

A Ghost in the Garret

Mary Kyle Dallas

“This is the garret floor. It’s a relic of the past,” said Miss Pettigrew. “They do not build such garrets now. The house is more than a hundred years old. It was my grandfather’s grandfather who built it. By the way,” continued the lady, turning on her guest in a sharp and bird-like manner peculiar to her—“by the way, this garret is haunted.”

“How delightful! Do tell me about the ghost!” cried the young lady who had followed her into the great room which covered half the large house.

“The ghost, Miss Walker, is a soldier, an officer who was killed by a jealous husband in a duel, which took place here. He walks up and down, trailing his sword after him, and is said to be as pale as death; however, he hasn’t been seen for ten years, though the servants are terribly afraid of him yet.

“They sleep,” said Miss Pettigrew, “in that half of the garret which is partitioned off, and use the backstairs. They wouldn’t come here for the world, so I make a sort of store closet of those shelves there, and feel perfectly safe about my sweetmeats.

“Here,” said Miss Pettigrew, opening a little door—“here is still another pair of stairs. They lead to the orchard. It is said that that idiotic lady who caused the duel had them built that her lover might come to the garret without discovery. It may be true. It’s evident that they were never built in the original house. Nobody ever uses them now; and they are actually mouldering away.”

With some difficulty she moved a rusty bolt, and the young lady peeped down the rickety stairs.

“I can fancy the ghost coming up,” she said, with a little, soft shriek, as she drew back. “How romantic!”

Descending the large, well-carpeted stairs that ran down the middle of the house, the two ladies entered the parlor, where an elderly gentleman sat waiting. The young lady then addressed him:

“The rooms are lovely, pa, and if Miss Pettigrew will let us come, we ought to be delighted.”

Miss Pettigrew gave a polite wave of the hand, which signified that she was charmed to receive such boarders.

“Elsie, dear, go out and get into the carriage,” said the old gentleman. “Miss Pettigrew and I will have a word about terms.”

The young lady tripped lightly away.

“I have but one condition to make, madam,” said the old gentleman, the instant she was gone. “That you will take no single gentlemen boarders.”

“I have one, sir,” said Miss Pettigrew, “Mr. Jeffers, seventy-five years old, and quite rheumatic.”

“Ah! I don’t mind *him*,” responded Mr. Walker. “I—I mean— In fact, I have brought my daughter to this quiet place to separate her from a person who is paying his addresses to her, and I am afraid he will follow us.”

“Not into *this* house,” said Miss Pettigrew. “My other rooms are filled; two families, mother, father, and children; a widow lady and her daughter; and Miss Budwick, principal of a school in——.”

“The place will suit me perfectly,” said Mr. Walker. “We’ll come over tomorrow morning;” and with a bow, he trotted down the path and also took his place in the carriage.

About a fortnight from the day on which she had received her first boarder, Miss Pettigrew descended to the dining room at an early hour, as was her wont, and in a very cheerful mood.

“This is very comfortable, indeed,” thought she to herself, “*very* comfortable. Why shouldn’t I turn a penny as well as my neighbors? Certainly my house is full of genteel people, and it’s really pleasanter than to live alone.” And Miss Pettigrew regarded her well-spread breakfast table with just pride and pleasure.

“Very comfortable, indeed— My goodness!” The latter portion of the sentence did not belong to the former. It was an ejaculation forced from her by the sudden appearance of her two servants, pale as death, hollow-eyed, and with compressed mouths, who, having made each a courtesy, ground themselves against the wall and stood looking at nothing, in a way, as Miss Pettigrew afterward said, calculated to freeze the blood of an observer.

“My goodness!” repeated Miss Pettigrew. “Fanny Ann and Abby Jane, what’s the matter? Is the house on fire?”

“No, Miss,” replied Fanny Ann.

“Have you seen a ghost?” proceeded Miss Pettigrew.

“Yes, Miss,” replied Abby Jane.

“And please, Miss, we can’t sleep in that awful place no more,” continued Fanny Ann. “If you can’t put us somewhere else, we must go. We’ve seen him three times.”

“Three nights hand-running,” said Abby Jane.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” asked Miss Pettigrew.

“We thought you wouldn’t believe us,” said Fanny Ann.

“Well, I believe you’ve seen something terrifying,” said Miss Pettigrew, “and I’ll see what I can do. Don’t mention this to anybody. You’d frighten some of my boarders away, perhaps. I’ll talk it over after breakfast, and I’ll wager I’ll lay the ghost.”

Fanny Ann and Abby Jane departed, promising silence, and the boarders ate their breakfast as usual. Afterward, behind closed doors, she heard this narrative:

At eleven o'clock every night for the past week the girls had heard a noise in the outer garret; but the last three having been lit by a brilliant moon, they had been able to see through a crack in the door, and espied—"as sure as she was a living woman," Abby Jane declared—a ghostly soldier in complete uniform, pacing up and down.

The first time the figure vanished rapidly. The second time it was longer in going; but on the third night they saw it enter by the disused stairway, and heard it speak. What it said was: "Darling, I would die for you! I would risk all to meet you!"

"We could look no longer, Miss," said Abby Jane. "We thought we should take spasms."

Miss Pettigrew rubbed her nose.

"This is unpleasant," she said. "Certainly, the ghost was an officer; and my own Aunt Lydia declared that she saw him. That was before her daughter, Grace, eloped with—Good gracious! I have it!"

"What, Miss?" cried Abby Jane.

