

My First and Last Ghost

I don't believe in ghosts. Please accept that as a starting-point. I am not in the least an imaginative or nervous person. I entertain a profound contempt for Spiritualism, and all the morbid follies which are connected with it. I have always had quite a reputation for good common sense, and I have never, thank God, had a secret of any kind on my mind. Yet I was the person of all others selected as the object of a ghostly manifestation, and here I am in my sedate middle age taking the public into my confidence, and asking for some rational explanation of the events which I am about to relate, on the credit of my serious, sober veracity.

Some twenty years ago, when I was a girl, or, at least, quite a young woman, I went down into South Carolina to visit an aunt of mine, who had married a wealthy planter, and settled in what we are apt to consider the backwoods. Another niece of her's, and cousin of mine accompanied me on the journey—which was quite a long one in those days—and together we were handed about like a couple of dry goods and parcels from hand to hand, from this man's care to that man's escort, until we finally reached Laurens District, and were deposited by a very creaking old stagecoach at the gate of my aunt's abode. I don't know who was most glad to see this bourne of our travels, Cecilia, who was heartily tired of the journey, or I, who was heartily tired of her. She has been a married woman these eighteen years, and is head of a large household now, so I sincerely hope she has gained some faint inkling of common sense and self-reliance by this time; but, if she still remains the same Cec[i]lia Hardie, with whom I made that memorable journey from Baltimore to Laurens District, why then all that I have to say is, that I am heartily glad Fate did not make me her husband.

Well, we arrived, and we soon found that this arrival occurred at a most inopportune time for our own enjoyment. My aunt's husband (I never could see the sense of calling people "uncle" who are no relation to one) was absent, having been summoned as witness in a legal examination, my aunt herself had gone to bed from the combined effect of nervousness and horror, the children were howling as if their hearts were broken, the servants were so badly scared that they could not obey the plainest order, or perform the most ordinary duty, and the cause of the whole uproar was that Ann Blake had been murdered.

Now you may be sure I was both astonished and shocked to hear this, for Ann Blake was an Irish girl whom I myself had engaged for my aunt—she preferring a white to a black nurse for her children—and I remember well how much I had been pleased by her bright face and pleasant manners, when she came to answer my advertisement. This had only been about six months before, and now I came to the house where she had preceded me, to find the girl, who had endeared herself to every one in it, lying a disfigured corpse. Everybody was so brimful of the matter that I had great difficulty in obtaining any clear idea of the events which had preceded this awful result; but I managed to elicit from the avalanche of hearsays and thinksos, two clear facts. 1. That Ann Blake had left the house on the afternoon of the day before, to take a walk; that she had refused to let any children accompany her, and that she had last been seen crossing the fields by a footpath towards a clump of woods, where she had been found a few hours later, stiff and cold, with every proof of brutal murder. 2. That a man, who was an admirer of hers, had already been arrested on suspicion of the crime, and that Colonel Northrop had been summoned to bear witness at this examination. More than that I declined to hear, and after a futile attempt to quiet

Cecilia (who thought it was her bounden duty to go into hysterics) and restore some order to the household, I sat down to await Colonel Northrop's return. He came at last, in a very tired condition—not too tired, however, to give us newcomers a very cordial welcome, to cheer up his wife, to send the servants about their duties, to do justice to an excellent supper (fortunately for our appetites, the cook was a strong-minded person) and lastly, to send the children to bed, and tell us the result of the examination. The evidence, it seemed, had borne quite heavily against the accused, Henry Watson, a handsome, dissipated young carpenter, who had been making love to Ann Blake for some time, and against whom she had been repeatedly warned. She had been known to supply him with money on various occasions, and the fact that her month's wages had been paid to her on the very morning of the murder was in itself suspicious, especially as a pocketbook, identified as hers, had been found in his possession, together with a note from the murdered girl, promising to meet him on that afternoon. Watson denied the identity of the first, but could give no satisfactory account of it, and, while he admitted the fact of the appointment, he declared that he had been unable to keep it.

"You can doubtless prove an *alibi* then," said the magistrate.

But at this suggestion the prisoner was observed to turn very pale.

