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The Ash Tree – Part 1

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 guilt)', 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 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 Matthew's 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 mans 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.