

# *The Mysterious House*

IN THREE CHAPTERS.

## CHAPTER I.

“LARGE and roomy; well-furnished; good garden; healthy neighborhood; within easy reach of a railway station; good boys’ school near; not far from London; cheap!” Thus, with something more than a suspicion of scorn in her voice, my sister Margaret ran off on her fingers the list of my requirements for a house.

I had just returned from India with my six children, and I was anxious to settle them comfortably before their father’s return. “You want every comfort,” continued my sister, “and you don’t want to pay for every comfort. I believe you Anglo-Indians think we live upon nothing in England.”

Her husband came in as she spoke. Turning to him, she ran over again, with slight exaggeration and a deeper infusion of contempt, the catalogue given above.

He took a seat. “Difficult,” he said, oracularly; “but it might be done. I have it!” said he, turning to his wife.

“What? The right house! Then you are cleverer than I thought you.”

“Do you remember the story Williams told us yesterday?”

“Now, James,” said my sister, rising to her feet, and looking at her husband severely, “if you advise Eleanor to take that house, you do it on your own responsibility. I wash my hands of it.”

“Sit down again, Margaret,” he said. “Be reasonable, my dear. Is there any sufficient reason why Eleanor should not take that house?”

“There is one very good reason—she will have to do the housework herself. No servants will stay a week.”

“But think of herself, of her feelings. You smile, James. O yes; I know you think me absurd. Very likely I am absurd; but remember this—there’s no smoke without some fire. Besides, I knew the last tenants. Mrs. Green is not an idiot. She told me——”

“Stay a moment,” said my brother-in-law, and he addressed himself to me. “Eleanor, tell me the truth: are you a believer in ghosts?”

“Does this mean that the eligible house is haunted?” I exclaimed, much stimulated by what I had heard. “If so, I will take it at once. Write to the agent for me, James.”

“I do believe you are all going mad,” said my worthy sister, holding up her hands in horror. “James, you are a sensible man. You know things, ought not to be done in a hurry. Eleanor,

listen to what I heard from the last tenant. She told me with her own lips; it is none of your second-hand stories——”

“No,” I interrupted; “don’t tell me. If there is a ghost it will show itself. If there is not, I might be set thinking of your story, and might imagine it; or at least” — correcting myself — “I might be betrayed into telling somebody else. Somebody else might imagine it.”

My brother-in-law thereupon entered into an elaborate description of the house, which had everything I could desire; and he believed I could have it for a rent, which was so small, considering its advantages, as to seem merely nominal. “The fact is,” he said, “their principal object is to have the thing off their hands. Tenants have been coming, and tenants have been going; and some have paid, and some have not paid. The place has got a bad name in the neighborhood. The owners, however, think that if a respectable tenant comes and stays for some time, it will have a good effect on the public mind. But, as Margaret says, you must count the cost. Your servants will be sure to hear the ghost-story. They will see visions and dream dreams. You may have to do a good deal of the work yourself. By-the-by, there is an old housekeeper, a Mrs. Weevil, who lives in the lower rooms.”

“Could we not get rid of her?” I said. “She might tell the servants.”

“I am afraid that would be easier said than done,” he answered. “She has some claim upon the family. But they say she is a quiet old soul, who interferes with nobody. You might warn her, you know.”

“Well,” I said, “let us write to the agent, and see what can be done.”

The result of all this was that, a week or two later, on a placid afternoon early in the month of August, I drove up with my children, servants, and luggage before the deep porch of one of those moderately-sized country-houses which abound in the county of Surrey. It was to be my home for the next twelve months — servants and ghosts permitting.

For once, description and the expectation that followed hard upon it were, I felt, abundantly justified. My earthly paradise was a paradise indeed; and joyfully, on the evening of our arrival, I sat and wrote to my husband of our good fortune. The house was beautifully situated, and was itself picturesque, with its deep porch in front, and the neat balcony that surmounted it. It was an irregular building, and its red brick walls were half smothered with ivy and clematis. Beyond the garden in front was a broad lawn, bounded by the grand old beeches and elms which form a belt round Lord B——’s estate. During the first few weeks, nothing happened to change my good opinion of the house.

There was one circumstance I did not like; but I persuaded myself it was trivial, and to be affected by it proved ultra-sensitiveness; besides, I had been warned beforehand. Two of the lower rooms were occupied by an old woman. She was a pensioner, I was told, of our landlord’s. Many years ago, she had been housekeeper to some relatives of his, who lived in the house, and she had lived in it ever since. I wished to see her and have some conversation with her. I disliked,

in the first place, that any one of whom I knew nothing should be in my house; and in the second place, I was anxious to warn her to keep the ghost-story (whatever that might be) secret. My three English servants were north-country girls. I had taken good care that they should be utter strangers to the neighborhood; but I knew, if the possibility of seeing a ghost were suggested to them, they would promptly make the possibility a certainty, and then my troubles would begin.