No, he said, he was unable to prove an *alibi*, for he had gone some distance in the country to see a man on business, but he had found himself, and his family absent, so the walk counted for nothing. "He owed me some money," said the young man despairingly, "and I wanted him to pay me, for I was in debt, and I didn't want to take any more from Ann." So it went on, every point telling against him, until the examination ended in the magistrate refusing bail, and committing him for trial.

That was all. So after this had been told and re-told a sufficient number of times, after we had arranged the whole order of the murder, to our own content—even determining, I remember, the exact weapon that had dealt the ghastly death-blow—we began to think that our eyelids were very heavy, and that, even when murders were on the *tapis*, there was such a thing as going to bed. But lo! on the very threshold of this very desirable proceeding, there arose a sudden and unexpected difficulty. Cecilia protested, with a loud scream, that no earthly power should induce her to sleep alone. And I, quite as emphatically, if a little noisily, declined to share a bed with her. Colonel Northrop laughed, and said she had better take refuge in the nursery, where Tom of five and Jack of three could be her defenders, while my aunt looked concerned, and said I had better yield.

Cecilia declined the nursery, and I declined yielding.

"I am frightened to death—I *won't* sleep alone," Cecilia declared.

"I am tired to death—I *won't* be bothered with you," I said.

So the matter stood, until my aunt hit upon a compromise. There were two rooms in the house which opened into one another; not very desirable rooms, nor nearly so comfortable as those that had been prepared for us, but good enough, and which might almost be considered one, if we left

the door of communication open. Like most compromises, this only met with a half-reluctant assent from either side. I wanted my quiet, undisturbed chamber to myself; and Cecilia wanted somebody to startle and burrow into all night—so we were each to be made uncomfortable, and neither satisfied.—However, it was impossible to spend the night talking it over, so I cut the matter short by wishing my aunt and the Colonel good night, taking a candlestick in one hand, seizing Cecilia with the other, and whisking her up stairs at a rate that left her breathless for some time after she was deposited in her own room, and bade her to keep quiet until I chose to open the door between the chambers.

The night passed quietly enough, barring various hysterical calls for sympathy from Cecilia, to all of which I replied by a deep snore, and the next day the funeral of poor Ann took place. It was a day which all the days that have passed since have failed to efface from my vivid recollection; but I don't know that I need dwell on it here. The sorrow of high and low, whose love and respect the warm-hearted Irish girl had so closely attached to her—the noisy demonstrations of the negroes—the overwhelming grief of the children—the deep curses against her murderer, that even broke in upon the solemn services around the grave—formed a scene that I am not likely to forget, but which, if I mean to tell the story of my ghost, has no place here.

The funeral was over, the grave was heaped, the crime rested for God to discover, if He saw fit, and by degrees the Northrop household began to flow back into its usual channels.

Several weeks passed. The shadow gradually left us, and perhaps even the memory also, when one day at dinner Colonel Northrop suddenly said:

“I received a *subpoena* today to attend as witness for the State in the trial of Watson, which comes off next week. I wish in my soul I knew whether or not the fellow is really guilty.”

“I am sure I don't see how you can entertain a moment's doubt,” said my aunt, with a shudder. “I only wish I was as sure of heaven as I am sure it was he, and no one else, who murdered my poor Ann.”

“I don't understand one thing,” said Colonel Northrop, looking at me—he did not pay as much attention to my aunt's remarks as he had probably done in the courtship—“I do not understand how it is that no trace of the notes paid to the girl that morning has ever been discovered. We have never had even a clue to the knowledge of what became of them.”

“Might she not have left them at home?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“Impossible. Everything has been thoroughly searched, and there is no sign of pocketbook or money. She certainly took them out with her that evening, and she was certainly robbed, but a serious question in my mind is—did Watson do it?”

“I thought the possession of the pocketbook was proved upon him.”

“Why, of course it was,” said my aunt. “I don’t see how there could be a mistake in that—even if all the rest was false witness.”

“And yet,” answered the Colonel, “two of the most intelligent of the house-servants—Susan, the cook, and Rose, my wife’s maid—assure me solemnly that this pocketbook was *not* the one used by Ann Blake.”

