

## *A Mysterious Disappearance*

Miss MacWinkle was of that age when unmarried people are afraid to go out into the street unprotected. She was between thirty-five and forty. Of a romantic nature, and rather addicted to moonlight dreamings, her constant dread was that some member of the male sex would carry her off. She trembled if she found herself alone in a railway carriage with a man. She disliked men in general—they are so deceitful. Rather easy in her circumstances, she had made up her mind that if she ever did allow herself to be wooed—and she laid great stress on the did—it should be for her money; but in a general way she deprecated the idea that she could ever be prevailed upon to relinquish single blessedness for that wedded state which, she had heard, was fraught with so many disappointments.

Miss MacWinkle, being of good family, had a pretty extensive circle of acquaintances, and spent most of her autumn in visiting at country houses. Some weeks ago she received an invitation from a lady who was distantly related to her, and whose husband, Capt. Jaffie, of the royal navy, had recently purchased an estate in Suffolk with the proceeds of a legacy. On this estate was a hall which had been formerly inhabited by a squire of eccentric turn, who, because he lived alone and minded his own business, was generally suspected of having intercourse with the devil. The room in which this unfortunate man had died was, of course, supposed to be haunted, and Capt. Jaffie, being facetiously disposed, thought it would be a good joke to test Miss MacWinkle's courage by asking her whether she would object to sleep in it. Capt. Jaffie did not exactly like Miss MacWinkle, and had only invited her to please his wife; however, he put his proposal to the lady in the most courteous way possible at the dinner table on the evening of her arrival.

“Dear Miss MacWinkle,” said he, when he saw that she had sipped her first glass of sherry, “I am sorry to say that the room in which we intended to put you turns out to have a smoky chimney. We have been obliged to quarter you in a chamber that has the reputation of being haunted. I hope you don't mind?”

“Oh, dear, no,” exclaimed Miss MacWinkle, rather shrilly; and she allowed her glass to be refilled. “But what sort of a ghost is it who haunts the room?”

“No ghost at all, so far as I know,” laughed the captain. “It is a large handsome room, as you must already have remarked. It has a fine south view, and the fireplace draws capitally.”

“And there are no noises at night?” asked Miss MacWinkle. “I must tell you that I am a light sleeper and easily disturbed.”

“There are no noises at all,” said the captain.

“And no draughts? Sometimes rooms are said to be haunted because the wind whistles through chinks and crannies.”

“The room is as air-tight as a corked bottle. You have nothing to fear on that score.”

“And there are no rats or mice, are there? I must confess to loathing rats, and mice still more, if possible.”

“We have three cats and two terriers in the house, so rats and mice have no chance here,” rejoined the captain.

Poor Miss MacWinkle gulped down half her glass of sherry, and made no further objections. She was of shy disposition, and feared to look ridiculous before the other guests, of whom there were a dozen, including two girls of 18 with mocking eyes, but inwardly she felt uncomfortable, and several of the ladies present sympathized with her.

“I think it would have been kinder to keep the existence of the ghost out of sight, Capt. Jaffie,” said one of these ladies. “I am afraid that I should not exhibit as much courage as Miss MacWinkle.”

“But there is no ghost, I assure you,” answered the captain. “It’s only a foolish rumor got up by idle people.”

“But it rests on something, I suppose?”

“On nothing more substantial than senseless talk; but if Miss MacWinkle feels in the least nervous, I dare say we can contrive to put her in another room, though it may not be such a good one.”

Miss MacWinkle declined the offer, and felt a little soothed by the encomiums that were bestowed on her pluck and good sense. A handsome young dragoon officer, who had been dividing his attention between the two girls of eighteen, turned to Miss MacWinkle and said that the qualities he admired most of all in women were plain reason and courage. Miss MacWinkle blushed. For a few more such compliments she would have consented to pass her night in a room where goblins danced in a ring, provided, at least, that these imps did not touch her. She became the heroine of the evening, and when the hour arrived for her retiring to bed she took a collected and graceful farewell of the company.

“If I see a ghost I will drive him out of the room, and I rely on you to dispatch him for me,” she said, softly, to the dragoon as she departed.

“Oh, yes; I believe my room is in the same passage as yours, and I’ll keep a look-out,” laughed the officer.

“Don’t use firearms though.”

“No; I’ll rout him with a poker or an umbrella.”

Everybody was amused; and presently the whole company had dispersed. Soon after midnight the house was hushed, and even the dragoon, who ought to have been keeping watch for the ghost, slumbered in peace the sleep of the just. Throughout the night not a sound was heard, and the pair of terriers, who had been left free to ramble about the house as sentinels, curled themselves up in the passage near Miss MacWinkle's door, and were never heard to bark or growl once.

Breakfast used to be served at 9:30 in Capt. Jaffie's house, and all the guests staying under his roof generally came to it. Miss MacWinkle had said over night that she would do so; therefore, when the company assembled, and the coffee, tea, hot rolls, bacon, eggs, buttered toast, rounds of beef, game, pies, etc., were all spread out in a tempting array, eyes were turned toward the door, expecting to see the heroine walk in. But Miss MacWinkle was late.

After a quarter of an hour's delay, Capt. Jaffie said to the butler: "Has Miss MacWinkle's maid told her that breakfast is ready?"

"I'll go and ask, sir," answered the servant, and he went out. Five minutes later he returned, looking rather flurried, and said, "The maid has knocked several times at Miss MacWinkle's door, and there is no answer."

"When did she first knock?" asked Capt. Jaffie.

"An hour ago, sir; then she came back, half an hour later, thinking her mistress was asleep. She got no answer then, and now she's beginning to get alarmed."

