LINE FIELDS

SUPERNATURAL VISITATIONS

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Belén Pérez Simarro

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Supernatural Visitations

[266] Professor K. of the University of Strasburgh, in the former part of his life, resided at Frankfort on the Maine, where he exercised the profession of a physician. One day being invited to dine with a party of gentlemen, after dinner, as is the custom in Germany, coffee was brought in; an animated conversation commenced, and at length the discourse turned upon apparitions; K. was amongst those who strenuously combated the idea of supernatural visitations, as preposterous and absurd; and a gentleman, who was a Captain in the army, with equal zeal supported the opposite side of the question.

The Question was long and warmly contended, till in the end the attention of the whole company was engrossed by the dispute. At length the Captain, proposed to K. to accompany him that evening to his country house; where, if he did not convince him of the reality of supernatural agency, he would then allow himself, in the estimation of the present company, to whom he appealed as judges of the controversy, to be defeated. The professor, with a laugh, instantly consented to the proposal, if the captain would promise upon his honour, that no trick should be played off upon him: the Captain readily gave his word that no imposition should be resorted to, and here the matter rested. The wine circulated briskly, and the afternoon passed in the utmost conviviality. The Captain took his glass cheerfully, while K. prudently reserved himself, to be completely on his guard against any manoeuvre that might be practised in order to deceive him, or, as he properly observed, 'to be in full and sober possession of his faculties, that whatever should be presented to [267] his sight, might be examined through the medium of his reason.' The company broke up at rather an early hour, and the Captain and K. set out together on their adventure. When they drew near the Captain's house, he suddenly stopped near the entrance to a solemn grove of trees. They descended from their vehicle, and walked towards the grove. The Captain traced a large circle on the ground, into which he requested K. to enter. He then solemnly asked him if he possessed sufficient resolution to remain there alone to complete the adventure; to which K. replied in the
affirmative. He added further, ‘whatever you may witness, stir not, I charge you, from this spot, till you see me again; if you step beyond this circle, it will be your immediate destruction.’ He then left the Professor to his own meditations, who could not refrain from smiling at what he thought the assumed solemnity of his acquaintance, and the whimsical situation in which he was placed. The night was clear and frosty, and the stars shone with a peculiar brilliancy: he looked around on all sides to observe from whence he might expect his ghostly visitant. He directed his regards towards the grove of trees: he perceived a small spark of fire at a considerable distance within it’s [sic] gloomy shade. It advanced nearer; he then concluded it was a torch borne by some person who was in the Captain’s secret, and who was to personate a ghost. It advanced nearer; and the light encreased; [sic] until it approached the edge of the circle wherein he was placed. ‘It was then,’ to use his own expressions, ‘I seemed surrounded with a fiery atmosphere: the heavens and every object before visible, was excluded from my sight.’ But now a figure of the most undefinable description absorbed his whole attention; his imagination had never yet conceived any thing so truly fearful. What appeared to him the more remarkabl[e], was an awful benignity pourtrayed [sic] in it’s [sic] countenance, and with which it appeared to regard him. He contemplated for a while this dreadful object, but at length fear began insensibly to arrest his faculties. He sank down on his knees to implore the protection of heaven; he remarked, for his eyes were still riveted on the mysterious appearance, which remained stationary, and earnestly regarded him, that at every repetition of the name of the Almighty, it assumed a more benignant expression of countenance, whilst a terrific brilliancy gleamed from it’s [sic] eyes. He fell prostrate on the ground, fervently imploring heaven to remove from him the object of his terrors. After a while he raised his head, and beheld the mysterious light fading by degrees in the gloomy shades of the grove from which it issued. It soon entirely disappeared, and the Captain joined him almost at the same moment. During their walk to the Captain’s house, which was close at hand, the Captain asked his companion, ‘Are you convinced that what you have now witnessed was supernatural?’ K. replied, ‘he could not give a determinate answer to that question; he could not on natural principles account for what he had seen, it certainly was not like any thing earthly, he therefore begged to be excused from saying any more on a subject which he could not comprehend.’ The Captain replied, ‘he was sorry he was not convinced,’ and added, with a sigh, ‘he was still more sorry that he had ever attempted to convince him.’ Thus far it may be considered as no more than a common phantasmagorical trick, played off on the credulity of the Professor; but in the end the performer paid dearly for his exhibition: he had, like a person ignorant of a complicated piece of machinery, given impetus to a power which he has not the knowledge to controul, [sic] and which in the end proves fatal to him who puts it in motion. K. now assumed a
gaiety which was very foreign to his feelings: his thoughts, in spite of his endeavours, were perpetually recurring to the events of the evening; but in proportion as he forced conversation the Captain evidently declined it, becoming more and more thoughtful and abstracted every moment. After supper K. challenged his friend to take a glass of wine, hoping it would rouse him from those reflections which seemed to press so heavy on his mind. But the wine and the Professor’s discourse were alike disregarded: nothing could dispel the settled melancholy which seemed to deprive him of the power of speech; and immediately after supper, the Captain had ordered all his servants to bed. It drew towards midnight, [268] and he remained still absorbed in thought, but apparently not wishing to retire. K. was silently smoking his pipe, when on a sudden a heavy step is heard in the passage; it approaches the room in which they are sitting,—a knock is heard: the Captain raises his head and looks mournfully at K. The knock is repeated,—both are silent: a third knock is heard, and K. breaks the silence by asking his friend why he does not order the person in. Ere the Captain could reply, the room door was flung wildly open, when behold! the same dreadful appearance which K. had already witnessed stood in the doorway. It’s [sic] awful benignity of countenance was now changed into the most appalling and terrific frown. A large dog which was in the room crept whining and trembling behind the Captain’s chair. For a few moments the figure remained stationary, and then motioned the Captain to follow it; he rushed towards the door, the figure receded before him, and K. determined to accompany his friend, followed with the dog. They proceeded unobstructed into the court yard; the doors and gates seemed to open spontaneously before them. From the court yard they passed into the open fields; K. with the dog were about 20 or 30 paces behind the Captain. At length they reached the spot near to the entrance of the grove, where the circle was traced; the figure stood still, when on a sudden a bright column of flame shot up, a loud shriek was heard, a heavy body seemed to fall from a considerable height, and in a moment all was silence and darkness. K. called loudly on the Captain, but received no answer. Alarmed for the safety of his friend, he fled back to the house, and quickly assembled the family. They proceeded to the spot, and found the apparently lifeless body of the Captain stretched on the ground. The Professor ascertained, on examination, that the heart still beat faintly; he was instantly conveyed home, and all proper means were resorted to to restore animation; he revived a little, and seemed sensible of their attentions; but remained speechless till his death, which took place in three days after. Down one side, from head to foot, the flesh was livid and black, as if from a fall or severe bruise. The affair was hushed up in the immediate neighbourhood, and his sudden death was attributed to apoplexy.