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BOTANICAL DIVERSIONS.—No. II.



The Nunnery Oak.

THE NANNAU OAK, which is here represented, had been for ages an object of superstitious dread to the peasantry of Merionethshire. On the 13th July, 1813, it fell suddenly to the ground, completely worn out with age. A drawing of this remarkable tree had fortunately been made by Sir Richard Colt Hoare, only a few hours before it fell, which has perpetuated its resemblance, and will long preserve the recollections connected with its history. It represents it as it then stood, pierced and hollowed by time, and blasted by the stroke of lightning; and with its blanched and withered branches forming a strong contrast to the freshness and beauty of the surrounding scene.

In the neighbourhood it was known as the Haunted Oak—the Spirit's Blasted Tree,—or, in Welch, “Ce-

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bren yr Ellyll,” the Hobgoblin's Hollow Tree. It owed its fearful names to a circumstance well known in the history of that country. Howel Sele, a Welsh chieftain, and Lord of Nannau, was privately slain, during a hunting quarrel, by his cousin, Owen Glyn-dwr, or Glendower, and hidden for a long time within its hollow trunk. The remembrance of this tragical event was afterwards preserved by tradition in the family of the Vaughans of Hengwyl; nor was it wholly lost among the peasants, who would point out to the traveller the “Haunted Oak;” and as they passed it in the gloom of night, would quicken their pace, and perhaps murmur a prayer for personal protection, against the crafts and assaults of the demon of the tree.

"The irregular and wild Glyndwr, (at least so tradition says) being enraged with Howel, who had refused to espouse his kinsman's and his country's cause, determined, during a cessation of arms, like Earl Percy of old, "to force the red deer from the forest brake," in the domains of the unbending lord of Nannau. Thither he repaired; and encountering Howell alone, but armed, they fought. Glyndwr conquered—his cousin fell. Owen returned in haste to his stronghold, Glyndwrdray. Howel was sought for, but nowhere found. The vassals of Nannau were filled with consternation and alarm; Sele's sorrowing lady shut herself up from the world in the solitude of her now gloomy castle. Year succeeded year, and yet no tidings were received of the absent Howel. His fate remained long unknown to all save Glyndwr, and his companion Madog. At length, one tempestuous evening in November, an armed horseman was descried urging his flagging steed up the hill that leads to Nannau, from the neighbouring town of Dolgellau: It was Madog—who, after the death of the fiery, yet generous Glyndwr, hastened to fulfil his last command, and unravel the horrid mystery. He told his melancholy tale, and referred to the blasted oak in confirmation of its painful truth. Howel's unhallowed sepulchre was opened, and his skeleton discovered, grasping with his right hand his rusty sword. The remains were removed to the neighbouring monastery of Cymmer, for burial, and masses were performed for the repose of the troubled spirit of the Lancastrian Sele [Cambro-Briton].

The above tradition forms the subject of a very fine ballad by Mr. Warrington, printed in the notes to *Marmion*, by Sir Walter Scott. Let Madog, in the poet's words, complete the tale.

Led by the ardor of the chace,
Far distant from his own domain,
From where Garthmaelen spreads her shade,
The Glyndwr sought the opening plain.

With head aloft and antlers wide,
A red-buck roused, then cross'd his view;
Stung with the sight, and wild with rage,
Swift from the wood fierce Howel flew.

* * * * *
They fought, and doubtful long the fray,
The Glyndwr gave the fatal wound.
Still mournful must my tale proceed,
And its last act all dreadful sound.

I marked a broad and blasted oak,
Scorch'd by the lightning's livid glare,
Hollow its stem from branch to root,
And all its shrivell'd arms were bare.

Be this, I cried, his proper grave!
(The thought in me was deadly sin)
Aloft we rais'd the hapless chief,
And dropped his bleeding corpse within.

* * * * *
He led them near the blasted oak,
Then conscious, from the scene withdrew;
The peasants work with trembling haste,
And lay the whitened bones to view.

Back they recoil'd: the right hand still
Contracted, grasp'd a rusty sword,
Which erst in many a battle gleamed,
And proudly deck'd their slaughtered lord.

Pale lights on Caday's rocks were seen,
And midnight voices heard to moan;
'Twas even said the blasted oak
Convulsive heav'd a hollow groan.

And to this day the peasant still
With cautious fear avoids the ground;
In each wild branch a spectre sees,
And trembles at each rising sound.

This celebrated oak measured 27 feet 6 inches in circumference, and stood on the estate of Sir Robert

Williams Vaughan, Nannau Park, Merionethshire; who, after its fall, had a variety of utensils manufactured from its wood, which is of a beautiful dark colour, approaching to ebony; and there is scarcely a house in Dolgelle that does not contain an engraving of this venerable tree, framed with the wood. At Nannau there are several relics; amongst others, a frame containing an engraved portrait of Pitt, and under it the following motto: "Y Gwr fal y dderwn a wynebodd y dymestl." "This man, like the oak, faced the tempest."

A sepulchral tree somewhat similar has lately been discovered in France, in the hollow trunk of which was found the skeleton of a man, with his head downwards. No traditions, however, are extant, which either throw, or pretend to throw, any light upon this curious occurrence: neither were there any attendant circumstances which could prove whether the individual had been murdered, or whether "some fantastical suicide had chosen this extraordinary mode of self-destruction."