

## *The Haunted Closet*

by Susan Archer Weiss

My sister wrote to me that she had taken a house for the summer, “a queer, old-fashioned house”, away down on the lonely Georgian coast, where the children would have the benefit of the sea-breeze and the surf-bathing prescribed for them after a sickly spring season. And she urged me to come at once and join them in their new abode.

Queer and old-fashioned indeed I found it—a jumble of brick and stone and timber, each room of which had the appearance of having been built separately by successive owners with regard only to personal convenience, and in open defiance of all architectural rules. Yet I liked this irregularity and the odd nooks and corners which were forever unexpectedly “turning up” in the most improbable places. The halls were large and airy, and the rooms abundantly supplied with closets, windows and doors—the latter, for the most part, opening upon broad piazzas, or queer little porches stuck here or there, like excrescences upon the walls. Very cold and bleak in the winter, no doubt, but for a summer residence delightful.

At the back of the main building projected a sort of long and narrow wooden gallery, consisting of a row of three or four small rooms—last used, it appeared, as store-rooms for grain and vegetables—all opening upon a covered passage-way connecting with a brick office which had formerly stood separate from the house. These rooms and the office were unused by the family: for the gallery was not in very good repair, and the office-room, as it was called, was quite too remote to be desirable; besides there was plenty of room in the main building.

Yet the first time I visited the little brick office, it at once took my fancy. It was a good-sized, comfortable room, with a fireplace on one side, and a queer little triangular closet, or cupboard in a corner, bearing the marks of books and ink-stains on the shelves. There was a door opening into the gallery, and another upon a quiet and secluded corner of the garden, out of sight of the house; and the two windows, one looking towards the sea and the other over the large grassy backyard, were shaded from the sun by vines and the long drooping branches of a weeping-willow, which cast green shadows and breathed fresh odors throughout the apartment. The very place I thought for a study; a charming nook in which to lay reading some interesting volume by day, or quietly dreaming by night, away from the noise of the children and the screaming of the baby; so I at once chose this little room for my own, bedroom and study in one, and after giving it a thorough purification and airing, took possession.

It proved quite as pleasant as I anticipated. Here, awaking in the morning, I would open the windows and let in the fresh sea-breeze, with the fragrance of the dewy vine-leaves that clustered on the walls without; here, in the sultry noon-tide, I dozed or dreamed away the hours, lying upon the little lounge near the window and glancing from the book in my hand upward, into the deep, cool recesses of the willow branches above; and, when evening came, I would sit in my little garden-door, looking upon the neglected wilderness of bowery shrubs and dewy flowers, and rejoice in the quiet and seclusion which I loved so much.

Thus I was sitting, about twilight, a few days after I had moved into my little hermitage, as I called it. The air was very still: scarce a rustle disturbed the branches of the willow, and the surf rippling on the beach made but a low murmur. Suddenly, in the midst of the silence, I became aware of a faint, uncertain sound, like the whispering of voices and rustling of garments. Fancying that my sister or the children had playfully stolen upon me in my abstraction, I looked around; but to my surprise, there was no one visible.

It must have been a fancy, of course, I thought, and turned once more to the book; but hardly had I done so when again I heard the rustling of drapery, and what sounded like a footfall on the floor. I was startled and sat breathless, staring around and listening. Once or twice it was repeated and then all was as still as before.

In order that my story may be fully comprehended and credited, I must inform the reader that I was at this time a woman of four-and-twenty, had never in my life been ill or nervous, was the farthest possible from being superstitiously inclined, and had been accustomed to regard with ridicule all stories concerning ghosts, goblins, and other so-called spiritual manifestations. Such being the case, it is not to be supposed that the circumstance just narrated should have made any deep or lasting impression on me. On the contrary, though regarding it as certainly singular, I set it down as one of those odd and fleeting fancies which do sometimes puzzle and bewilder even the most rational, and as such, thought no more of it at the time.

But on the following day, and again on the next, the mysterious sounds which I have described were repeated. It was exactly as though some person or persons were occupying the room with me—moving with soft footsteps and speaking in low whispers, as if unwilling to be heard. Once it seemed as though some small article were dropped upon the floor, with a metallic sound dulled by a carpet, though there was none in the room; and then I distinctly distinguished a grating noise, as of a key turned in a lock: after which, for the rest of the day, all was quiet.

I said nothing to anyone about these noises; though, by this time, I was almost convinced that they were not the effects of my imagination, I yet decided to wait, to watch for their recurrence, and to be thoroughly convinced of their real existence before exposing myself to laughter and ridicule by relating so improbable a story.

