

Two Fragments of Ghost Stories

Elizabeth Gaskell

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I

I have no objection to tell you to what I alluded the other night, as I am too rational, I trust, to believe in ghosts; at the same time, I own it has ever remained an unexplained circumstance; and the impression it left on my own mind was so vivid and so painful that for years I could not bear to think at all on the subject. To you, even, I do not mind owning that I once made a considerable round to avoid Birmingham as a sleeping-place. This was thoroughly ridiculous; and so I felt it at the time. I think you know enough of my father and mother to recall a little of the gentle formality of the Society to which they used to belong. Don't you remember how my mother would check any "vain talking" in her own mild, irresistible way? All tales and stories which were not true were excluded from the dear old nursery-library at Heverington. Much more so were ghosts and fairies prohibited; though the knowledge that there were such things to be talked about came to us, I don't know how. Do you know, I even now draw back from telling the story of my fright! I do believe I am making this preamble, in order to defer the real matter of my letter. But now I will begin at once.

I was going back to school at Dunchurch; and my father could not go with me, because of some special jury-case at Chester which he was obliged to attend; so I was to be put in charge of the guard of the coach as far as Birmingham, where a friend of my father's was to meet me, and take me to sleep at his house. It was on the 26th of January; so you may be sure it was dark when we got into Birmingham about seven o'clock. The coach rumbled into an inn-yard, and I was wakened out of my sleep by some one popping in a broad-brimmed hat (with a head under it, I suppose; only the hat stood out in relief against the light) and asking if Hannah Johnson was there? I remember feeling frightened at saying "Yes," and wishing that some one were there to answer for me; and at last I spoke sadly too loud but I had tried twice before, and no voice had come.

Well! I was soon bundled, more asleep than awake, into a gig; and my luggage was all stowed away till morning, in the booking-office, I suppose. We had a drive of two miles, or it might be two miles and a half, out of the very thick of the town into a sort of suburb on a hill-side. The houses were plain and commonplace enough (red-brick, I saw the next morning, they were), with a long slip of garden, up which we had to walk. A woman Friend came to the steps, with a candle in her hand, to meet us; and I liked her from the first better than her silent husband, who did his duty, but never spoke. She made me take off my shoes; felt my stockings to see if they were wet; then she hurried tea, to which I remember I had no sugar, because of the slave-trade, which many good people were then striving to put down. She talked a good deal to me; and, if her husband had not been there, I should have talked much more openly back again; but, as it was, I remember feeling sure he was listening behind his newspaper; and very uncomfortable it made me. I recollect she had let the cat jump on her knee and was stroking it, and it was purring; but he gave it a slap and sent it down, saying, "Esther, thee hadst three drab gowns last year. That cat will cost me as many this." I don't remember his speaking again; but I know I was as glad as the cat to get out of the room, and upstairs to my snug bedroom. The house was joined to another; and, somehow, they dove-tailed together; so that, though there was but one room in the front, there were two in width behind; one on each side of the passage.

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We breakfasted in the left-hand room at the back next morning; but I never knew what the right-hand room was. Only, over it on the first floor, was the chamber I was to sleep in that night; and very comfortable it looked, with a pleasant fire, and a great deal of crimson and white about the room. You went in, and had the fire on your right-hand and the bed opposite to you, and the large window, with the dressing-table under it, on the left. The house altogether must have been eighty or ninety years old; I judge from the chimney-pieces, which, I recollect, were very high, with narrow shelves, and made of painted wood, with garlands tied with ribbons, carved, not very well, upon them. The bed, I remember, was a great, large one too large for the room, I should think; but you heard me say I have never seen it since that time. Judging from my recollections, I should imagine the furniture had been picked up at sales, in accordance with the thriftiness of the master of the house. (I do not mention his name, because he has a nephew, a respectable tea-dealer in Bull Street, and a member of the Society of Friends, who would not, I am sure, like to have his name connected with a ghost-story.)

All these things I was too tired to notice that night. I put my feet into hot water though I would much rather have gone straight to bed because my kind hostess urged it; and then it was found out I had left my carpet-bag at the inn; so I had to wait till a night-gown and night-cap of hers was aired. And at last I tumbled into bed.

I think I fell asleep directly; at any rate, I don't remember anything of being awake. But, by-and-by, I wakened up suddenly. To this day, I don't know what wakened me; but I was all at once perfectly conscious, although at first I was puzzled to remember where I was. The fire had burnt down, but not very much; there was, however, not a great deal of light from it. But it seemed as if there were some light behind the right-hand curtain at the head of the bed; just as if some one had been in and put a candle down on the drawers, which stood between the bed and the window. I thought I must have forgotten to put the candle out, though I did not remember putting it there. I had some debates with myself as to whether I would leave my warm bed, and get up into the cold and put it out; and I think I should never have troubled myself about it, if I had not remembered that the candle would be burnt down before morning, and that perhaps I might get a scolding from my host. Still, I was so lazy! and I thought I could perhaps stretch out of bed far enough to put it out without fairly getting up. So I shuffled to the cold side of the bed (which was fully large enough, and indeed prepared for two people).

