

The Storyteller.

THE SHADE OF DARELL.

A FEW miles west of the town of Credition in Devonshire, there is a picturesque and unpretentious house standing in a cluster of oak-trees that bear the evidence of extreme age. The spot has been for centuries the home of the Darells. The only portion of the ancient family mansion now remaining lies about fifty yards from the present dwelling, and with a modern adjunct forms the stabling. There is a weird incongruity in the aspect of the place. The piece of grey ruin and the ancient oaks rise towering above their surroundings, the stubborn survivors of a past age, the memories of which overshadow the present with an influence that dominates the minds of all living within a radius of many miles of the homestead. No Darell during the last two centuries has permitted an oak to be felled, or a stone of the ruin to be dislodged, for their clings to these relics of his house a ghostly tradition which is cherished by the family with as sedulous a care as they guard the rust-eaten sword and suit of armour that once belonged to the founder of their race.

In the year 1549, when ten thousand of the people of Devon marched on Exeter, bearing crosses before them, in execution of their resolve to 'keep the old and ancient religion as their forefathers before them had done,' Reginald Darell rode with them by the side of Humphry Arundel, the Governor of St. Michael's Mount. When the rising had been suppressed, and his kinsman, the vicar of St. Thomas, had been hanged on the tower of his own church in his vestments, with his beads at his girdle, Darell lay in hiding from the State messengers. He had more than an average share of the quality that had given their name to his race—'Dare-all' and though a price was on his head, he refused to quit the country, vowing that neither Protector, nor Prince, nor pursuivant would prevent him from hearing Mass in the home of his ancestors on the following Christmas Day. He kept his vow, but was surprised at night in his home through the treachery of one of his retainers. Weakened by his wounds in the fierce struggle with his intending captors, he placed one hand, wet with his own blood, against the wall of the room for support, and, gripping with the other the hair of his traitorous servant, he sank in death on the floor. When the body was moved it was found that the servant, who had fallen with his master, was lifeless too, with a red stain of Darell's blood in the centre of his forehead. One of the pursuivants before departing had hewn in rough characters on the stone of the wall the following lines

The laws defied
Here Darell dyed.

And beneath were five red marks made by the finger-tips of Darell's hand. The scroll and the marks have survived the wasting effect of time, and are still faintly discernible on the wall of the chamber. Tradition tells that it was the first time a liegeman of the house had been false to the Darell motto of 'True to you,' and that during the centuries that succeeded, no Darell had ever maintained an unfaithful dependent. Any act of dishonesty committed by one of them had been sure to rouse the troubled spirit of Reginald Darell, and some ghostly portent had revealed the deed, and driven the unworthy servitor from the house.

'He's restless to-night,' said old Mr Darell, as a weird note, sounding like a distant cry of rage that ended in a wail, startled the ears of those assembled at the dinner-table. 'He's very restless to-night.'

'What on earth is it?' said one of the guests.

'Mr. Reginald, sir,' solemnly responded the grey-haired butler, who was at the moment presenting a dish to him.

The inquirer looked at his host for an explanation.

'The spirit of my ancestor Reginald Darell,' he replied.

'Oh, that's it,' said the guest, with a laugh; and the old servant bestowed on him a look of undisguised contempt.

'Yes,' continued Mr. Darell gravely, 'at this season he always reminds us of his presence. But that's only natural, if one may say so of the supernatural. You know his history. He never fails to keep his Christmas with us.'

'Really,' said another gentleman—he was a member of the Psychological Research Society—'that's most interesting. It would be very gratifying now if you would tell us something of the phenomena of the case, and the character of the evidence on which it is based.'

'Ah,' replied Mr. Darell, 'I'm sorry I can't satisfy you. What you ask just indicates the mistake you make. You modern investigators approach the matter from an utterly wrong standpoint. A little of the experience that men with my privileges possess would teach your society that no spirit in ghostdom with any pretensions to respectability would submit himself to your methods. Your modern "spooks"—the very name you give them is an insult to their order—may allow themselves to be examined and cross-examined like an arranging debtor in a bankruptcy case, but no spectre with claims to a lineage or a history would subject himself to the gross indignity to satisfy some prying sceptic's curiosity. No, a reverent spirit is an essential condition of mind in the mortal who hopes to bridge the gulf that lies between the material world and the higher order of spirits; but he who has once succeeded can never afterwards harbour a shadow of doubt as to the reality of the manifestation. But those thus favoured are the few—the chosen few. And yet,' continued Mr. Darell, with a reminiscent smile, 'I have seen the shade of a Darell myself, in the haunted room, and I am not likely to forget it.'

And then, at the general request, he consented to relate his experience.