It was not long that I was kept in suspense. A day or two after, about four o'clock in the afternoon—a most un-ghost-like hour—I was reclining on my lounge between the door and the window, reading *The Woman in White*, then just out. Suddenly, as I turned a leaf, I heard a faint grating sound, as of a key, just behind me, and then a voice speaking in a low, indistinct murmur, inexpressibly hollow and sepulchral.

I did not stir. I arrested the hand which was about to turn the page, and, holding my breath, listened with deliberate eagerness. I would now be certain that this was no fancy playing me fantastic tricks.

For an instant only came the indistinct murmur, and then a silence. The sunlight was streaming down in slender, golden threads through the gently swaying branches of the willows; out on the lawn I saw the gardener at work, and on the beach heard the merry voices of the children: I felt

courageous. Rising I searched around the room, under the bed and lounge, and in the triangular cupboard in the corner—the only places where a person could be concealed. Not a living thing was to be seen, and I was about closing the closet-door when I heard distinctly a low, faint laugh, close in my ear, and then a moaning sigh, or groan, which seemed to die away into infinite distance.

I confess that at this instant my nerves did fail me, and a cold shiver ran curdling through my veins. I hastily closed the closet-door, and, without waiting even to snatch up my book, ran along the gallery to the other part of the house.

Should I tell my sister and brother-in-law? No; I still shrank from the thought of their laughter. Should I return to the room which appeared haunted by some invisible presence, and sleep there again alone? I must confess that I did not like the idea; yet what good reason could I give for so suddenly changing my apartment? Finally—and the reader will credit me with the possession of almost more than feminine courage in so doing—I resolved to keep silent for the present, and spend the night, as usual, in my little office-room.

The first few hours passed away quietly, and I was just falling into a doze, when I was aroused by the door of the corner closet slowly creaking. A faint moonlight illumined the room sufficiently to enable me to perceive that this door stood ajar, though I distinctly recollected having closed it before retiring. It had neither lock nor bolt by which it could be secured.

I sat up in bed, watched the closet and looking half-fearfully around the room; and as I looked, with my eyes fixed upon the half-open door, I heard within a jingle of glasses and phials. It was a sound not to be mistaken, and almost at the same instant a voice said near me, in a hoarse whisper:

*“Bring a light!”*

I started up trembling, and with a cold perspiration breaking out on my forehead, reached for a match and the lamp, and tried to strike a light, but in vain. I had but one or two matches left, and as I dropped the last in despair, I heard the voice which had before spoken, say slowly and distinctly:

*“Poison!”*

My first impulse now was to flee from this haunted room; but, as I arose for that purpose, a feeling such as I had never before known—a feeling of superstitious fear and horror—overcame me, and, had my life depended upon it, I could not have passed that closet and sped through that long, deserted gallery alone. I sank back upon my pillow and drew the sheets about my head, and remained thus until daybreak.

It was now no longer a question with me as to whether I should or should not inform my relatives of what had occurred. I told them the whole, and as I had expected, was met with laughter and badinage.

“Try it, yourself!” was all I could say in answer; and on that night my brother-in-law, Mr. Walton, agreed to occupy the office-room, I remaining with my sister.

“Well, Richard, did you see or hear anything of Lousia’s ghost?” inquired my sister, playfully, on our meeting at the breakfast table in the morning.

“I saw nothing,” he answered rather thoughtfully. “But really, Emma, it did appear as though, more than once during the night, I heard some unaccountable sounds—the turning of a key in the lock, a sort of moaning and sobbing child’s voice, and very distinctly the shutting of a small door. And this last sound,” he added decidedly, “certainly came from the closet or cupboard in the corner of the room.”

Emma opened her eyes and looked frightened. “Good gracious, Richard! you don’t really think that you heard these sounds in the room, with no one there but yourself?”

“It is very unaccountable at present, I admit; but you know what I do not believe in the supernatural. We must examine more fully into the matter.”

For some days he kept sole possession of the room, reporting once or twice that he had again heard the mysterious noises, and especially the grating of a rusty key, as in the lock of the corner cupboard, was very distinctly audible. Three times, he said, he had heard this sound, and yet, as we all knew, there was neither lock nor key to the cupboard door, only traces of one that had been there. He had examined all the doors and windows, had searched the whole room minutely, but without discovering the slightest clue to the mystery. There was no adjoining, no cellar below or garret above whence the sounds could have proceeded, and the whole thing was most singular and unaccountable. And once he even hesitatingly suggested, could it be, after all, that there were in reality such things as spiritual manifestations? My own mind echoed the inquiry.