I sent a polite message to Mrs. Weevil, asking for an interview; and she came to my room. She was not a prepossessing woman. Her age might be somewhere between sixty and seventy; and as she dropped an awkward curtsy on entering my presence, I felt she was giving me a homage which she did not pay willingly. I said I understood she had permission from the owner of the house to occupy certain rooms in it.

“Yes, ma’am,” she said; “but not from the owner as is the owner of the ’ouse now, ma’am.”

She manifested, I thought, a certain ill-concealed sulkiness as I went on to ask her if she could not be induced to find accommodation for herself in some of the cottages on the adjoining estate, so as to give us the house to ourselves. She stubbornly refused.

“No, ma’am,” she went on to say. “I am an old woman as has lived here for nigh twenty years, and I never gives trouble to no one. I only wishes to be let alone; and I means to stay, ma’am — yes. I means to stay.”

I saw that it would serve no purposes at present to try to dissuade her; and as I did not wish to quarrel with her, I changed the conversation. I said I understood there were some foolish stories current about the house being haunted, and I hoped, whatever she thought of it, that she would say nothing to my servants on the subject.

“If your servants ’ll let me alone, ma’am, I’ll let them alone. I has no wish to meddle with any lady’s servants.”

I then permitted her to go. She was certainly no trouble about the house; and she was very seldom seen by me or the servants. She only went out occasionally, as if to make such purchases as her necessities might require, locking the door of her rooms both in going and returning.

A month passed by. People in the neighborhood began to call. They all praised the house and grounds; but they all looked mysterious, and one and another hinted: “You won’t stay here over the winter.”

My answer was a smile. But the winter came. Flowers faded; trees grew red, golden, brown; and at last their shivering leaves fell to the ground. It was an early winter. In November, the cold was intense, and the days were short and gloomy. Many years had passed by since I had spent a winter in England, and I felt the cold very much. I made the best of things however, muffling myself and the children in flannel, keeping the doors and windows closed, and having large fires in the rooms and hall. In spite of all I could do, two of them fell ill. Their illness was not serious; but nursing and looking after them gave me much to do, for their *ayah* (Indian nurse) was suffering at the moment from a severe cold, which rendered her almost incapable of helping me.

Such was my position when, one morning, my housemaid asked to see me. I knew what this mean; and was not at all surprised to hear that she intended to leave us that very day. Her mother wanted her, she said. I asked her mother's reason. She was impenetrable. I offered her higher wages. She said, tremblingly, that she would not stay if I were to offer her a hundred pounds. I began to perceive that the news of the ghost-story had got abroad; and I asked her if there was anything in the house of which she was afraid; but to this question she was dumb. I said I would see her again, and sat down to think, with my sick child in my lap. Even while I was thinking, there came a knock at the door of my room. I cried out, "Come in;" but my heart sank.

My cook was at the door. The girl who helped in the kitchen and house was behind her. Both looked scared, and announced that they were going.

I did not know what to do. To gain time, I ordered them back to their work. I had no money in the house, I said. The bank, as they knew, was some miles distant. They had no right to leave me without due notice; in fact, I would not let them go. So I said, and hoped that they were quieted for a time. But late that evening, the ayah came to me with consternation in her face. All the three English servants had left me!

By that time the children were in bed, and everything was still. I bade the ayah go to her room with the younger children, and after locking my bedroom door, sat alone, thinking. I had passed through an exciting day. The night was chilly; I was tired, and not very well. That the warmth of the fire and the comfort of my favorite lounging-chair should presently cause a delightful sense of indifference to all and every annoyance, need not be considered wonderful. As I sat there, I have way to the pleasant compulsion, and was soon, I imagine, fast asleep. I say I imagine, because there was no witness present; and of what we do, or what we don't do, in that strange, indefinite borderland of sensation which separates waking-time from sleeping time, we can never be perfectly certain.

So far as I know, I slept for some considerable time. It was the sensation, I believe, of my feet waxing cold that first loosened the bonds of slumber. While I was in that semi-conscious state, which has a peculiar discomfort, I became dimly alive to the fact that there was in the room some presence other than my own. There was movement — a stirring in the air, as if some creature had come in. The events of the day returned to my memory, which was still only half alive. I started up, rubbing my eyes, for I could not be at all sure that I was awake and in my right mind.

When I went to sleep, I was alone. Yes, certainly. But even if it were not so, what strange, pale face was this now gazing at me across the dimly-lighted space of the shadowy room? I was but half awake and in my right mind.