“Then,” cried Cecilia, with a little scream, “why on earth don’t they go to the Courthouse and give in their evidence?”

The Colonel looked at her with a man’s supremely pitying smile for her ignorance.

“My dear young lady, the testimony of a negro cannot be received in a South Carolina court of law. Even if they had seen Watson murder the girl, their evidence could not convict him.”

Cecilia’s eyes opened wide.

“Goodness! Why not?”

“Because,” answered the planter briefly. “I have only to go and offer five dollars to obtain half a dozen who would testify on oath that *you* did it.”

“Then you don’t believe Susan and Rose?”

“Yes—why shouldn’t I? They have no possible motive for falsifying themselves. I confess they have very much shaken my belief in Watson’s guilt, and when I remember how pale and wretched the poor fellow looked that day he was taken up, I cannot help hoping he may be proved innocent.

“And I hope,” said my aunt, viciously, “that he may be convicted and hanged; yes, hanged as high as Haman.”

So, with these two expressions of diverse sentiment, the conversation ended.

That afternoon several visitors popped in upon us, and as callers in the country never make visits of fashionable length, they were easily persuaded to remain to tea and spend the evening. We had cards and music, and the time passed so pleasantly that it was nearly eleven o’clock before their carriages were ordered for a five miles’ drive, over roads that were anything but a credit to the District. We stood on the piazza, watching them off in the bright moonlight, then went back into the empty-looking drawing room, and bade each other good night.

Cecilia was yawning, and I was snappish—the two effects which sleepiness generally caused in us—and as we went up stairs together, I told her emphatically that if she disturbed me with any of her fanciful terrors that night, I should immediately shut and lock the door of communication, which usually stood open. That threat, I thought, would certainly keep her quiet, so I repeated it after we were both in bed, the lights out, and the good-nights exchanged.

“Do you hear me, Celia?” I asked. And Cecilia very meekly replied that she heard.

I do not know how long I had been asleep—it may have been fifteen minutes, or it may have been two hours; but, at all events, I had thoroughly lost consciousness when I was sharply wakened by Cecilia’s voice, calling my name. I was thoroughly irritated—there is not a doubt of that—and I fear I did not answer very patiently.

“Well?”

“Oh, Rachel, do get up,” she said eagerly. “There is somebody knocking at the door, and I—I am afraid to answer it.”

“Somebody knocking at the door? Why I don’t—”

Hear it, I was about to say, but at that moment I *did* hear it—a loud, distinct knock on my door.

“Who’s there?” I asked, thinking my aunt had sent a message of some sort.

But there was no answer. So, after a moment, I spoke again.

“Who is that knocking?”

No reply.

“Open the door, if you want to speak to me.”

Neither answer, nor movement.

I confess I felt very foolish as I sat up in bed, making these remarks in the utter darkness, and was met by this profound silence; so I began to think my ears deceived me, and according to the impulse of human nature, I turned upon Cecilia.

“I am going to get up this moment and shut the door,” I said. “I gave you fair warning, Cecilia, and here I have scarcely got to sleep before you make me with this absurd story.”

“Oh, indeed, Rachel, somebody knocked,” she cried. “You heard them yourself—you did.”

“I heard a noise made by some rat.”

“It was not a rat—it couldn’t have been a rat. Oh, Rachel, I am so scared. Please let me come and get in bed with you.”

“In bed with me! Indeed I shall do nothing of the kind. If I hear any more of this nonsense I shall—”

Rap, rap, rap.

Not a timid, hesitating series of taps, either, but a knock loud enough and imperious enough to have been given by the strongest man alive. There came a faint scream from Cecilia's room, and that was all until I demanded in no very moderate tone:

“Who are you? If you don't answer, I will call Colonel Northrop.”

Only silence answered me—profound, impenetrable silence.

Then indignation grew very strong within me. Somebody was evidently trying a very stupid trick to frighten us, and I, for one, determined to prove that I was not easily betrayed into fear. I put out my hand, and felt for the matchbox as quietly as possible. Meanwhile, a frightened cry was coming from Cecilia.

“Oh, Rachel, what can it be? What—”

“Hold your tongue,” I answered shortly. “It is nothing at all.”

