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Poems

Poems on several occasions

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A true story of an apparition

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A TRUE STORY

OF AN

APPARITION.

SCEPTICS (whose strength of argument makes out
That wisdom's deep inquiries end in doubt)
Hold this assertion positive and clear,
That sprites are pure delusions rais'd by fear.
Not that fam'd ghost, which in presaging sound,
Call'd Brutus to Philippi's fatal ground;
Nor can Tiberius Gracchus' goary shade
These ever-doubting disputants persuade.
Straight they with smiles reply, Those tales of old
By visionary priests were made and told;
Oh might some ghost at dead of night appear,
And make you own conviction by your fear!
I know your sneers my easy faith accuse,
Which with such idle legends scares the Muse:
But think not that I tell those vulgar sprights,
Which frighted boys relate on winter-nights;
How cleanly milk-maids meet the fairy train,
How headless horses drag the clinking chain;
Night-roaming ghosts, by saucer eye-balls known,
The common spectres of each country-town:
No, I such fables can like you despise,
And laugh to hear these nurse-invented lies.

Yet has not oft the fraudful guardian's fright
Compell'd him to restore an orphan's right?
And can we doubt that horrid ghosts ascend,
Which on the conscious murd'rer's steps attend?
Hear then, and let attested truth prevail,
From faithful lips I learn'd the dreadful tale.

Where Arden's forest spreads its limits wide,
Whose branching paths the doubtful road divide,
A trav'ler took his solitary way;
When low beneath the hills was sunk the day.
And now the skies with gath'ring darkness lour,
The branches rustle with the threaten'd show'r;
With sudden blasts the forest murmurs loud,
Indented lightnings cleave the sable cloud;
Thunder on thunder breaks, the tempest roars,
And heav'n discharges all his wat'ry stores.
The wand'ring trav'ler shelter seeks in vain,
And shrinks and shivers with the beating rain:
On his steed's neck the slacken'd bridle lay,
Who chose with cautious steps th' uncertain way;
And now he checks the rein, and halts to hear
If any noise foretold a village near.
At length from far a stream of light he sees
Extend its level rays between the trees;
Thither he speeds, and, as he nearer came,
Joyful he knew the lamp's domestic flame
That trembled through the window; cross the way
Darts forth the barking cur, and stands at bay.

It was an ancient lonely house, that stood
Upon the borders of the spacious wood:
Here tow'rs and antique battlements arise,
And there in heaps the moulder'd ruin lies;

Some lord this manſion held in days of yore,
To chace the wolf, and pierce the foaming boar:
How chang'd, alas! from what it once had been,
'Tis now degraded to a public inn.

Straight he diſmounts, repeats his loud commands;
Swift at the gate the ready landlord ſtands;
With frequent cringe he bows, and begs excuſe,
His houſe was full, and ev'ry bed in uſe.
What, not a garret, and no ſtraw to ſpare?
Why then the kitchen-fire and elbow-chair
Shall ſerve for once to nod away the night.
The kitchen ever is the ſervants right,
Replies the hoſt; there all the fire around,
The Count's tir'd footmen ſnore upon the ground.

The maid, who liſten'd to this whole debate,
With pity learn'd the weary ſtranger's fate.
Be brave, ſhe cries, you ſtill may be our gueſt,
Our haunted room was ever held the beſt;
If then your valour can the fright ſuſtain
Of rattling curtains and the clinking chain;
If your courageous tongue have power to talk,
When round your bed the horrid ghoſt ſhall walk;
If you dare aſk it, why it leaves its tomb,
I'll ſee your ſheets well air'd, and ſhow the room.
Soon as the frighted maid her tale had told,
The ſtranger enter'd, for his heart was bold.

The damſel led him through a ſpacious hall,
Where ivy hung the half-demoliſh'd wall;
She frequent look'd behind, and chang'd her hue,
While Fancy tipt the candle's flame with blue.
And now they gain'd the winding ſtair's aſcent,
And to the loneſome room of terrors went.

When all was ready, ſwift retir'd the maid;
The watch-lights burn; tuck'd warm in bed was laid
The hardy ſtranger, and attends the ſprite
Till his accuſtom'd walk at dead of night.
At firſt he hears the wind, with hollow roar,
Shake the looſe lock, and ſwing the creaking door;
Nearer and nearer draws the dreadful ſound
Of rattling chains, that dragg'd upon the ground:
When lo! the ſpectre came with horrid ſtride,
Approach'd the bed, and drew the curtains wide!
In human form the ghaſtly phantom ſtood,
Expos'd his mangled boſom, dy'd with blood.
Then ſilent pointing to his wounded breaſt,
Thrice wav'd his hand. Beneath the frighted gueſt
The bed-cords trembled, and with ſhudd'ring fear,
Sweat chill'd his limbs, high roſe his briſtled hair;
Then mutt'ring haſty pray'rs, he mann'd his heart,
And cry'd aloud: Say, whence, and who thou art!
The ſtalking ghoſt, with hollow voice, replies:
Three years are counted, ſince with mortal eyes
I ſaw the ſun, and vital air reſpir'd.
Like thee benighted, and with travel tir'd,
Within theſe walls I ſlept. O thirſt of gain!
See, ſtill the planks the bloody mark retain;
Stretch'd on this very bed, from ſleep I ſtart,
And ſee the ſteel impending o'er my heart;
The barb'rous hoſteſs held the lifted knife;
The floor ran purple with my guſhing life.
My treaſure now they ſeize, the golden ſpoil
They bury deep beneath the graſs-grown ſoil,
Far in the common field. Be bold, ariſe,
My ſteps ſhall lead thee to the ſecret prize;

There dig and find; let that thy care reward:
Call loud on Juſtice, bid her not retard
To puniſh murder; lay my ghoſt at reſt,
So ſhall with peace ſecure thy nights be bleſt;
And when beneath theſe boards my bones are found,
Decent inter them in ſome ſacred ground.
Here ceas'd the ghoſt. The ſtranger ſprings from bed,
And boldly follows where the phantom led;
The half-worn ſtony ſtairs they now deſcend,
Where paſſages obſcure their arches bend.
Silent they walk; and now through groves they paſs,
Now through wet meads their ſteps imprint the graſs;
At length amidſt a ſpacious field they came:
There ſtops the ſpectre, and aſcends in flame.
Amaz'd he ſtood; no buſh, or briar was found,
To teach his morning ſearch to find the ground;
What could he do? the night was hideous dark,
Fear ſhook his joints, and nature dropt the mark:
With that he ſtarting wak'd, and rais'd his head,
But found the golden mark was left in bed.
What is the ſtateſman's vaſt ambitious ſcheme,
But a ſhort viſion, and a golden dream?
Pow'r, wealth, and title elevate his hope;
He wakes. But for a garter finds a rope.