



The Hemlock Tree and Its Legends

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From the Preface.

It is the general custom when anything new is brought before the public in the shape of a book, to preface it with a few remarks explanatory of the origin and design of the work; sometimes an apology is offered, and often an humble petition for leniency. The author of the present little work does not wish to be altogether out of fashion, and therefore, more as an explanation than anything else, offers the following remarks to those who may wish to read them. Apology he makes none; his attempt is justified in the motive. His design was to save from destruction one of those vast monuments of antiquity which ligature has scattered so plentifully over the American continent, and which Sir Walter Scott, according to Washington Irving, declared were far superior to anything that art has or can produce. I speak of the gigantic trees that abound in the American forest. And as the first part of this work, that is, the petition of the Hemlock Tree, was published previous to that of *Abbotsford*, it was a gratification to find that two such as have just been mentioned, should, at least in this particular, agree in the same sentiment with himself.

The Tree which is the subject of the forepart of this work, and, indeed, the cause of the whole production, is at present growing at Garrattsville, a small village, beautifully located in one of the finest of those rich valleys that abound in the State of New York, in the town of New Lisbon, and the county of Otsego, about fifteen or sixteen miles from Cooperstown, a place rendered classical by the tales of the Deerslayer and Leather-stocking.

The writer once lived at the Villa named above, and frequently resorted to the foot of the Hemlock Tree when he wished to enjoy the luxury of a book without interruption. Its immense size and beauty commanded his admiration; its vast age, his veneration. He used to fancy that his thoughts, when under that tree, flowed more freely and more sweetly than anywhere else. Doubtless this was all fancy, but it is 'nevertheless a fact, and it will account for the affectionate regard that he had for it.

It was with astonishment and regret that, on visiting this favorite haunt, after an absence of two or three weeks, he beheld almost all the trees in the immediate neighborhood felled by the ruthless axe, and an envious cut into the Old Hemlock himself, showing the design to be to sweep off everything in the shape of a tree from the place, without regard to beauty, size, or antiquity. After beholding the desolation for some time, he returned home, and ascertaining there that the land had changed owners, and that the present owner was Mr. Berthier Whitford, a gentleman to the Author well known, and one who, though an industrious and thriving farmer, could yet find time and take delight in a good book, it occurred to the Author that, if he could only see him before the tree was cut down, it would be no hard matter to induce him to spare it. Taking a little refreshment, he resolved to visit him forthwith; but, previously remembering that old song, "'Woodman, spare that tree,'" the idea that Mr. Whitford was the very man to appreciate a few verses in behalf of the Old Hemlock, and having sometimes before dabbled in rhymes, he at once set about the composition of that which is now given to the public. When he sat down to his task he had no intention of writing more than five or six stanzas, but having begun, and finding the matter opening before him in a manner that surprised as well as gratified him, it occurred that it would not be difficult to make the Old Tree the medium of a number of Indian legends, which is hinted at in the petition of the Hemlock Tree....

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