At that moment I laid my hand on the matches, and knew that it would not take more than an instant to strike a light, so I repeated my words more loudly—“It is nothing whatever.” Rap, rap, rap.

It was a knock which fairly shook the door, and made it rattle on its hinges. Simultaneously I struck a match. The next instant the candle was lighted, and I sprang to the door. Cec[i]lia cried out at me, but I flung it wide open and faced—

NOTHING.

Then it was, when I stood there with the candle in my hand, the empty passage before me, and not a human figure in sight, that I felt my first thrill of superstitious terror. Sitting here now, with the bright daylight all around me, and the sober pulse of forty-five beating in my veins, I feel it again—that cold shiver, that vague sense of the Unseen, which flesh and blood are so little able to resist. I was never a coward, however, and I rallied almost immediately. I came back to the room, where Cecilia met me, pallid and trembling, and closed the door.

“It is very strange,” I said, “but there's no need for hysterics, Cecilia. We'll see the end of it.”

“Oh, Rachel,” she gasped, “go—go to Colonel Northrop.”

“Indeed, I shall do nothing of the sort,” I answered coolly. “It would be a fine story that we went to Colonel Northrop, because we were startled by a noise we could not explain. You may go, if you choose. I shall not.”

But, as I knew beforehand, she had not the courage for this. So the matter ended by my bolting the two outer doors, and then giving Cecilia leave to get into my bed. “You surely won't put out

the candle," she pleaded, as I placed it on a stand close by the bed, and it was evidently such a comfort to her, that I replied in the negative. I shaded it, however, and then got in bed myself.

Half an hour, at least, must have passed before I felt Cecilia give a quick, convulsive start.

"What is the matter?" I asked immediately.

"I—I thought I heard a noise in the passage. A something like a faint rustling."

"Whoever it is must be coming back, then," I said, "or else you have fancied it."

"There—now again."

I listened intently, but I could hear nothing until suddenly the knock fell on my ear louder, if anything, than ever.

"This is beyond patience," I cried; and with one bound I reached the door, and flung it open again.

Again it was only to find silence and vacancy. Then, while I stood there gazing stupidly and wonderingly around me, occurred the second memorable event of that memorable night. The candle was in my hand. Cecilia, who had followed me because she dared not stay behind, was at my side; when a sudden tight grasp encircled my left wrist, and I felt myself drawn, or rather jerked, into the middle of the passage. There the grasp relaxed, and I heard distinctly a sound as of garments rustling past me.

Before I could think or speak, Cecilia gave a loud scream, and rushed downstairs; my aunt's door opened; Colonel Northrop's voice was heard, and the next moment the whole house was in commotion.

I have little further recollection of that night. Uproar and discomfort embody the most of it. The house was searched from top to bottom, but nobody was found, nor any clue to the disturbance. Cecilia took refuge in the nursery, and I was inducted, whether I would or no, into my aunt's dressing-closet,—so I think we were equally uncomfortable, and equally glad to welcome morning. Only, as I thought with a sigh of resignation while dressing, what an immense amount of talking there was to be done. Immense it certainly was, for it began before breakfast, and lasted without intermission until bedtime, when it broke into a perfect storm of expostulation over my resolution to sleep in my own room. Alone? Yes, alone. But, good heavens, was I not afraid? Afraid of what? Oh, it was all very fine to take that tone, but I knew something *had* happened out of the common way. Thank God, ghosts didn't knock at the doors every night, and jerky people downstairs by their wrists, whether they would or no.

"Who says it was a ghost? I for one, don't believe it was anything but—"

"But what?" demanded my aunt and Cecilia, triumphantly.

“But whatever I find is to be tonight,” I answered. “If it *is* a trick, I mean to discover it, and if it be a ghost—why I have never harmed any of God’s creatures, so I don’t know that I need be afraid to meet any of them.”

“That’s right, Rachel,” said the Colonel, who was my sole supporter. “That’s sensible, as well as brave. But I tell you what, my girl, there have been cases of people losing their senses from sheer fright, so it may be as well if you let me take your place tonight. I’ll warrant you I will ferret out the mystery.”