I name this, because I remember the wide-awake feeling which the icy coldness of the fine linen sheets gave me, when I was lying across them; stretching out, I undrew the crimson moreen curtain. There was no candle; but a bright light very red; more like the very earliest blush of dawn on a summer's morning than anything else; but very red and glowing. It seemed to come from, or out of I don't know how the figure of a woman, who sat in the easy chair by the head of the bed. I think she was a young woman, but I did not see her face; it was bent down over a little child which she held in her arms, and rocked backwards and forwards, as if she were getting it to sleep, with her cheek on its head. She took no notice of my drawing back the curtain, though it made a rustling noise, and the rings grated a little on the rod. I could draw the pattern of the chintz gown she wore; of a kind called by my mother, a palampore: an Indian thing, with a large straggling print on it, but which had been in fashion many years before.

I don't think I was frightened then; at least, I looked curiously, and did not drop the curtain, as I should have done if I had been frightened, I think. I thought of her as somebody in great distress; her gesture and the way she hung her head all showed that. I knew very little about the people I was staying with; they might have babies, for aught I knew, and this might be some friend or visitor, who was soothing a restless child. I knew my mother often walked about with my little brother who was teething. But it was rather strange I had not seen this lady at tea; and a little strange too that her dress was so very gay and bright-coloured, because in general such dress would be considered by Friends to savour too much of the world, and would be remonstrated against. While these thoughts were passing through my mind of course in much less time than it takes me to write them down—the lady rose, and I dropped the curtain and . . .

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II

Well, my dear Bob, let those laugh who win! You, who were so much amused at my being captivated by the queerly-worded advertisement of lodgings in the "Guardian," would be glad enough, I fancy, to exchange your small, dingy, smoky rooms in Manchester (even granted the delights of a railway excursion every day during Whitsun-week) for my Lorton Grange, though my host cannot write grammar, any more than my hostess can speak it. I do like the spice which the uncertainty of the result gives to any adventure; and therefore my spirits grew higher and more boisterous, the wilder and more desolate grew the hills and the moors, over which I passed in the shandry my landlord had sent to meet me at the station.

When I say the "station," you are not to picture to yourself anything like a Euston or a Victoria; but just a modest neat kind of turnpike-house, with no other dwelling near it; no passengers crowding for tickets, no pyramids of luggage. I myself was the only person to alight, and the train whizzed away, leaving me standing and gazing (rather sadly I must confess) at the last relic of a town I was to see for a whole week. But the delicious mountain-air blew away melancholy; and I had not gone many paces before I saw the shandry, jogging along on its approach to the station. Worthy Mr. Jackson fancied he had an hour to spare for a chat with his friend at the station, and a rest for his horse. No wonder! for, when I arrived at Lorton Grange, I found the clocks differed by two hours from one another, and each an hour from the real time of day. Does not this speak volumes as to the way in which life is dreamt away in these dales?

Good-man Jackson was taciturn enough on the drive a circumstance I did not dislike, as it gave me leisure to look about. The road wound up among brown heathery hills, with scarce a bush to catch a stray light, or a passing shadow; the few fences there were to be seen were made of loose stones piled on one another, and cemented solely by the moss and ferns which filled up every crevice. I do not intend to worry you by description of scenery, any more than will be absolutely necessary to give you an idea of my locale; so I shall only say that, after about an hour's drive over these hills, "fells" and "knots" as my landlord called them, we dropped down by a most precipitous road into the valley in which Lorton Grange is situated.

The dale is about half a mile in breadth, with a brawling, dashing, brilliant, musical stream dividing it into unequal halves. At places, the grey rocks hem the noisy, sparkling waters in, and absolutely encroach upon their territory; again they recede and leave bays of the greenest of green meadows between rock and river. On one of these Lorton Grange was erected some three hundred years ago; and rather a stately place it must have been in those days. It is built around a hollow square, and must have been roomy enough, when all the sides were appropriated to the use of the family. Now two are occupied as farm-buildings, and one is almost in ruins; it has been gutted to serve as a large barn, and the rain evidently comes in, every here and there, through the neglected roof. The front of the quadrangular building is used as the dwelling-place of the farmer's family. Formerly, a short avenue must have led up to the ivy-covered porch from the road which is flanked by the afore-mentioned river. Now, all the trees are felled, except one noble beech, which sweeps the ground close to the walls of the house, and throws into green obscurity one charming window-seat in my sitting-room. All over the front of the house clamber roses, flaunting their branches above the very eaves; but they seem to grow by sufferance now, and to flower from summer to summer without imparting pleasure to any one.

You must not suppose that we drove up to the grand entrance; the old carriage-road has long been ploughed up, and grass now grows where once the Lortons paced daintily along their avenue. Mr. Jackson took me to the back-door in the inner square, fluttering two or three dozen hens and turkeys, and evoking a barking welcome from almost as many dogs and whelps. I steered my way through the dim confusion of a large crowded kitchen, having for guide the voice of some female, who at the end of a dark passage kept calling, "This way, sir; this way;" and at last I arrived at the room in which I now write the ancient hall, I take it.

I could write down an inventory of the furniture and description of any room in a lodging-house in Manchester;

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but I think I might defy you to return the compliment, and form even a guess at the apartment I am now occupying. Think of four windows, and five doors, to begin with! Two of my windows look to the front, and are casements, draped with ivy; through one the glancing waters of the stream glint into my room, when the sun shines as it does now; the other two look into the noisy farm-yard; but on these window-seats are placed enormous unpruned geraniums and fuchsias, which form an agreeable blind. As to the doors, two of them are mysteries to me at this present; one is the back entrance to the room through which . . .