When I went to sleep, I was alone. Yes, certainly. But even if it were not so, what strange, pale face was this now gazing at me across the dimly-lighted space of the shadowy room? I was but half awake. My nerves were in an excited state. The ghost in the house had been my last conscious idea. And now this strange face, which seemed to be advancing on me out of the gloom, was it a creation of my own fancy? Or was it some one playing a trick upon me? In any case, now was my time to fathom the mystery. Trying to be courageous and gather my wits

together, I advanced. The face receded, and passed into the deeper shadow, till it appeared to be suddenly swallowed up in the draperies of the heavily curtained window. I rushed forward, but was not swift enough. Before I touched the curtains, the face had disappeared. I was certain, however, perfectly certain that as I drew the curtains open, I felt resistance to my hand, and at the same time a gust of colder air rushed against my face, as if from an opened window. At first, I felt as if about to faint; but my will, fortunately, was strong, and I threw the curtains aside, and put my hand on the window. It was closed. I tried the bar, which could only be fixed from the inside, and it was as I had left it early in the evening.

At this discovery, my agitation overpowered me, my head swam, and I fainted. When I recovered consciousness, I was lying in the broad recess of the curtained window, and I felt a trickling sensation on my forehead, and suspected, what I afterwards found to be the case, that I had struck my head on some article of furniture, and was bleeding. This involuntary blood-letting helped to revive me, and I sat up.

For a few minutes I remained partially stunned and bewildered. I felt a creeping sensation, as if I had been struck by a frost-wind. After a while, my heart began to beat less audibly, and I rose to my feet. At that moment the embers of the fire suddenly sank into the bottom of the grate, sending up a faint, flickering light, which was absolute cheerfulness as contrasted with the horrible semi darkness that had hitherto prevailed. I felt my courage returning, and managed to ring the bell. The ayah came, alarmed that I should have summoned her at an hour when she supposed I had retired to rest. I did not tell her what I had witnessed, only asked her to light a candle. She did so, and as the light fell upon my face, she gave a slight scream. I had forgot at the moment that blood was trickling from the wound I had received, or I should not have asked her to light the candle. As it was, I had to make the best excuse I could in answer to her inquiries. I said I must have slept long by the fire, and in moving about the darkened room had fallen and hurt myself. The wound, however, was found to be a mere scratch; and in a few minutes the ayah had succeeded in removing from my face all marks of the disaster.

I asked her to leave the candle with me, and allow me to retire to rest. She did so; and after the door was closed upon her, I proceeded with the candle to examine the windows more minutely. The mystery was as much as a mystery as ever. The window had certainly not been opened by any one, and no trace was visible on the walls of any possible means of egress or ingress. I felt more nervous than ever, and was about to turn and quit the room altogether, so much did my fears oppress me, when something lying on the floor within the recess attracted my attention. I stooped and picked it up. It was a small piece of white cloth — a few inches square — very frail in the texture, as if half-rotted with damp or age, and adorned with a peculiar kind of embroidery such as I thought I had seen before, but could not recall where. On one edge there was a hem; the other three edges being irregular and jagged. It looked like a piece of cloth wrenched out of a garment by the foot being suddenly placed upon it. I felt I had made a discovery.

Returning to the fireplace, I sat down to think. It seemed clear to me now that my visitant, however he or she had effected an entrance, was no spirit. This piece of linen was certainly not lying there when I had closed and barred the window for the night; nor could it belong to the apparel of any member of my household. It was not unlikely that it was part of the loose garment of dingy white which I now remembered my strange visitant wore.

I am naturally strong-minded, and, gradually began to recover my composure. I said to myself: "I shall find out the secret. The first link of the chain is between my fingers. I never before heard of ghosts tramping bits out of their drapery, and no doubt the ghost I saw had been nearly as much afraid as myself when I so suddenly approached it, and had not got away without a little flurry. This accounts, too," I thought, "for the resistance which I felt to my hand when I first laid hold of the window curtains."

I was more than ever persuaded that a trick was being played upon me. I did not feel, however, as if I could sleep in the room that night. If my visitor was, as I suspected, a mortal like myself, there was no saying what he or she might be induced to attempt, should the desire of revenge prompt a second visit. My life was not safe in such circumstances, when a bared window and a locked door were not sufficient to protect me from the intrusion. I resolved for that night to occupy the bedroom where my two eldest children slept, which I could reach without disturbing the rest of the house.

I was about to take up my candle and go, when I imagined I heard a sound behind me. In my state of nervousness I started, and had almost dropped the candle. I looked towards the window; but the curtains hung motionless, and were parted as I had left them.

A thought struck me. If my visitor were to return after I had retired, how should I know? I pondered the matter a little, and then proceeded to action. Trickery must in this case be met by trickery. I went to my workbox, took out a reel of thread, and drew off a few yards. There were curtain fasteners on each side of the window, about two feet from the floor; and between these I stretched and made fast the length of thread, so that no one could enter the room from the window recess in the course of the night without unconsciously breaking the frail barrier I had erected. This would afford me sufficient proof as to whether the privacy of my sleeping-room had again been invaded. Taking up my candle and the bit of cloth, I then passed quietly out, locking the door of the room, and carrying the key with me. I felt myself stronger in the presence of my children, and soon managed to fall asleep.

