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The Ash Tree – Part 3

But Sir Richard did not live to see them cut the ash-tree down. That night, at exactly midnight, a strange and terrible animal jumped from Sir Richard's bed, ran silently to the window and disappeared into the shadowy branches of the enormous tree.

No one was there to see it but the next morning they found Sir Richard's body, like his grandfather's, dead and completely black. When William Crome heard the news of his new friend's death, the words from the Bible came back to him: 'You shall look for me in the morning and I shall not be here.'

He immediately hurried to Castringham Hall, where he found the family and servants crowded round the ash-tree.

'Sir Richard's last orders were that we should cut down this tree,' explained James and then, in a quieter voice, he went on. 'and there's something very strange about that tree, sir. Very strange. It's hollow and they say something lives inside it.'

The gardener put his ladder against the tree and climbed up to look inside. As he held a light over the hole, his face suddenly looked so terrified that several of the people watching from below screamed and turned to run.

The gardener himself fell off the ladder, dropping his lamp down into the hollow tree, which quickly caught fire. As the tree started to burn, the crowd saw an animal run from the tree.

They screamed in horror as they saw its shape and size. It looked like an enormous spider, about the same size as a man's head and covered all over with grey hair.

'Look, there's another! And another!' someone shouted. For a long time the men watched these terrifying animals trying to escape from the fire one after another, and then they killed them with sticks.

At last, the fire burned itself out and William Crome, James the servant and some of the braver people went to look inside the blackened tree. There they found the bones of a human being.

The doctors who examined it afterwards said that it was the body of a woman who died around 1690 . . . the year that old Mrs Mothersole was hanged.