

Chapter 1 The Ash-Tree

Visitors to Castringham Hall in Suffolk will find it almost unchanged from the days when our story took place. They can still see the beautiful old house with its gardens and lake. However, the one thing missing is the ash-tree, which used to stand, proud and tall, in front of the house, its branches almost touching the walls.

This story begins in 1690 with a strange, lonely old woman, Mrs Mothersole, who was found guilty of being a witch. Sir Matthew Fell, the owner of Castringham Hall at that time, described how she used to climb into the ash-tree outside his bedroom every time there was a full moon. He said that she usually carried a strange knife to cut off parts of the tree and that she talked to herself. Once he followed her home, but she disappeared and when he knocked on the door of her house, she came downstairs in her night clothes looking sleepy. He and the villagers agreed that it was certain she did these things by magic and so she was hanged. Before she died, she fought and shouted, and her last strange words were: 'There will be guests at the Hall.'

After the hanging, Sir Matthew felt uncomfortable and guilty, and he told his friend the vicar about his worries. 'You did the right thing. Sir Matthew,' were the wise words of the vicar. 'I'm sure she was a dangerous woman.' Sir Matthew felt happier.

That evening, Sir Matthew and the vicar went for a walk in the gardens of Castringham Hall. It was the night of the full moon. As they were returning to the house, Sir Matthew pointed to the ash-tree in great surprise. 'What kind of animal is that running down the ash-tree? It looks very strange.'

The vicar only saw the moving animal for a moment, but he thought that it had more than four legs. He shook his head. 'I



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must be tired,’ he thought to himself. ‘After all, what animal has more than four legs?’ He said nothing to Sir Matthew, but just wished him good night.

The next morning, Sir Matthew’s servants were surprised not to find him downstairs at his usual time of six o’clock. When seven o’clock and then eight o’clock passed, they began to suspect that something was terribly wrong and they went up to his bedroom. The door was locked. After knocking several times and still getting no answer from inside, they broke down the door and entered, to find that their fears were right. Sir Matthew’s body lay on the bed, dead and completely black. There were no wounds or other marks on him and everything in the room looked as usual, except that the window was wide open. His servants at first suspected poison but the doctor who was called found no such

thing and could offer no real explanation for Sir Matthews death.

When he heard the news, the vicar rushed to Castringham Hall, and, while he was waiting to hear the doctor's opinion, he looked at Sir Matthew's Bible, which was lying on a table by the dead man's bedside. He opened the book and the first words he read were from the book of Luke, chapter 8: 'Cut it down' were the words he read.



The servants locked Sir Matthew's room that day and it stayed locked up for the next forty years. By that time, Sir Richard Fell, Sir Matthews grandson, was living at Castringham Hall. He enjoyed spending money, especially on rebuilding parts of the Hall. He also decided to make the local church bigger so that his family could have a fine new seat in the new part of the church. In order to complete this building work, some of the graves in the graveyard had to be moved. One of the graves was that of Mrs Mothersole, the old witch who began this story. The villagers were excited about the opening of her grave and a crowd came to watch. However, they and the workmen were amazed to find the grave completely empty: no body, no bones, no dust.

At about this time, Sir Richard started to sleep very badly. The wind made his fire smoke and the curtains move and, because his room faced east, the sun woke him up early in the morning. One morning he asked his servant to help him choose a better room and he made a tour of the house, finding something wrong with each room. Each one was either too cold or too noisy or it faced the wrong direction. Finally, he found himself outside his grandfather's old room. His servant tried to persuade him not to go in:

'It's a bad room, sir. They say terrible things happened in there, and no one has opened the door since the death of your grandfather. Also, the ash-tree is right outside the window and that's always unlucky, sir.'

But Sir Richard was not listening. He unlocked the door and walked straight in. 'See? Nothing unusual in here, James!' he said and he opened the window. As he did so, he noticed how tall and dark the ash-tree was. Its branches seemed to be trying to reach into the room. But he said nothing.

At that moment, a stranger rang the bell at the front door of the Hall. The servant brought him up to the bedroom, where Sir Richard was standing, looking around him at the old paintings and old books. 'I must apologize for interrupting you, Sir Richard,' said the stranger, 'but please allow me to introduce myself. My name is William Crome. My grandfather was the vicar here in your grandfather's time. I have some papers to deliver to you.'

'Delighted to meet you,' said Sir Richard. 'James, please bring us some wine in the library and then move my clothes and things into this room for me. I will sleep here in future.'

While he was drinking a glass of wine with William Crome in the library, Sir Richard looked at the papers, many of which belonged to his grandfather. Among them he found the notes made by the old vicar about the day of Sir Matthew's mysterious death.

'Well, well,' said Sir Richard, laughing quietly. 'How very interesting! It seems that my grandfather's Bible gave a piece of advice on the day he died and your grandfather thought it could be about that old ash-tree outside the bedroom window - "Cut it down" the Good Book told him. Those were the first words your grandfather saw when he opened the Bible on the day of my grandfather's death.'

'Do you still have that old Bible?' asked William Crome, 'I'd very much like to see it.'

Sir Richard found the old Bible easily. 'Yes, here it is. A bit dusty, I'm afraid. Let's see what it has to tell me. I'll open it at any page and read the first words I see, just as your grandfather did.'

He opened the book and his eyes fell on the words, 'You shall look for me in the morning, and I shall not be here.' Sir Richard