'Down to the days of my own early youth,' he began, 'the tradition of the Darell ghost still held such sway over the neighbouring country as to be occasionally a source of some slight embarrassment to our family. Servants left our employment, sometimes on the shortest notice, from no other reason than that, being of a timid or imaginative disposition, they refused to submit themselves and their acts to the vigilant care with which the spirit of Reginald Darell was supposed to guard the interests of our house, and it was often a matter of difficulty to fill their places. My father, though true to the traditions of his race, had imbibed somewhat of the spirit of cultured scepticism that gave its tone to the thought of the latter half of the eighteenth century; and, partly from this tendency, and partly from a desire to avoid the inconveniences that sprang from an exaggerated belief in the spectre's powers, he did his best to allay the feeling. But in vain did he argue that the wailings of Darell were nothing more than the north winds of winter sighing through the secret recesses of the old ruin, and that most ghostly experiences had their origin in atmospheric or gastronomic disturbances: the memory of his ancestor was too strong for him. I myself, who had been bred on the traditions of our house from my infancy, remained quite unaffected by his reasoning. In the year 1848 our old coachman died, and we had to look for someone to succeed him. This was a matter of unusual difficulty, as the coachman's dwelling was in the stable-building adjoining the haunted room, and we were at length compelled to accept the services of a man named Crump, who had not much in the matter of references to recommend him. The family records told that each hundredth anniversary of Darell's death had been marked by ghostly manifestations of the most awe-inspiring kind, and, as this period was approaching, it was generally believed that Crump's frequent visits to the neighbouring inns were made with a view to fortifying himself against the dread of disembodied spirits by spirits of another kind. He was a morose, disagreeable man, and, before many months' service, he had proved himself thoroughly unsatisfactory.

The year 1849 came, and with it the supernatural terrors that had been anticipated. The coachman reported nightly disturbances in the haunted room. Each morning, with terrified looks, he told of unearthly sounds and mysterious occurrences—the displacement of furniture, and the disappearance of oats from the bins—that threw the household into a state of keen nervous agitation. Among the servants there was a young Irishman—Denis O'Connor—whose vivid Celtic imagination, nurtured on tales of the fairies, or "Good People," of his own land, yielded a respect to the tradition of the Darell ghost that bordered on veneration. Yet, strange to say, he was now the one member of the household who showed an inclination to be sceptical. He was no friend of Crump's, and, having formed a bad opinion of his character, was sorely puzzled at the man's hardihood in facing the alleged terrors of his situation.

"Ye see, sir," he said to me in one of his confidences, "there was never a man with a bad conscience that could face any spirit, let alone Mr. Reginald, the terror of bad servants. It's just lies the man's tellin', so it is, to keep a hold on the place he's not fit to be in. At the whisper of a real ghost he'd be off in the shake of a duck's tail."

'Now, here was a matter touching the honour of the family. The possibility of our faith in my ancestor's ghost being thus exploited by one of our own dependents for a dishonest purpose, and turned in a manner against ourselves, was an idea I could not brook. I was a youngster of eighteen at the time, and O'Connor's words suggested to me a boy's method for testing the truth of his suspicion. I determined to play the ghost myself, to see the effect it would have upon Crump, and I arranged my plans with O'Connor.

'One night, when all was quiet, and the usual hour for Crump's return from the nearest inn was approaching, I stole from the house in my ghostly habiliments.

'When I had gone a few steps I paused. The black stillness of the night seemed to close in upon me, and I was seized with a sense of lonely isolation from everything human that filled me with a sudden awe. What if the coachman's reports were true? Would the spirit of Darell permit the spot hallowed by his death to be desecrated by an irreverent fraud? A vision of the haunted room, garnished as in the past, rose before me, and I saw the old tragedy re-enacted. Then a horrible revulsion of feeling took possession of me. I felt myself powerless to advance. An invisible influence seemed forcing me back to the house. But there was nothing in life I so dreaded as the thought of yielding to fear: I could not belie my name, and I vowed that, come what might, I would carry out my resolve. Mastering my repugnance by a strong effort, I drew near to the stables. The hideous whiteness of my attire heightened my nervous foreboding by a strange, fanciful dread. It seemed to me the garb of a doomed man—the livery of death, in which he is clothed to be led to his fate. The silence was unbroken by the rustling of a leaf, and I would have welcomed any sound, even the moaning of Darell, to relieve the acute tension of my nerves. I reached the door of the building and pushed back the bolt, and, without a pause, though the grating of the rusty iron made my pulses throb, I entered the stable. As I passed a stall that was used for one of the horses, I stretched out my hand and felt for him in the darkness—I sought for a scrap of comfort in the thought that anything that breathed was near me. The horse started violently at my touch, and stood trembling under my hand; then I passed into the haunted room. Placing myself as nearly as I could judge in the centre, I stood with my back to the dreaded wall, while in front, to the right and left, were two doors through which Crump should pass on his way to his bedchamber. Had the place not been in utter darkness I could not, I think, have supported the strain of my overwrought feelings. It was a kind of relief to me that I could see nothing. But even as it was, as I stood breathlessly awaiting the moment for the performance of my part, the terror of my surroundings gradually overmastered me, and I could scarcely resist an impulse to fly from the building. Then a slight sound