## CHAPTER II.

MY first quest next morning on leaving the apartment where I had slept, was for the purpose of ascertaining whether my bedroom had been again entered after I had left it on the previous evening. I unlocked the door, and cautiously looked in. Enough lights came through between the drawn curtains to show me that the room was apparently as I left it. I advanced to the window and found the thread there, unbroken, and evidently untouched. I must confess I felt somewhat disappointed. My fears had probably exaggerated my conceptions of the danger, and I had anticipated a second visit as more than probably. After thinking, however, I came to the conclusion that it was better as it was. Had my strange visitor for any purpose entered my room a second time and found that I had quitted it, the effect might have been the reverse of favorable to a discovery could best be forwarded by my making as little change in my usual habits as possible. It was not improbably, seeing that no suspicion had been aroused by the knowledge that I had changed my sleeping apartment, that the "ghost" might be emboldened to pay me a visit on

the following night; and by that time I hoped to be able to arrange for the interception of my strange visitor, and the detection of the trick.

In the course of the morning I had made up my mind how I should proceed. Mrs. Weevil generally left after breakfast on her errands to the neighboring village or elsewhere, not generally returning for a few hours; and I thought this a good time to obtain an interview with Andrew the old gardener, who, I saw, was engaged trimming the walks in front of the door. I had no doubt now that what I had seen had been also appearing to the servants who had so suddenly departed on the previous evening; and I had no doubt also that Andrew knew the whole story about the ghost having been again seen in the house. I opened the parlor window, and spoke with him over the balcony. "Will you come up-stairs, Andrew? I should like to speak to you."

He stood for a moment in hesitation, scratching his head. I think he would have preferred anything to entering my house at that moment; but evidently he did not see his way to refusing. A few moments later, he was in the drawing-room.

"Andrew," I began, with some intentional solemnity of manner, "you see the position I am in." His expression indicated that he considered the position an exceedingly unpleasant one. "The story has got about," I went on, "that this house is haunted." He turned pale. "You think it *is* haunted?" I asked, looking at him fixedly.

He hesitated for a few moments, shook his head slowly, and succeeded finally in saying: "W'at *is* folks to think, ma'am?"

"I acknowledge," I answered, "that the thing has a queer look. When people appear, and vanish as suddenly as they came, it is difficult to think of them as creatures of flesh and blood like ourselves."

"Tain't possible-like," was Andrew's comment; and I observed that with the words, his face took a more healthy hue. The quiet tone I had assumed reassured him. Ghosts, when they can be reasoned about, lose half their terrors.

"No," I answered him; "it is not possible. But, Andrew, if we look at these things from another point of view ——"

"*Be* there another?" he eagerly asked, as I paused to allow him time for expression of opinion.

"Yes," I said; "there is another. Before I believe in your interpretation, Andrew — before I believe it possible that spirits can wander about the world for no other reason than to frighten people, I must test mine."

His eyes, awakened to new interest, were looking at mine inquiringly.

I explained at once. "What I mean is this. I suspect a trick. Somebody has a spite against the owner of this house — somebody has an interest in keeping it empty."

Andrew was naturally shrewd. As I spoke, there came into his face a new look of keenness. He smiled. "There has been queer things done," he observed, with a cautious impartiality.

"You have been here some weeks," I said. "Have you heard anything during that time about this house, about the people who own it? I am told they lived here once."

Thus stimulated, Andrew told me that the house and grounds had originally belonged to Lord B——, father of the present lord, whose park was commanded by our front windows. On the marriage of a favorite sister with Mr. Roupel, a man somewhat beneath her in position, he gave her the house. Here the married pair lived, in much unhappiness it was said; and here their only child, a daughter, was born. After running through his wife's money, the husband died. When left alone, the widow, and her now grown-up daughter, determined to let their house, and live abroad. The rent of the furnished house, with its excellent garden, would bring them in an income sufficient to enable them to live quietly in some foreign town. But while this project was being discussed, the widow died, suddenly and mysteriously. An inquest was held over her; for strange suspicions were circulated abroad. The verdict was, that she had died of the family complaint, heart disease. But there were those who still spoke mysteriously about the circumstances of the death, and declared that the poor lady had met with foul play.

Now, this was the germ of the ghost-story; for it was said far and near that Mrs. Roupel, if she really had been murdered — and murdered by her own child, as some dared to whisper — would never rest in her grave. And when singular appearances came and went, and strange sounds were heard in the house, now empty save for an ancient housekeeper, the suspicion, scarcely spoken of at first above the breath, so dark it was and monstrous, was by-and-by openly discussed.

On this part of the story old Andrew was very ready to dilate. He warmed to the theme indeed, and would willingly have given me, had I desired it, a full and particular account of the various people who from time to time had been driven from the premises. But I, holding still to my point, that *trick* had to do with it, restrained his flow of language, and endeavored, by close questioning, to find out what he knew about the daughter of Mrs. Roupel, who, if his story were true, was the present owner of the haunted house.

