the family, and the charm she had chosen was a very simple one. It consisted only in putting on clean linen on the first Friday in the month, and stepping backwards into bed; repeating, as she did so, the following invocation three times over:—

“Friday night, Friday night,
As I lie dressed all in white,
I pray to heaven that I may see
The man that my husband is to be;
In his apparel and his array,
That he doth appear in every day;
With the children by his side,
Which I am to have when I am his bride!”

My brothers, two roguish boys, just escaped from the gloomy precincts of a free school to spend their Christmas holidays at the old mansion house, learned from Mary, the housemaid, Hannah’s intention. This knowledge afforded them infinite diversion, and called forth all their mischievous propensities. They sought the enamoured damsel, and, assuming a forced gravity of deportment, they assured her the charm would have no effect unless she took nine black pepper-corns, and shook them nine times in Proctor’s boot, and screwed them up in a little piece of paper, and tied them with a bit of green thread round her great toe. Hannah received the information with avidity, and never questioned the source whence her young masters derived their pretended knowledge. She went to bed perfectly satisfied, having smuggled one of Proctor’s boots out of his room, to give the nine ominous shakes to the nine black pepper-corns. The process of tying them round her toe would have afforded a subject for Wilkie’s pencil; but to these mysteries we were not admitted. The family retired to rest at the usual hour, and before eleven the house was in a state of perfect tranquillity. About midnight, our slumbers were broken by a piercing scream, or rather yell of terror. The sound came from Hannah’s garret; and, as it echoed through the long passages of the mansion, all the inhabitants sprang with one consent from the arms of sleep. Before I could reach my wrapping cloak, the door of my
apartment was suddenly burst open, and Hannah stood before me — her eyes fixed and staring, and her red face, for the first time, as white as her night dress. Her limbs were convulsed, as if under the influence of an ague fit, and her quivering lips appeared incapable of uttering a single word. There she stood, trembling and shaking before me, the tears rolling down her cheeks, and her hands uplifted in silent horror. Before I could find words to demand the reason of her nocturnal visit, the room was filled with eager and enquiring faces, and the two mischievous imps who had partly been the cause of her terrors were the foremost in the motley group. Anxious to learn the result of their invented charm, they exclaimed in a breath —

“Well, Hannah! — what did you see?”

She answered this abrupt question in a pitiful whine, of such unusual length and emphasis, that I was constrained to turn my back on the afflicted damsel, to hide the painful risibility with which I was irresistibly assailed.

“Oh! Master Thomas, and John, it was all your doings. Instead of Nehemiah Proctor — Death came to my bed-side!”

“Death!” repeated the brothers, exchanging a sly glance with each other — “That was rather a strange visitor. I suppose it was old Harry, who, loving hot things, had come to untie the pepper-corns from off your toe.”

After much desultory colloquy, the detail of the night’s adventure was drawn from old Hannah. She had gone up stairs backwards, and a tiresome job she had had of it; first up one steep flight of stairs, and then another — across Miss Sarah’s room, and down the long passage, at the end of which, as ill-luck would have it, the wind blew her candle out, and she dared not go back to light it, for fear of breaking the charm. On she went in the dark, stumbling at every step, till she reached her own door. There she heard such dismal howlings of the wind in the old garrets, and such strange noises, like the rattling of bones, that she stood quaking and shaking with fear. Then the difficulties she encountered, in securing the nine pepper-corns round her toe; and then, jumping backwards into bed, the

OLD HANNAH; OR, THE CHARM

21
first spring she gave broke the thread that held the pepper-
corns, and she heard them go rolling to every corner of the
room! "'Tis no use," says I, "seeking for them, I might as
well look for a needle in a truss of hay. I contrived at last to
get into bed," continued the old woman, in a very sulky
tone; "but I was in such a desperate fluster, I made three
mistakes in the charm, and that helped to do the mischief.
However, after I had made a finish of the conjuration, I lay
quite still in the bed, neither looking to the right nor to the
left, but with my eyes fixed on the door which was before
me, and thinking of Nehemiah Proctor, when I heard a soft
low voice say — Mother! mother! — I sprang up in the
bed, and the room was no longer dark, but as light as the
noon-day. And there stood at the foot of the bed the pretti-
est pick-a-ninny of a child I ever saw in my life, and I knew
the dear babe again — it was my sweet Caleb, whose corpse
that wicked old parson —— treated so undecently."

"Hannah," said I, "how was that?"

"My poor babe died in the work-house," continued
Hannah, sinking into her usual whine; "and Mr. —— came
to bury the child. It was past three o'clock, and he was in a
desperate hurry to get home to his dinner. My child's coffin
was not brought out quick enough to please him, and he
began to read the service over the empty grave, and —— in
short, it was not a Christian burial, and I told him so; but he
said, in his blustering way — ‘There, there, young woman,
it is of no use your making such a bother about the child;
you should have been ready before. It is your place to wait
for me, not mine to wait for you.’"

Hannah was at length brought to the main point of
her story. "Well, as I was telling you when I broke off to
give you an account of my dear Caleb’s funeral, I was so
struck with the beauty of the child's smiling face, that I
tried to take him in my arms; but, before I could touch the
vision, it turned suddenly into a hideous grinning skeleton,
that sprang on to the bed, and, seizing my throat between
his long bony fingers, cried, in a hollow voice, ‘I am Death!
the only husband you will ever have!’ It was no dream — it
was a struggle for life and death. — I felt his cold bones
rattle against me — I saw the blue flames flashing out of the eyeless holes in his skull — his grinning teeth chattered in his fleshless gums, as he tightened the strong gripe on my swelling throat — Oh! oh! I feel him! — I see him still!"

Her face, which had resumed, during her relation, its crimson hue, was again colourless; her lips firmly compressed, and her eyes wild and staring. "How this world is given to fibbing!" cried Tom, with a deliberate laugh; "what a mountain this mole-hill has become!"

I really pitied her distress. "Compose yourself, Hannah," I said; "you have been under the influence of a frightful dream."

"Indeed, Miss, I shall never forget it to my dying day — I was wide awake — I heard it with my own ears — I saw it with my own eyes — I felt its gripe on my flesh. You cannot persuade me out of my senses."

"It was very hard to raise such an outcry against your husband," cried Tom, "I will go and see what has become of him." Before he could leave the room, the door opened, and Master John, who had quietly retired, conducted into our presence a pasteboard skeleton of gigantic dimensions. At the sight of the apparition Hannah gave another frightful scream, and made a hasty retreat behind the bed-curtain, while the manufacturers of the scarecrow exclaimed, in a tone of triumph, "Here, Hannah! here's your husband!"

All my eloquence was vainly spent, when I endeavoured to convince Hannah that she had been deceived; — that my brothers had invented this scheme to cure her of resorting to charms for the future. She turned sullenly away, persisting in the truth of her own story. Tom, the inventor of the scheme, had introduced the pasteboard figure (which was skilfully constructed) into the room after Hannah was asleep, and placed it opposite the bed. Her dream was of the pretty child; but, awakening with the noise which "Death" made on his entrance, her vision was assailed by the frightful apparition, which seemed to grin horribly upon her in the moonlight. Imagination had done
all the rest; and the mischievous boys had not a little enjoyed the wonderful and exaggerated account that the love-lorn damsel had given of the spectre. The experiment was not successful. Hannah still continued to practise charms, and still remained a spinster; and the old garret acquired the reputation of being haunted ever after; a calumny which will never be effaced as long as one stone shall remain upon another.

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