

The Ghost of the Grate
by Sarah P.E. Hawthorne

“This is as strange a maze as e’er men trod;
And there is in this business more than nature
was ever conduct of; some oracle must rectify
your knowledge.” —*The Tempest*

Some twelve years since, the wealthiest man in Orange County disappeared. I say disappeared, but it was feared that he was murdered; and, as a detective, I was employed to ferret out the case. I was a young man then, and had suddenly risen to prominence by bringing a gang of skillful counterfeiters to justice.

Solomon Rothmore, the missing man, was a widower with an only child, a daughter, aged eighteen, of whom I shall have more to say.

The most singular and suspicious part of the case was that he left a will, bequeathing his vast wealth to his only brother, one James Rothmore. A small legacy was left to the daughter, and a trifling sum to an old servant.

I had an interview with Miss Edith Rothmore before I decided on any course of action.

She was a tall, queenly girl, with eyes like the r flets of pansies, and hair of the true golden hue about which artists rave, and in whose meshes men’s hearts are caught. Calmly, and with perfect self-possession, she gave me every detail of the case.

In the grounds, adjoining Rothmore Lodge, was a summer-house, where her father often sat to read or smoke. On the day of his disappearance, the servants were off on a two days’ leave of absence, with one exception; old Jabez, the gardener, to whom the small sum had been willed, was somewhere on the estate. Miss Rothmore herself was spending the summer at Newport. When the servants came home, they found Jabez nearly wild at his master’s absence. His hat was found in the summer-house, and on the seat was a stain of blood.

That was all.

“But, O Mr. Curtis, I know papa was murdered; and I do not know where his poor body is laid!” she cried, clasping her hands in an agony of grief.

Her forced composure broken, she gave way to tears.

“You may rely on me,” I said, nervously. I can’t bear a woman’s tears.

“I have not told you all,” she continued, raising her dewy eyes to mine. “I do not believe papa made that will. It was forged.”

“And whom do you suspect?”

“I cannot tell you,” she said, decidedly.

After a few more words, I left her. If the will was a forgery, it put a new light on the case. And the one benefited by it might have been the murderer; but he was the man’s own and only brother. It was more probable it was Jabez, the gardener.

Following this clew, I “shadowed” the man for months, without learning anything that gave me the slightest foundation to that theory.

One morning, early in the fall, an artist sought an entrance to James Rothmore’s house, and asked to be allowed to sketch the Lodge, and a view of the river and falls from there. I—for I was personating an artist, did not like the looks of Mr. Rothmore. He was a grizzled, wiry man of fifty, with small, restless eyes that were never at rest.

After some haggling about the price, I obtained his permission to occupy a few rooms in his late brother’s residence for a month.

In a few hours, I was comfortably seated in a room in the dead man’s house. Many believed him to be a suicide, or a wanderer upon the face of the earth.

As I ascended the wide stairs and stepped softly on carpets into whose rich pile my feet sank, an unaccountable *something* struck a chill to my heart. Room after room did I open, but all seemed too luxurious for my occupancy. The very portraits on the walls seemed to frown at me as I passed by them.

At length, I came to a large, unfurnished room in the west wing. Three French windows gave it a good light, and a grate offered means for warmth. Ascending still higher, I found a small room, tastily furnished in blue, and there I left my portmanteau.

With fuel from the shed, I soon had a good fire in the unfurnished apartment mentioned. From a lovely *boudoir* I brought a table and arm-chair. By the aid of my spirit-lamp, I made a cup of tea; and, opening a can of tongue, I made a good supper with the roll of bread I had brought.

The wind came up as the sun went down, and I was getting a trifle lonesome, when I bethought me of a library, such as ought to belong to this establishment. With a book and my cigar, I could enjoy myself anywhere.

In the library, a large, sombre room, I saw a small portrait of Miss Edith, painted on ivory, and I took that also to bear me company.

The cigar was of the best flavor, the armchair easy, and the book calculated to put a man to sleep. I awoke with a start. The gray ashes of my cigar powdered my knee; the lamp had burned low. I looked at the fire. It had burned down to coals. From those dying embers arose a thin, gray vapor. Faint at first, it rose in sinuous curves, like a sea-serpent, higher—higher! now faint, now darker in hue, until, widening, it took on shape.