Everybody else became alarmed all of a sudden. A general adjournment was made to the passage, and Miss MacWinkle's door was vigorously thumped, but without any responsive sound being evoked. The handle was tried, but the door was locked on the inside. "Poor thing! She had fainted from fright!" remarked one of the young ladies of 18.

"A fainting fit does not last an hour; we had better have the door forced open," said Mrs. Jaffie, anxiously.

"If we sent to the village locksmith won't be here for an hour," observed the captain. "I had better go and get my tools and do the business myself."

The captain hurried off, and while he was gone, his guests, who were now seriously frightened, indulged in every sort of conjecture. If it had not been of the presence of their hostess they would loudly have blamed the captain for having put the nerves of Miss MacWinkle to such a strain. As it was, some of them remarked that people ought not to keep ghosts on their premises, and that haunted rooms were only good to hear of in novels.

Meanwhile Capt. Jaffie returned and after some trouble forced the door open. Mrs. Jaffie and some ladies streamed in and instantly uttered cries of distress, which brought the men into the room. The place was empty and the window stood wide open; thus telling a tale of some fearful drama which must have been enacted in the night. It was evident that poor Miss MacWinkle must have received some horrible scare and have leaped clean through the casement. Luckily the window was on the ground floor, so that she could not have been much hurt by her fall; but where was she?

The ladies looked out, half expecting to see an inanimate form in a bed-gown lying across a flower-bed. Mrs. Jaffie had been more prompt to remark that Miss MacWinkle must have undressed and got into bed, for the bed was in disorder, and the poor lady's clothes were thrown over some chairs. But, indeed, Miss MacWinkle's maid was able to corroborate the fact that her mistress had gone to bed, and an inspection of boxes and wardrobe enabled her to say that, wherever Miss MacWinkle might be, her attire must be of the scantiest, consisting only of a night-dress and frilled cap. "Send off the grooms at once in every direction. Perhaps the poor thing has become mad from fright. Oh, dear! What shall we do?" ejaculated Mrs. Jaffie.

"I'm very sorry I asked her to sleep here," stammered captain Jaffie apologetically to his guest, "but I had no idea she was so timid."

"Who wouldn't be timid against a ghost?" exclaimed one of the ladies moving toward the door with a shudder, as if she feared to see the sprite who had frightened Miss MacWinkle start up suddenly again. The other ladies concurred, and, after another quarter of an hour had been expended in conjectures, the party filed back toward the breakfast room. Appetites had not been destroyed, though partly blunted by what had happened and Capt. Jaffie requested his wife to stay and do the honors of the board.

He himself went to help his grooms look after Miss MacWinkle. They hunted high, low, far, and near; they summoned the police to assist them; they set the telegraph wires to work; but all to no purpose. Then a river which flowed near the house was dragged; but this, again, served nothing. It became too obvious that poor Miss MacWinkle must have met with a bad end.

Before two days had elapsed the whole country was made acquainted with the sinister affair, and one more was added to the list of "mysterious disappearances." There were some frivolous wags who did not scruple to suggest that Miss MacWinkle had eloped with some adventurous swain who had obtained ingress to her chamber by means of a rope ladder; but this ungenerous rumor found small credence. The most common opinion was that Miss MacWinkle had jumped out of her window with fright, ran to the river, and got drowned.

One peculiarity, however struck the police who were investigating the case—viz, this: That if the unfortunate lady had jumped out of the window, she must have fallen upon a freshly-turned flower-bed, and have left marks on the mould. Now, there were no marks; and this puzzled the detectives not a little.

A certain member of the police force, named Timsot, had been specially intrusted with the conduct of the MacWinkle case, and when all his researches had proved ineffectual he begged that he might come and spend a few days in Capt. Jaffie's house and sleep in the apartment which Miss MacWinkle had occupied. The request was acceded to and the detective announced that he would lay himself out to discover whether there really was anything of a ghostly nature that haunted the room.

He was rather tired when he went to bed on the day of his arrival at Crabtree hall, but wishing to be ready for action he did not undress; he simply threw himself on the bed with his clothes on, a revolver in his breast-pocket, and a lighted candle on the table beside him. As his eyes were about to close he wondered what the time was, and half rising to take a look at his watch, he caught sight of a clock placed on a bracket in the wall just over the bed. There was a peculiarity about this clock, for it was surmounted with a wooden nigger's head, whose tongue—a very red one—protruded from his mouth in a hideous grimace. Mr. Timsot's curiosity was always excited by little things, as well as great, so he stood up on the bed to examine the clock, and, doing so, he pulled the nigger's head to see if it were moveable.

Instantly a giddiness seized Mr. Timsot. The bed gave way under his feet, darkness encompassed him, and with a horrible plunge he went head-over-ears in to black, icy waters, which closed above him with a whirling noise. Luckily Mr. Timsot was a good swimmer, and he did not lose consciousness; he struck out with both arms, saw a light, struggled on, and presently found himself swimming in the river. "Ah!" said he, as he reached the shore and regained his foothold; "it seems an armet of the river runs under Crabtree hall, and Miss MacWinkle took the same bath, I expect, as I did."

This proved to be the case. A few days later it was ascertained that the crew of a lighter, streaming down the river, had picked up the apparently lifeless form of a lady who was floating down the stream in the dark. They had picked her up, restored her to consciousness and put her to bed. But as she was found to be in high fever they were unable to ascertain who she was until she became cured, some ten days later. By this time, however, the lighter had got across the channel and was in foreign waters. It was from Holland that Miss MacWinkle eventually returned, clothed and in her right mind, to explain the accident that had befallen her and to vow eternal enmity against the Jaffies.

It proved, however, that Capt. Jaffie knew nothing of the queer spring-bed which revolved at the touch of a negro's head and emptied its occupant into the water. This work of art had been designed by the former owner of Crabtree hall, who presumably had been animated by the amiable intention of playing a practical joke upon his heir.

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