"An IDEA!" said Miss Pettigrew. "Girls, you may take a mattress on the parlor floor to-night, and hold your tongues until tomorrow morning."

The police force of —— was not large, but that night two of its members stood concealed behind the largest apple trees in the orchard at the east of Miss Pettigrew's house. They were No. 12 and No. 14. These figures glittered on their cap-bands.

Within, on the other side of the garret door, Miss Pettigrew, in a flowered dressing gown, stood listening intently. The moonlight flooded the old garret. Stern and strong of mind as she was, Miss Pettigrew felt a cold shudder run up her spine. It was now a quarter to eleven. Soon the old clock in the hall below croaked, rolled, and struck the hour. At that instant a faint creaking was heard. A door opened—not the stair door, the one into the hall—and a figure, all in white, stole in and sat down on a great box. It was very ghostly. "Ugh!" shuddered Miss Pettigrew. "I declare I feel scary." Hark! another faint creaking. The door to the mysterious stairway opened softly and a figure entered. It was dressed in a soldier's uniform. It wore a sword, but its face—its awful face, though it bore the features of a man, was of an awful ghostly white, lips and all, enlivened only by two great black eyes, that glared about them.

Miss Pettigrew shivered until the door rattled. The next instant the two ghosts ran into each other's arms. Another instant, and the stair door was opened with a bang, and Officer No. 12 followed Officer No. 14 into the garret, each armed with a club.

"Ghost or not I'm quite safe now," said Miss Pettigrew, and opened the garret door with her kerosene lamp in her hand.

"So we've caught you," said Officer No. 12.

“And we’ll find how ghosts like being locked up in jail,” said Officer No. 14, as he pulled a wet handkerchief with two holes in it from the ghost’s face and revealed a very pale human countenance, adorned by a mustache which had most carefully waxed points, and, under other circumstances, might have been very fierce indeed.

“And this young woman—your servant, most likely—shall we arrest her along with the burglar? Do you make a charge against *her*, Miss Pettigrew?”

At these words the female ghost, who had hitherto done nothing but wring its hands, tore from its form the sheet in which it was enveloped and revealed the face and figure of Miss Elsie Walker, who instantly went down on her knees at the feet of Miss Pettigrew.

“He is not a burglar, dear Miss Pettigrew. We were neither of us doing anything dishonest. It’s Captain Slasher, to whom I am engaged. Pa wouldn’t let us meet as we wished, so we had to meet as we could, and the dress and disguise were only assumed to save me if we were seen by anyone. Don’t—don’t—don’t arrest my Alfred for a thief, when it is only his great love for me that—that—that—”

Here Miss Walker’s voice failed her and she became hysterical, and Captain Slasher was heard to say, rather faintly and nervously:

“Be calm, Elsie, be calm.”

“Officers,” said Miss Pettigrew, “I am sorry to waste your time, but will you be seated—take some boxes, pray—until I summon another person.”

And Miss Pettigrew sailed from the room and returned ten minutes later with old Mr. Walker, hastily clad in his dressing gown, on whose appearance the gallant captain grew pale, and Miss Elsie wrung her hands again.

“A pretty piece of business indeed!” said Mr. Walker.

“Yes, sir,” said Miss Pettigrew, “pretty indeed. Here is a decent young man—in the army, I suppose—who is driven to sneaking up backstairs into a garret to pay attention to a respectable young lady who prefers to receive him in the parlor. Now if that young lady loses her character, whose fault is it, sir? The fault of those who drove her to it. We are old, Mr. Walker, but we have been young. I’m single, but”—and Miss Pettigrew drew out her pocket handkerchief—“*I have a heart*. I should have been somebody’s wife twenty-five years ago if I had had the spirit that girl had; but I was meek and submissive—and—no matter. If you really have nothing serious against that young man, hadn’t you better let him marry your daughter, Mr. Walker?”

“Perhaps I had, Amelia—I mean Miss Pettigrew,” said the old gentleman.

“You angelic woman!” cried Miss Elsie, casting herself into Miss Pettigrew’s arms.

“Sir, I thank you,” said Captain Slasher, who had grown red to the tips of his ears.

“I suppose no charge whatever will be made, then,” said Officer No. 12, in an irritated tone.

“Oh! no, This is not a case for charges,” said Miss Pettigrew.

“Good-night, then,” said Officer No. 14, turning on his heel and departing as he came, but in a huff.

“You may call on my daughter two evenings a week and see her in Miss Pettigrew’s presence,” said the old gentleman to the captain. “If my daughter were not motherless this would not have happened.”

The captain shook hands with everybody and followed the policemen. Miss Pettigrew bolted the garret door. Mr. Walker assisted her.

“I thought you did not know me, Amelia,” he said.

“You might very well have forgotten me, I’m so dreadfully changed,” sighed Miss Pettigrew.

And after these mysterious whispers they went downstairs.

There was a wedding at Miss Pettigrew’s that autumn. Elsie was united to her captain in the presence of all the boarders and many friends. But Miss Pettigrew did not take boarders again the next summer. Before that time came she had changed her name, and had married old Mr. Walker.

“It’s rather late in life, Elsie,” said she, as she embraced her step-daughter; “but the fact is, your pa and I were old sweethearts, and but for the cruelty of the old folks, who broke the match, I suppose I should have been your mother in reality.”

Elsie did not discuss the question. She only kissed her and said:

“You’ve been my best friend, at all events, dear mamma.”

New York Ledger, February 19, 1881