“And I warrant you that I mean to win and wear my own laurels,” I answered, gaily. “I am not afraid of losing my senses, and as I was the person selected, I don’t mean to show the white feather, and run away from whatever it is. I shall sleep in my own room tonight. Cec[i]lia may come, if she wants to—”

“She doesn’t want to,” put in Cecilia, hastily.

“But I mean to sleep there all the same. Aunt Mary, you need not look so disturbed. I am sure it will be better to settle the matter, than to give your house the reputation of being haunted.”

“It has that already, as far as the children and servants are concerned,” said she, with a sigh. “I declare I thought they would all go crazy today. The servants’ eyes nearly rolled out of their heads, and the children, poor little things, were afraid to look over their shoulders. They think it was the ghost of poor Ann, calling for vengeance on her murderer.”

“I shall see that an end is put to all that folly,” said the Colonel, severely. “I wonder you would allow it, Mary. I shall issue my orders tomorrow, but tonight I had better investigate the matter. Rachel, I shall share your watch.”

“Very well, sir. Where will you go?”

“Into Cecilia’s room, while she and my wife can make each other miserable downstairs.”

So the matter was settled; and after a while we all separated, too full of the one subject to talk of anything else, and yet rather shy of that, just as we were about to dare the dark passages and dimly-lighted chambers.

As I remarked once before, I am not a coward, but in my opinion cowardice and the terror that we feel whenever we are brought into contact with the supernatural, are two different things. I felt none of the first; but I felt a great deal of the last, when I bolted the door behind me on that night, and put my candlestick down on the toilet table. All the fantastic thoughts which sometimes come to us without any cause whatever, crowded over me then. I looked into the mirror at my own white face, and a still whiter one seemed dimly peering behind me. The shadows that hung around the corners of the room seemed gathering into spectral shapes, and a leaf scraping against the window was enough to make me start and quiver all over. When I got into bed, I was so far gone in this folly, that I left the candle burning. It was not long, however, before my calmer sense reasserted itself; I told myself very concisely that I would never be fit for

the emergency when it came, if I gave way to thoughts like these. So, after one fervent prayer,—I think the veriest scoffer would have prayed then—I leaned out of bed to extinguish the light. Before I could reach it, there came a sound which made me pause and start, for it was nothing more nor less than a soft, mournful sigh, which seemed to be breathed into my very ear. I paused;—you may be sure I did not extinguish the light then—and looked around. Nothing whatever was to be seen; nothing whatever to be heard, save once again that soft, wistful inspiration. Then, while I still waited, my eye rested on a little dog, one of the children’s pets, who had followed me into the room, and lay curled up on the foot of the bed. If I had needed proof of some strange presence in the room, that dog’s behavior would have given it to me. He was wide awake, but he lay perfectly motionless, his eyes wide open, and fixed on some object to my right; his ears pricked forward, his whole attitude one of rapt and painful intensity. *Whatever was present there, the dog saw it, while I could not.* There was something terrible in this, something which I can scarcely express in words, and I doubt if I shall ever do a braver thing in all my life than to sit quietly there, while the animal peered past me, with those strange, awe-struck eyes, into the gloom and shadow. What he saw, God only knows—I never did.

It was some time before any other sound came, but at last there was a faint rustling, another deep, mournful sigh, and then that which I so much dreaded—a grasp, but this time a very gentle one upon my wrist. I had made a resolution to do whatever seemed re[qu]ired of me, and I now rose at once to go wherever I was to be led. Then the hand left my wrist, and only the faint rustling, as if a woman’s skirts went in front of me. I followed it—I marvel to think so now—but I was young and daring then, and I followed it. The door seemed to open of itself, and let me through, and it was only when I heard it softly behind me, that I remembered Colonel Northrop, and my promise to call him should anything occur. I half-turned back toward his door, but again that light touch was laid on my wrist, that gentle sigh to be led forward. Down the passage I went, following the lead of the rustling sound that went before me, until suddenly it paused, and I stopped at a closed door.

The door of Ann Blake’s room!

