

The White Lady

Folk-Lore And Legends: English

English

Advanced
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There was once on a time an old woman who lived near Heathfield, in Devonshire. She made a slight mistake, I do not know how, and got up at midnight, thinking it to be morning. This good woman mounted her horse, and set off, panniers, cloak, and all, on her way to market. Anon she heard a cry of hounds, and soon perceived a hare making rapidly towards her. The hare, however, took a turn and a leap and got on the top of the hedge, as if it would say to the old woman "Come, catch me." She liked such hunting as this very well, put forth her hand, secured the game, popped it into one of the panniers, covered it over, and rode forward. She had not gone far, when great was her alarm at perceiving on the dismal and solitary waste of Heathfield, advancing at full pace, a headless horse, bearing a black and grim rider, with horns sprouting from under a little jockey-cap, and having a cloven foot thrust into one stirrup. He was surrounded by a pack of hounds which had tails that whisked about and shone like fire, while the air itself had a strong sulphurous scent. These were signs not to be mistaken, and the poor old woman knew in a moment that huntsman and hounds were taking a ride from the regions below. It soon, however, appeared that however clever the rider might be, he was no conjuror, for he very civilly asked the old woman if she could set him right, and point out which way the hare was flown. The old woman probably thought it was no harm to pay the father of lies in his own coin, so she boldly gave him a negative, and he rode on, not suspecting the cheat. When he was out of sight the old woman perceived the hare in the pannier began to move, and at length, to her great amazement, it changed into a beautiful young lady,

all in white, who thus addressed her preserver—

“Good dame, I admire your courage, and I thank you for the kindness with which you have saved me from a state of suffering that must not be told to human ears. Do not start when I tell you that I am not an inhabitant of the earth. For a great crime committed during the time I dwelt upon it, I was doomed, as a punishment in the other world, to be constantly pursued either above or below ground by evil spirits, until I could get behind their tails whilst they passed on in search of me. This difficult object, by your means, I have now happily effected, and, as a reward for your kindness, I promise that all your hens shall lay two eggs instead of one, and that your cows shall yield the most plentiful store of milk all the year round, that you shall talk twice as much as you ever did before, and your husband stand no chance in any matter between you to be settled by the tongue. But beware of the devil, and don't grumble about tithes, for my enemy and yours may do you an ill-turn when he finds out you were clever enough to cheat even him, since, like all great impostors, he does not like to be cheated himself. He can assume all shapes, except those of the lamb and dove.”

The lady in white then vanished. The old woman found the best possible luck that morning in her traffic. And to this day the story goes in the town, that from the Saviour of the world having hallowed the form of the lamb, and the Holy Ghost that of the dove, they can never be assumed by the mortal enemy of the human race under any circumstances.

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