From this ghostly veil of vapor the form of a man was evolved. A man past the prime of life, with gray hair dabbled in blood, and a gaping wound in the throat, which had the leanness and outstanding cords of age. Never can I forget the expression on that face, the anxiety in those sunken eyes.

Frozen with horror to the spot, I neither stirred nor moved until it faded away in a cloud of diaphanous vapor.

Sleep did not visit my eyes again for the night, and in the morning I began a search for that face. I found it on the wall of the music-room. *It was the face of the missing man.*

The room I deserted for a lower one; and, indeed, I tried every grate in the house during the next week, but no such vision greeted my eyes. Then I tried that grate again, with a like result. From the ashes always arose that ghostly figure.

I had to carry out my pretence of painting, and had some pictures for show, which I bought for the occasion. I had arrived at one conclusion: The late tenet of Rothmore Lodge was not only murdered, but his body was burned in that grate. From the ashes of his casket of clay arose the man, or his image. I carefully cleaned the grate, but found that by so doing my unearthly visitant had deserted me. From the siftings of the ashes, I saved a little bundle of relics which fully proved my supposition; some—— But I will spare the reader's sensibilities. It is enough to say that *what* I found was indisputable proof that a human being had been cut in pieces and burned there.

It was necessary for me to see the will of Solomon Rothmore. I did so, and found it correct. The handwriting was an exact copy of his name as I saw it on the fly-leaf of books in the library. But a peculiar water-mark in the paper, and sign manual, I might say, of the maker, was of a form only two years old. By the date of the document, it was six years since it was written, and the witnesses were dead.

Here, indeed, was another strong point in the evidence pointing to James Rothmore, the morose, younger brother of the murdered man. I soon paid Mr. Rothmore a call. It was in the evening, and lamps were lighted, for his home boasted none of the elegancies of the Lodge. We had a quiet game of chess, then over our cigars we became talkative.

“Singular about your brother!” I said, carelessly.

Rothmore darted a quick, suspicious look at me.

“Not so very. He had been insane before, and he probably wandered [off] and killed himself,” he said, in a dry tone.

Word by word and slowly, I told him of the ghost of the grate. A deathly pallor settled on his face, his hands twitched convulsively as his eyes fixed themselves on my face in a steady stare. As I closed, I arose, threw my cigar in the fire, and, laying my hand on his arm, said:—

“I arrest you as his murderer!”

Before I could read the warrant, he sprang at my throat, at which he caught with his long, yellow teeth like a hound. I would not have given much for my life had not two trusty minions of the law been beneath the window, awaiting my call. Even against three he fought like a madman; and glad enough was I when he was safe in the Tombs.

There are many who will remember his trial and sentence—a sentence he never lived to endure.

Miss Rothmore was his only heir, and inherited not only her father’s estate, but that of her uncle. I received a handsome sum for my services, but was not satisfied.

Ahem! I hardly know how to tell the rest. But Miss Rothmore was very lonely in spite of her wealth, and married the man she loved in defiance of Mrs. Grundy. Not her coachmen? Oh, no! A detective—in short, *me!* And very happy we have been for ten beautiful years. Little children use that telltale room now for a play-room. They are Edith’s babies and mine; but I can never look at that grate with its polished bars, without a shudder.

Never again say that “fire tells no tales.” It is not true. Listen. Possibly I have not made all the details of this tale as clear to my readers as they would like.

Between Solomon and James Rothmore an estrangement had existed for years. Their father, dying, left the lion’s share of his property to the elder, who prospered in every undertaking; *vice versa*, James was always unfortunate. Both fell in love with fair Edwina Leroy, their father’s ward, and Solomon was her choice. The younger killed his brother in a fit of ungovernable rage; concealed the body until the servants fled the house; then, in the dead of night, reduced it to ashes.

The forged will was an afterthought, and he found a lawyer vile enough to aid him in his designs. For his niece he had always entertained a sort of fierce hatred, because she resembled the woman he had loved and lost.

Explain it as you will, savants or students of psychometry, I know that he came to justice by the aid of, not a fabrication of my disordered brain, but through the agency of the soul of the owner of the Lodge, the *fac simile* of whose corporeal frame rose, phoenix-like, from its own ashes.

I had never been a believer in the supernatural, and this was my first and only experience with the great unexplainable. Neither do I wish to make any converts to that faith.

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