I elicited the following facts. Miss Roupel was nineteen years of age about the period of her mother's death. She was then a young lady of high spirit and cheerful temper; she was accomplished, witty, and unusually attractive in appearance. Thus, in spite of the drawbacks entailed by poverty, and a sad, melancholy mother, the young lady was not without suitors. The suit of one of these was, according to her mother and herself — they remembered their old antecedents and were proud — little short of an impertinence; for the man was neither more nor less than Lord B——'s house-steward. The old housekeeper, to whom, before he bestowed the house upon his siter, the old lord had apportioned two rooms, was Mrs. Weevil, the steward's mother.

It was natural that Miss Roupel, niece of his former employer, should reject his suit with disdain. It was perhaps no less natural that the rejection, imbittered by contempt, should sink deeply into the steward's soul. The fact was that from the day when he was forbidden the house where his



mother lived, the young man changed. People spoke of his black looks, of his hard ways, of his cruel, cynical speeches, and some predicted a bad end for him.

Meanwhile, Miss Roupel, now left alone by her mother's death, married Mr. Egerton, a man, from a monetary point of view, scarcely more eligible than the steward. He was a lieutenant in the navy; but as he had nothing in the world but his pay, they carried out Mrs. Roupel's plan of letting their house furnished, believing it would bring them in a sufficient income to enable the young wife to live in comfort while her husband was away from her. But, as Andrew remarked, if this was her belief, she must have been often "sore pinched," for the house could have brought in very little.

I thanked him for his story. "Now," I said, "you must do something more for me. Go to the village at once. Find the carpenter and blacksmith. Tell them I want them on important business. There must be no delay. I will pay them well for their work. Do you understand?" For the old man was staring at me as if he thought I had taken leave of my senses.

"I understand," he answered slowly. "But what will you be wanting with them, ma'am?"

"You will know all in good time. They must bring their tools. Now go, Andrew — go quickly. And mind, Andrew," I added, "say nothing to any one of your errand; and bring the joiner and blacksmith in by the back entrance, for I do not wish them to be seen coming here today by everybody."

Notwithstanding these bold words, I must confess that when Andrew started on his message, and I was left alone — for the ayah had gone down to the village — I felt a little uneasy. I did not believe in spiritual presences, but I did believe in wickedness driven to desperation. I was bidding defiance to a foe of whose resources I was utterly ignorant. What if my defiance should be taken up? Mentally, I felt strong enough; physically, I was conscious of being weak; but I set about the performance of my household duties, which occupied me fully till the return of Andrew.

I took him, as also the joiner and blacksmith, into the parlor, and told them my experiences of the previous evening. Andrew exhibited symptoms of alarm; but I found the joiner a sensible man, and inclined, after what I told him, to take a similar view with myself of the situation, namely, that we were being made the subjects of some diabolical trickery, in order to drive us out of the house. He asked about Mrs. Weevil, and if I had ever been in her rooms. I said I had not. He proposed at once to visit them. The door of her apartments was as usual locked; but the blacksmith had little difficulty in successfully picking the lock, and effecting an entrance for us — Andrew being meanwhile sent to keep a look-out in the garden, that no one approached the house unawares.

There was nothing to attract attention in Mrs. Weevil's apartments. The joiner carefully examined them; but no means of egress from either of the rooms could be discovered, save the door by which we had entered, the windows having iron gratings outside. We took the utmost care that nothing was disarranged; and any piece of furniture or apparel which we had occasion to disturb was replaced exactly as found. Previous to this, I should have mentioned, both the

joiner and blacksmith had made a particular examination of the bow-window of my bedroom; but had failed to find anything to awaken suspicion in the slightest. Our search had so far been entirely fruitless; and I was beginning to feel more perplexed than ever, as, after what Andrew had told me of Mrs. Weevil, and of her son's former relations to the owner of the house, I had somehow begun to connect her in my mind with the mysterious appearances which had given it such a bad fame.

We were in the act of quitting the housekeeper's sitting-room, afraid that she might return before we had had time to refasten the door, when I noticed the blacksmith kneel down on the floor of the inner apartments, and examine the foot of one of the bedposts. It was an ancient Elizabethan, with heavy faded hangings, and stood on a floor covered with a carpet, out of which long use had extracted almost all traces of its original pattern. At a signal the joiner stooped down beside him; and I then observed that the caster at the foot of the bedpost was glistening with oil, as if it had but recently been lubricated; and we all three then noticed that there was a distinct dark oily streak along the carpet, as if the bed had been moved forward obliquely for a few feet from where it stood, and then been moved back again. The joiner at once rose; and taking hold of the bed, he found that he could pull it forward easily and without making the slightest noise, till it was about a foot from the wall against which it stood. At this point, we noticed that the bed seemed to dip slightly to one side, as if something were yielding to its weight; and at the same moment we observed a panelling slightly open in that part of the wall which had formerly been hid behind the hangings.