Our nearest neighbor was a farmer who lived about a mile distant, and of himself and his wife we made inquiries in regard to the former occupants of the house.

It had for twenty years within his memory, Mr. Grover said, belonged to a small farmer, an illiterate but good sort of man, who had finally sold out and purchased a better place farther south. Then the house, with a part of the land adjoining, had been taken by an Englishman who was known as Doctor Mather, and was understood to very learned and a writer. Mr. Grover and the rest of the neighbors believed him to be “a little cracked.” He used to go about the country gathering sea-weeds, plants, and insects, but would repel all approach to acquaintance, and reply very rudely to any inquiry of the country-people as to the use or purpose of his collections. He had a wife, with whom it was said he lived on bad terms, and three sickly children whose presence he would scarcely tolerate. The wife and two of the children died, and then Doctor Mather went away with the remaining child, leaving the place to an agent for sale. It was then rented for a time by some people, who, for reasons known only to themselves, would not remain their term out; and finally, we had taken it, furnished as it was, for the summer. This was all that Mr. Grover knew.

Upon hearing this simple account, there instinctively formed in my mind an explanation, if such can be called, of the mysterious circumstances which had so puzzled and disturbed us. This Doctor Mather—this morose and unsocial man, and unkind husband and father, as he was described to be—this solitary collector of herbs—of what deeds might he not have been guilty here in the seclusion of this lonely old country-house? “They had all three died;” and my memory reverted with a shudder to the word “*Poison!*” which I had heard uttered by that mysterious voice. Perhaps murder had been committed in this house—even in that very office-room which I had appropriated; and this impression was deepened upon being informed by Mr. Grover, in answer to my inquiries, that that room had in reality been Doctor Mather’s study or library, into which no one was ever admitted; and that he would sometimes remain in it whole days and nights together without being interrupted—having his meals brought and deposited outside the door, in the adjoining gallery.

The office and gallery were now carefully shunned by us all, with the exception of Mr. Walton, who haunted it with a persistency doubtless equal to that of the ghost itself. He was determined, he said, to learn all that could be learned of this mystery, and if possible, to thoroughly unravel it.

One evening after a rain, a heavy sea-fog set in upon the coast, and the atmosphere became all at once so damp and chilly as to render a fire indispensable to comfort. As I have said, the rooms were large and airy, and were, moreover, carpetless and sparingly furnished. This was pleasant enough in warm weather, but inexpressibly dreary in this chill and damp spell. The two most comfortable apartments of the house for cool weather were undoubtedly the nursery and the office-room, which were situated at opposite extremities of the long building. So, leaving the former to the nurses and children, Mr. Walton proposed that he and Emma and I should make ourselves comfortable for the evening in the haunted room, as he now called it, mauger the ghost; and, as an inducement, promised us a hot oyster supper. The oysters were to be had fresh out of the water, almost at our very door, just for the trouble of picking them up.

Certainly the room, as Emma and I rather hesitatingly entered it, looked pleasant and cheerful enough, with its pine-wood fire, and the tea-kettle steaming on the hearth. No one made any allusion to the ghost; Mr. Walton, indeed, seemed to have forgotten the subject in the interest of supper, though I, and I fancied also Emma, felt a little nervous as we occasionally glanced furtively around the room. Once or twice, also, I caught myself looking over my shoulder toward the corner cupboard behind me.

Supper over, Mr. Walton who was a fine reader, entertained us with some chapters from Dickens’ latest work, and we were soon so much interested as to forget everything else. In the very midst of this, however, I was startled by the feeling of a faint breath of cool air upon my neck, and at the same instant, saw my sister’s eyes lifted with a frightened glance toward the corner closet behind me.

I instinctively started up and crossed over to the opposite side of the fireplace.

“What is it Louisa?,” said Emma, nervously, “I saw the door of the closet open.”

Mr. Walton closed his book and sat looking attentively at the cupboard. And it was whilst we were all thus, perfectly silent and motionless, that a sound broke the stillness—at first what seemed the jingling of phials and rattling of chains, and then the faint, uncertain sound of muffled voices which I had heard more than once before, all coming unmistakably from the little triangular closet in the corner.

“Oh Richard, do you hear?” gasped Emma, seizing fast hold of her husband’s arm. For myself, I came very near screaming outright.

“Hush—be quiet!” said Mr. Walton. And taking the lamp, he advanced to the cupboard, threw wide open the door, and surveyed it minutely.

