

THE OLD TOWN

I fell, one night some fifteen years ago, into what seemed the power of faery.

I had gone with a young man and his sister—friends and relations of my own—to pick stories out of an old countryman; and we were coming home talking over what he had told us. It was dark, and our imaginations were excited by his stories of apparitions, and this may have brought us, unknown to us, to the threshold, between sleeping and waking, where Sphinxes and Chimaeras sit open-eyed and where there are always murmurings and whisperings. I cannot think that what we saw was an imagination of the waking mind. We had come under some trees that made the road very dark, when the girl saw a bright light moving slowly across the road. Her brother and myself saw nothing, and did not see anything until we had walked for about half-an-hour along the edge of the river and down a narrow lane to some fields where there was a ruined church covered with ivy, and the foundations of what was called "the Old Town," which had been burned down, it was said, in Cromwell's day. We had stood for some few minutes, so far as I can recollect, looking over the fields full of stones and brambles and elder-bushes, when I saw a small bright light on the horizon, as it seemed, mounting up slowly towards the sky; then we saw other faint lights for a minute or two, and at last a bright flame like the flame of a torch moving rapidly over the river. We saw it all in such a dream, and it seems all so unreal, that I have never written of it until now, and hardly ever spoken of it, and even when thinking, because of some unreasoning impulse, I have avoided giving it weight in the argument. Perhaps I have felt that my recollections of things seen when the sense of reality was weakened must be untrustworthy. A few months ago, however, I talked it over with my two friends, and compared their somewhat meagre recollections with my own. That sense of unreality was all the more wonderful because the next day I heard sounds as unaccountable as were those lights, and without any emotion of unreality, and I remember them with perfect distinctness and confidence. The girl was sitting reading under a large old-fashioned mirror, and I was reading and writing a couple of yards away, when I heard a sound as if a shower of peas had been thrown against the mirror, and while I was looking at it I heard the sound again, and presently, while I was alone in the room, I heard a sound as if something much bigger than a pea had struck the wainscoting beside my head. And after that for some days came other sights and sounds, not to me but to the girl, her brother, and the servants. Now it was a bright light, now it was letters of fire that vanished before they could be read, now it was a heavy foot moving about in the seemingly empty house. One wonders whether creatures who live, the country people believe, wherever men and women have lived in earlier times, followed us from the ruins of the old town? or did they come from the banks of the river by the trees where the first light had shone for a moment?

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