I was in a high state of excitement, and with difficulty could suppress my feelings, but stood silent as the two men went round and looked into the opening thus discovered. They asked for a candle, which I presently brought them; when we found that the recess was a small place, about five feet high and two deep, and that it was formed of solid mason-work on all sides but the front. A box, large enough to fill the whole space of the bottom, was attached to the wall by strong iron staples, as if to prevent its removal; but curiously enough, the box itself was not locked, though supplied with a hasp and padlock. The lid was at once lifted; when we saw stuffed into it, as if hurriedly, a mass of white garment, which we found to be old chasuble or surplice, that must have formed at one time part of the ceremonial robes of a priest. We brought it forth to the light, and examined it; and there, in the skirt of the garment, we found that a piece had been torn out, which was exactly fitted by the bit of white embroidered cloth which I had picked up in my bedroom on the previous evening. This was evidence indisputable that, whoever or whatever my ghostly visitor was, here at least was the garment that had been worn on that occasion; the more so, that attached to the upper part of the garment was a kind of hood which, when drawn over the head and face, would give in a dim and uncertain light the grim aspect that I had seen on the previous evening. I felt within me a burning indignation that for years the peace and happiness of successive families in the house should have been destroyed by the wretched trickery of this depraved old woman, in her malicious desire to injure the young lady who owned the house, by depriving her of the income that would otherwise have been derived from it.

My first impulse was to leave things as they were in the apartment till the arrival of the old hag, and confront her at once with the evidences we had discovered of her malevolent practices; but on a second examination of the box, it was found that it contained a false bottom, easily removed, under which were found a pair of loaded pistols. This struck us as being scarcely in

keeping with the idea that Mrs. Weevil alone was cognizant of the mischievous operations which had been carried on here for so many years. These were rather the weapons of a person who was both able and willing to use them should an emergency offer. And what was still more puzzling, while we had thus far discovered the means by which the ghostly reputation of the house had been maintained, there was as yet no trace of the manner in which access was gained, either to the bedroom which I occupied, or to any other parts of the house had been so mysteriously visited. In these circumstances, it was agreed at once to replace everything as we had found them, except that the blacksmith took the precaution of drawing the charge out of both pistols, stuffing the barrels afterwards to the required depth with paper, so that, on being probed, they might still appear as if loaded. This done, the bed was moved back to its original place, when the panelling of itself closed as before. We then left the apartment, the door of which was, though not without some difficulty, so fastened as not readily to excite the woman's suspicion that it had been tampered with.

It was now two hours after noon, and Mrs. Weevil might return at any moment. The two men therefore departed, but first arranging with me that they should return after dusk, bringing the village constable with them, to await with me the events of the evening; as I felt certain somehow that the "ghost" would again appear, with the object of driving me from the house, as other tenants had been driven before.

Like his namesake in "Rob Roy," the old gardener Andrew was not a very good keeper of secrets; hence it was proposed that the joiner and blacksmith should take him along with them to the village, and keep him under surveillance till the evening. I was glad when I saw them all out of the place, without, so far as I knew, being seen by any one; and still more glad when the ayah shortly afterwards returned with the children, as I could not help feeling timorous and alarmed in the house by myself, considering what we had discovered, and especially what we had failed to discover, namely, how the person playing the ghost could obtain access to different parts of the house so freely as report represented, and as I had myself in one instance painfully experienced.

### CHAPTER III.

UNLIKE her usual practice, Mrs. Weevil did not return to the house that day till far on in the afternoon; and after she had entered her rooms, I could hear her bustling about with an activity and noise quite unprecedented in my experience of her habits. This rather alarmed me. I was afraid she had suspected, from the appearance of her rooms, notwithstanding our care in removing all traces of our presence, that some one had been there in her absence; and this might be sufficient to defeat my hopes of bringing to light the trickery that had been so long and so systematically practiced. But I was still more astonished when, about an hour after her return, she sent a message to me by the ayah that she wished to speak with me, if I would grant her an interview. At first, I scarcely knew what answer to make. Were I to refuse to see her, this might complete the suspicion which she perhaps entertained; and if I did see her, I was afraid that I might by some word or look betray the knowledge of which I had become possessed. I thought upon the whole I had better see her, and answered accordingly.

As she entered the room with a basket over her arm, she dropped a curtsy; and from the flow of words with which she at once opened the conversation, she seemed to put on a frankness of manner which I had not before observed in any slight intercourse I had had with her.

“Yes, ma’am,” she went on, “I were just a-comin’, ma’am, to say as I would be goin’ from the ’ouse for a few days; my son, as is steward to Lord B——, being took very badly last night, ma’am; and as he have no one to wait upon him, it holds as I, ma’am, as his mother, must do my dooty — yes, ma’am.”

All this she said without once stopping to take breath; and I could not help observing that she was slightly flurried in my presence, and seemed to keep talking as much to hide her uneasiness as to enlighten me regarding her errand. I said I was very sorry to hear that her son was ill, and that it was very proper she should, in the circumstances, attend to him. “But,” I asked, “has he no servant in the house?”