Then it seemed as if I woke from a sort of trance, as uncontrollable horror rushed over me with one strong shiver, and I broke into a cry. A cry not loud or piercing, but still it reached the ears of Colonel Northrop, who had been startled by the closing of my door, and the next moment I saw his light gleaming rapidly down the passage. When he reached the door of Ann Blake’s room, he found me leaning against it, looking almost as if I were a ghost myself, and to all his questions I had but one reply, “The key?—the key? Where is it?” for ever since the removal of the body the door had been locked, until at last he was obliged to go for it.

It seemed to me ages until he came back, bringing the key, but entirely alone, for neither my aunt nor Cecilia could be induced to come. Then we unlocked the door, and went in.

It may be that I had been wrought up to a state that could imagine anything, but it certainly seemed to me as if a cold blast of wind rushed over us as we entered; and ah! it certainly was no imagination that there, at the farther end of the room, was to be heard the same rustling sound I knew so well. Colonel Northrop’s eyes met mine, and no words were necessary to tell me that he heard it also. Neither of us said anything, but we both advanced straight to the place so indicated,

and then the sound suddenly ceased. We were standing in a sort of recess, formed by the bed and a large case of drawers. What did it mean? We looked at each other again, and it was every evident that neither of us could imagine. After a while the Colonel broke the silence, by saying impatiently:

“It is all arrant folly. The best thing we can do, in my opinion, is to go back to bed. Nothing will come of standing here.”

I could not see myself that anything was to be done, so I answered by slowly turning away. Before I had taken three steps, the grasp suddenly fell on my arm—not so gentle this time, but tight and constraining,—and it was not so much a sigh, as a sob that sounded in my ear.

“I cannot go,” I cried passionately. “There is something for me to do, and it is here that I must do it. There is something for me to do,—but what can it be?”

I asked the question in a sort of despair, but no answer came.

“To stand here and take a bad cold, probably,” said Colonel Northrop, who began to recover from his awe, and who had not felt, as I had, the direct pressure of that ghostly hand. “If the ghost does not choose to make its wishes intelligible, you cannot be expected to fulfill them, Rachel.”

But I only looked round me, and repeated once more, “What can it be?” Then, as I am a Christian woman, I felt that hand draw me down, as if it would draw me to the floor. I strove to resist,—for horror was growing very mighty—but with one strong jerk I found myself on my knees. The sudden fall quite took away my breath, and before I could recover it sufficiently to relieve my terror by a scream, I became conscious that the plank on which my weight rested was loose. Colonel Northrop noticed it also; he raised me up and then said, quietly: “Perhaps the clue is here.”

The next moment the plank was lifted, and we were peering into the dark chasm which lay between the floor and the ceiling of the room below. Nothing but dust and cobwebs rewarded us. I leaned over, and ran my hand along the edge—still absolutely nothing. Then I slowly drew it back, and in so doing, touched something half-soft, half-hard, which made me start. The next moment I recovered myself, and drew it forth. It was the pocketbook of Ann Blake!

I don’t know that there is much more to be said. The object of the manifestation was accomplished, and from that hour to this I have never been troubled with another. The pocketbook was undisturbed, and we found within it the whole sum that had been paid to Ann Blake on the morning of the murder, together with various letters from Watson, that to me, at least, proved his sincere love for her, and one that went far to prove his innocence. This was a note breaking the appointment for that fatal afternoon, and giving the same reason that he had given to the magistrate at his examination. Whatever motive took the unhappy girl out to her death that day, it certainly was not to meet her lover.

The events I have narrated were attested by too many witnesses to be doubted in the Laurens District, and the sensation they made in favor of the prisoner were very great. He was tried and acquitted in the most honorable manner, and came at once to thank me for having been instrumental in clearing him. “Not but that I knew it was *her*—God bless her!” he said, with tears in his eyes; “but then she couldn’t have found many women brave enough to do what you did, ma’am, and as long as I live I shall be grateful to you and thank you for it. What hurt me most was, that I—I, who loved her the best in the world—should have been accused of murdering her. Maybe I’ll find the cursed wretch who did it some day, get within reach of him, and then I won’t be apt to wait for the reckoning of the law!”

He was mistaken, however. Twenty years have gone by since then, but it still remains for the Judgement to show poor Ann Blake’s murderer.

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