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TRAPPING A GHOST.

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 with a slight exaggeration and a deeper infusion of contempt, the catalogue of what was required.

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 at 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 all the house work herself. No servant will stay a week."

"She has an Indian servant at any rate, who must stand by her."

"But think of herself, of her feelings. You smile, James. Oh, 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 truth; are you a believer in ghosts?"

"Does this mean that the eligible house is haunted?" I exclaimed, much stimulated by what I 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 herself—"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 way, 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. 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 courtesy 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 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 wished to be let alone; and I means to stay, ma'am—yes, I means to stay."

I saw that it would serve no purpose 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 either 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 in 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 house-maid asked to see me. I knew what this meant; and was not 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 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 gave 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 border-land 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-unconscious 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 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, rubbed 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. 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 my 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 had 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 curtain 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 afterward 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 to 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 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 window more minutely. The mystery was as much 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 ingress and egress. I felt more nervous than ever, and was about to turn and leave the room altogether, so much did my fears oppress me, when something lying on the floor 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, and as if half-rotten 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 fire-place, 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 telling 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 barred window and locked door were not sufficient to protect me from 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 toward 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 up to my work-box, 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 during the night without unconsciously breaking the 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.

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 light 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 probable. 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 of the trickery, which discovery could best be forwarded by my making as little change in my usual habits as possible. It was not improbable, 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 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