“Not presently, ma’am,” she answered; “leastways, the ’ousemaid have gone away over to Brookford for a few days to see her mother, who stays there, ma’am — yes, ma’am;” and she curtsied again in the excess of her civility.

After I had dismissed her, I did not know what to think. This was an interference with my plans on which I had not counted. I had no one to advise with me, and felt much perplexed. As evening approached, and the gloom of twilight, I had a strange, nervous feeling, such as I had only once before experienced, and that was in India, during the terrible days when the Mutiny was at its height, and every footfall made us start, as if next moment were to be our last. As the dusk deepened, my anxiety increased; and when at length the ayah conducted the joiner, as I had before instructed her, to my room, I was almost too overpowered to speak. Andrew and the blacksmith were for the time detained in the kitchen, as I wished to talk the matter over with the joiner, as the most intelligent of the three.

As he entered my room, I was surprised to find a second person behind him, whom he introduced to me as Mr. Burrowes, the district inspector of police, who had been on an official visit to the village that day, and who, when he heard the story, volunteered his services in place of the constable. His presence at once gave me great relief; and this was enhanced when I found he had long experience in the London detective force, and was entering with the enthusiasm of his profession into our plans. He had heard already from the joiner what had passed that day; complimented me highly on the presence of mind I had displayed on the previous evening, and expressed his acquiescence in everything that we had since done.

When, however, I mentioned to him my unexpected interview that afternoon with Mrs. Weevil, and that she had left the house, he was a good deal taken aback. He questioned me closely as to her manner and appearance when she was in my room, and as to whether she seemed much affected by her son’s illness. I answered his several questions to the best of my ability; and he, after thinking a while, pacing up and down the room, turned to me and said, —

“Let everything be carried out as you formerly proposed. See that your family retire to rest at their usual time, and with as little appearance as possible of anything unusual going on. If the

woman has taken alarm, nothing will be lost by my waiting till to-morrow, when her rooms can be more carefully examined by daylight. In the first place, will you show me the bedroom in which you were disturbed last night?"

I conducted him thither, the joiner following; and after he had ascertained where, to use his own expression, I had first seen the "party," and where and how the party disappeared, he at once intimated his plans. He said I was to retire to my room as usual, seat myself in my chair by the fire as on the previous evening, and either sleep or appear to sleep, as was most agreeable to myself. Beyond the window stood a large wardrobe, in which, after the house was all quiet, he and the joiner would conceal themselves; the blacksmith and the gardener being set as a guard upon the door of the housekeeper's room below. The village constable, he had arranged, would keep watch on the outside of the house, but so as not to be readily discovered.

The duties of the household, in the absence of my servants, fell somewhat heavily on the ayah and myself; and the time passed quickly for me as I bustled about, seeing the children put to bed; after which the ayah had also retired. During all this time everything had been carried on in our customary way. Mr. Burrowes and the rest of his helpers betook themselves for the time to a distant apartment up-stairs, and the house had resounded all the evening with the mingled sounds of laughter and noise inseparable from a large family of children such as ours. But now all was silent; the men had slipped quietly to their different posts; Mr. Burrowes and the joiner were, I knew, in the wardrobe, at the other end of my bedroom; and I was seated in my lounging-chair, as on the previous evening.

As I sat in this position thinking, I could not help observing to myself how near we were all to making ourselves ridiculous. The old woman whom I had suspected was out of the house; no one else but the ordinary members of the household and the watchers could possibly be in it; and here was I, sitting at my bedroom fire, making believe to sleep, with two men concealed in the wardrobe, all hoping to catch — we did not know what. The humor of the situation was so strongly affected me at one time, that I could scarcely refrain from bursting into laughter. But the thought of Mr. Burrowes having put himself to so much trouble on my account, combined with a remembrance of what I had experienced during the past twenty-four hours, gradually sobered my feelings; and I shortly found my thoughts floating away in dim remembrances to my life in India; to my distant husband; to our long separation; to the terrible nights and days of that fearful Mutiny, whose horrors still rose up before me; to——

There was a thud on the floor, and I started. I had been asleep, and my slumber had knocked a book off the small table at my elbow. The fire was burning low, and I rose in a confused state to trim it, when my eyes fell upon what I had seen on the previous evening. In the imperfect light it seemed taller and more ghastly-looking than before, and was approaching me from behind. As my eyes fell upon it, I gave a loud shriek, and caught hold of the chair to support me. As I did so, I saw the figure gradually recede from me, and the room seemed to grow suddenly darker. I am certain that, left to myself, I should at that moment have fainted right away, for the whole thing had been so sudden, and found me so unprepared, that in my confusion I forgot all about the business of the night. But just as the white figure seemed to be approaching the curtained windows, I saw two dark figures dash quickly upon it from behind, then a sharp and violent struggle, in which all three rolled on the floor, as if locked together in a deadly embrace. The

white figure had manage to wrench one arm loose, and in another moment there was the sharp click of a pistol. Thanks to our forethought, the weapon was harmless. By this time the noise of the struggle that was going on had brought the blacksmith and Andrew up to my apartment; and with their help, the white figure was in a few seconds manacled and led forward to the light, his white garment — an old surplice — hanging in tatters about him. He was at once known to the majority of the company — it was the steward! He turned his back on me with a stifled oath.