It was simply a closet built of deal boards against the naked whitewashed walls of the room. Three rickety shelves unoccupied and much stained with ink and other liquids, were all it contained. Between the lower and middle shelves was a strip of wood nailed against the wall, as if to cover a place where, as we could see, the plaster had fallen away; and beneath this strip could be discerned part of what seemed to be a rat-hole. Besides these, not a thing was visible in the closet.

And yet as I live, while we three stood there gazing into the empty closet, from its recesses came a hollow laugh, and a low, childish voice said, plaintively:

*“Three—all dead—poisoned!”*

Emma sank down, half swooning. Even Mr. Walton’s face, as I fancied, became a shade paler; and then we heard the voice again:

*“Bury them—grave under the magnolia—”*

I looked again at my brother-in-law, and saw his lips compress and a kind of desperation appear in his face. He advanced close to the closet, put his head almost within, and shouted loudly and distinctly:

“Who are you? Who is it that speaks?”

In answer came a shriek, loud and appalling, ringing in our very ears. Then the same breath of cold air swept past, followed by the violent shutting of a door and grating of a key in a lock. We looked at each other aghast, but before we had time to utter a word, we were again startled by a different sound—that of children’s cries, and footsteps hurrying along the gallery to the room in which we were. The next moment the door burst open, and in rushed Momma Abbey, the colored nurse, bearing baby in her arms, followed by her assistant, Chloe, dragging the three elder children after her—all the latter pale and terrified, and Freddy in particular shrieking shrilly.

“What is the matter? What has happened?” screamed Emma, forgetting her own recent terror in alarm for her children.

“Oh, marster! oh, missus!” gasped nurse, piteously, her eyes rolling white in their sockets, “A ghos’! A ghos’ in the nursery!”

“A ghost?”

“In the corner closet in the nursery! I heerd it! We all heerd it! Marster Freddy was lookin’ in dat closet to see if dar was any mice in de trap what he’d set, and sure’s I’s alive dis minute, marster, somebody in dat ‘are closet hollered out, ‘Who is you? Who dat talkin’ dar?’ We all heerd it, we did!”

Mr. Walton turned around and once more looked into the closet. Then taking the tongs from the hearth, he inserted them behind the bit of board which I have mentioned was nailed to the wall, and wrenched it away, exposing, as he did so, a small aperture surrounded by a metallic ring.

“I have discovered the mystery at last!” he said, turning to us with a smile. “It is no ghost, but simply a speaking-tube. Stay here, and when you hear the spirits, place your mouth to this and answer them.”

He left the room, and in a few moments we again heard the mysterious, sepulchral voice in the closet, only much more distinct now, since the board had been removed.

*“How are you all?”*

I summoned the courage to answer: “Much better!” And then there came a low laugh, ghostly enough certainly, to have caused our blood to curdle, had we not been aware of the identity of the apparent ghost.

And so it was all explained, and the mystery of the haunted closet cleared up. There was as Mr. Walton had said, a speaking-tube communicating between the office-room and the distant nursery—placed there, doubtless, by the eccentric English naturalist, Dr. Mather, for his own convenience; and he, on leaving the house, had simply carelessly boarded over the mouths of the tube, not dreaming of, or indifferent to, the consequences of this negligence. Probably it had been these very mysterious sounds which had driven away the last occupants of the house; and certain it is that, but for the fortunate discovery of their source, we ourselves might have been won over to the ranks of spiritualists and ghost-believers. Such results have, ere now, been produced by slighter causes than these.

The explanation of the various sounds heard by us in the office-room is very simple. The corresponding mouth of the tube was in a closet in the nursery, precisely similar to that in the office. Momma Abbey stored in this closet the various cups, phials, etc., used in the nursery, and, to secure these from the children, the closet was generally kept locked. It was the opening and shutting of this closet door, with grating of the key in the rusty lock, that had so often alarmed me; and when it was open and a search going on among its contents for some special article, the noises thus made and the words spoken in the closet could be heard, more or less distinctly, in the office. Also, when the closet door was suddenly shut to, it would produce a current of air

through the tube sufficient to slightly open the loosely-hung door of the office cupboard. Master Freddy's idea of setting a mouse-trap in the closet, baited with poisoned food, had added much to the effect of the mystery; and it was little Mary's voice which had pleaded so pathetically for the three victims of her brother's experiment, imploring that they might be buried under the magnolia-tree.

Mr. Walton used to say that it was almost a pity that the secret of the tube should have been discovered, and thereby so capital a ghost-story spoiled.—*Scribner's Monthly*.

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