Leaving him, now helpless, with his hands fast behind his back, in charge of the blacksmith, Mr. Burrowes led the way to the housekeeper's rooms below, the door of which was found to be locked. It was at once burst open, and taking a candle with us, we entered. The outer room was in the same condition as I had seen it during the day; but the inner room showed the bed drawn forward, and the panelling of the recess which we had discovered standing open. Nobody was there. Taking the candle forward to examine the recess, Mr. Burrowes found that the box had a movable bottom, in addition to that which we had discovered, and that by its removal an opening sufficient for one person at a time led down a trap-stair into the cellars below. Mr. Burrowes and the joiner at once descended, taking the light with them, the rest of us waiting as directed in the outer apartment, or watching the lobbies that led to it. In a few minutes I heard sudden footsteps in my bedroom, and rushing thither found that Mr. Burrowes and the joiner had reached it from the cellars, into which the trap-door led, the whole of the woodwork of one side of the window of my room being ingeniously made to move back upon hinges like a door, yet so constructed that it could not be opened by any one in the room. When the steward was searched, there was found on him, besides the pistols, a bunch of duplicate keys, which could open any chamber, or other lockfast place, in the house.

The constable having been called in from the garden, the steward, who had hitherto stood silent and sullen, with a dark expression of malice and revenge upon his face, was handed over to him, and he was instructed by his superior to convey him to the local police-office and place him in a cell. The blacksmith he ordered to accompany the constable, and see that the prisoner did not effect an escape.

Meantime the gardener, who, since the "ghost" had been discovered to be but flesh and blood like himself, had become as bold as a lion, volunteered to stay in the house with us all night and help me to soothe the fears of the my poor terrified children; while Mr. Burrowes, accompanied by the joiner, proceeded to the house of steward. I need not burden the reader with details; but I may mention that in answer to a quiet tap at the window, the door of the house was immediately opened, and old Mrs. Weevil was at once in the grip of the officer. She was absolutely thunderstruck, and quite lost her presence of mind. Without telling her anything of what had happened, Mr. Burrowes asked for her son, the steward. At first she hesitated, then said he was ill in bed.

"No," said Mr. Burrowes; "he is not in bed, but he is safe enough by this time in the police-office; so you had better just tell us all about it."

At this, Mrs. Weevil entirely broke down, and confessed all. It is unnecessary to repeat at length what the reader can guess in great measure for himself; but the sum of her story was this. The mother, equally with her son, hated Miss Roupel for despising his addresses, and took the means

we have seen in order to drive each successive tenant out of her house. She also admitted that after the sudden death of Mrs. Roupel, it was they who had spread the stories charging foul play against the daughter. In answer to a question from Mr. Burrowes, she confessed that it was she who had played the ghost on the previous evening; but she had never before shown herself to any one who did not at once flee and quit the house. My attempt to get hold of her, therefore, had so alarmed her that she had great difficulty in escaping; and next morning had gone to her son, and told him she durst not play the part of ghost any longer, as the present tenant was likely to stand her ground, and they would in that way be found out. They were both enraged at thus being at last baffled in their long-cherished course of malicious practices against Miss Roupel; and her son determined to take out his revenge upon me that night by first frightening me and then robbing the house, after which they were resolved to take the first opportunity of quitting that part of the country. Their cupidity had been aroused by the sight of some trinkets in Indian jewelry which I possessed; hence the design to rob me. In order to cover their purpose, the old hag was sent to me with the story of her son being ill; and as he had a secret means of access to the house, he readily effected an entrance after he supposed the family asleep. It was her son who had first put her upon these evil practices — had brought the old surplice from Lord B——’s house, in which either of them, as occasion offered, was in habit of terrifying the inmates, and thus depriving the innocent object of their hatred of her chief means of livelihood.

Mr. Burrowes did not trouble to apprehend the old woman at that time; but he took care that she could not leave the country till after the trial of her son for housebreaking and felony, when she had to appear against him as a witness. He was found guilty, and sent to a penal settlement. Mrs. Weevil, ashamed to show her face in the neighborhood, departed no one knew whither.

As for the ghost-story, as soon as its salient points were known in the neighborhood, the house not only lost its bad character, but I became for the time quite a kind of heroine, everybody praising my courage and sagacity. I had the pleasure, some weeks later, of entertaining in the house Mrs. Richard Egerton, the former Miss Roupel, whom the neighborhood, conscious of unjust condemnation, received with open arms. After the term of my tenancy expired, the charming house let me for a more suitable rent; and ever since, I believe, it has formed an adequate source of income to its worthy owners.

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