

The Goodwood Ghost Story

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MY wife's sister, Mrs M-, was left a widow at the age of thirty-five, with two children, girls, of whom she was passionately fond. She carried on the draper's business at Bognor, established by her husband. Being still a very handsome woman, there were several suitors for her hand. The only favoured one amongst them was a Mr Barton. My wife never liked this Mr Barton, and made no secret of her feelings to her sister, whom she frequently told that Mr Barton only wanted to be master of the little haberdashery shop in Bognor. He was a man in poor circumstances, and had no other motive in his proposal of marriage, so my wife thought, than to better himself.

On the 23rd of August 1831 Mrs M- arranged to go with Barton to a picnic party at Goodwood Park, the seat of the Duke of Richmond, who had kindly thrown open his grounds to the public for the day. My wife, a little annoyed at her going out with this man, told her she had much better remain at home to look after her children and attend to the business. Mrs M-, however, bent on going, made arrangements about leaving the shop, and got my wife to promise to see to her little girls while she was away.

The party set out in a four-wheeled phaeton, with a pair of ponies driven by Mrs M-, and a gig for which I lent the horse.

Now we did not expect them to come back till nine or ten o'clock, at any rate. I mention this particularly to show that there could be no expectation of their earlier return in the mind of my wife, to account for what follows.

At six o'clock that bright summer's evening my wife went out into the garden to call the children. Not finding them, she went all round the place in her search till she came to the empty stable; thinking they might have run in there to play, she pushed open the door; there, standing in the darkest corner, she saw Mrs M-. My wife was surprised to see her, certainly; for she did not expect her return so soon; but, oddly enough, it did not strike her as being singular to see her there. Vexed as she had felt with her all day for going, and rather glad, in her woman's way, to have something entirely different from the genuine casus belli to hang a retort upon, my wife said: "Well, Harriet, I should have thought another dress would have done quite as well for your picnic as that best black silk you have on." My wife was the elder of the twain, and had always assumed a little of the air of counsellor to her sister. Black silks were thought a great deal more of at that time than they are just now, and silk of any kind was held particularly inconsistent wear for Wesleyan Methodists, to which denomination we belonged.

Receiving no answer, my wife said: "Oh, well, Harriet, if you can't take a word of reproof without being sulky, I'll leave you to yourself"; and then she came into the house to tell me the party had returned and that she had seen her sister in the stable, not in the best of tempers. At the moment it did not seem extraordinary to me that my wife should have met her sister in the stable.

I waited indoors some time, expecting them to return my horse. Mrs M- was my neighbour, and, being always on most friendly terms, I wondered that none of the party had come in to tell us about the day's pleasure. I thought I would just run in and see how they had got on. To my great surprise the servant told me they had not returned. I began, then, to feel anxiety about the result. My wife, however, having seen Harriet in the stable, refused to believe the servant's assertion; and said there was no doubt of their return, but that they had probably left word to say they were not come back, in order to offer a plausible excuse for taking a further drive, and detaining my horse for another hour or so.

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At eleven o'clock Mr Pinnock, my brother-in-law, who had been one of the party, came in, apparently much agitated. As soon as she saw him, and before he had time to speak, my wife seemed to know what he had to say.

"What is the matter?" she said; "something has happened to Harriet, I know!"

"Yes" replied Mr Pinnock; "if you wish to see her alive, you must come with me directly to Goodwood."

From what he said it appeared that one of the ponies had never been properly broken in; that the man from whom the turn-out was hired for the day had cautioned Mrs M— respecting it before they started; and that he had lent it reluctantly, being the only pony to match in the stable at the time, and would not have lent it at all had he not known Mrs M— to be a remarkably good whip.

On reaching Goodwood, it seems, the gentlemen of the party had got out, leaving the ladies to take a drive round the park in the phaeton. One or both of the ponies must then have taken fright at something in the road, for Mrs M— had scarcely taken the reins when the ponies shied. Had there been plenty of room she would readily have mastered the difficulty; but it was in a narrow road, where a gate obstructed the way. Some men rushed to open the gate—too late. The three other ladies jumped out at the beginning of the accident; but Mrs M— still held on to the reins, seeking to control her ponies, until, finding it was impossible for the men to get the gate open in time, she too sprang forward; and at the same instant the ponies came smash on to the gate. She had made her spring too late, and fell heavily to the ground on her head. The heavy, old-fashioned comb of the period, with which her hair was looped up, was driven into her skull by the force of the fall. The Duke of Richmond, a witness to the accident, ran to her assistance, lifted her up, and rested her head upon his knees. The only words Mrs M— had spoken were uttered at the time: "Good God, my children!" By direction of the Duke she was immediately conveyed to a neighbouring inn, where every assistance, medical and otherwise, that forethought or kindness could suggest was afforded her.

At six o'clock in the evening, the time at which my wife had gone into the stable and seen what we now knew had been her spirit, Mrs M—, in her sole interval of returning consciousness, had made a violent but unsuccessful attempt to speak. From her glance having wandered round the room, in solemn awful wistfulness, it had been conjectured she wished to see some relative or friend not then present. I went to Goodwood in the gig with Mr Pinnock, and arrived in time to see my sister-in-law die at two o'clock in the morning. Her only conscious moments had been those in which she laboured unsuccessfully to speak, which had occurred at six o'clock. She wore a black silk dress.

When we came to dispose of her business, and to wind up her affairs, there was scarcely anything left for the two orphan girls. Mrs M—'s father, however, being well-to-do, took them to bring up. At his death, which happened soon afterwards, his property went to his eldest son, who speedily dissipated the inheritance. During a space of two years the children were taken as visitors by various relations in turn, and lived an unhappy life with no settled home.

For some time I had been debating with myself how to help these children, having many boys and girls of my own to provide for. I had almost settled to take them myself, bad as trade was with me, at the time, and bring them up with my own family, when one day business called me to Brighton. The business was so urgent that it necessitated my travelling at night.

I set out from Bognor in a close-headed gig on a beautiful moonlight winter's night, when the crisp frozen snow lay deep over the earth, and its fine glistening dust was whirled about in little eddies on the bleak night-wind-driven now and then in stinging powder against my tingling cheek, warm and glowing in the sharp air. I had taken my great "Bose" (short for "Boatswain") for company. He lay, blinking wakefully, sprawled out on the spare seat of the gig beneath a mass of warm rugs.

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Between Littlehampton and Worthing is a lonely piece of road, long and dreary, through bleak and bare open country, where the snow lay knee-deep, sparkling in the moonlight. It was so cheerless that I turned round to speak to my dog, more for the sake of hearing the sound of a voice than anything else. "Good Bose," I said, patting him, "there's a good dog!" Then suddenly I noticed he shivered, and shrank underneath the wraps. Then the horse required my attention, for he gave a start, and was going wrong, and had nearly taken me into the ditch.

Then I looked up. Walking at my horse's head, dressed in a sweeping robe, so white that it shone dazzling against the white snow, I saw a lady, her back turned to me, her head bare; her hair dishevelled and strayed, showing sharp and black against her white dress.

I was at first so much surprised at seeing a lady, so dressed, exposed to the open night, and such a night as this, that I scarcely knew what to do. Recovering myself, I called out to know if I could render assistance—if she wished to ride? No answer. I drove faster, the horse blinking, and shying, and trembling the while, his ears laid back in abject terror. Still the figure maintained its position close to my horse's head. Then I thought that what I saw was no woman, but perchance a man disguised for the purpose of robbing me, seeking an opportunity to seize the bridle and stop the horse. Filled with this idea, I said, "Good Bose! hi! look at it, boy!" but the dog only shivered as if in fright. Then we came to a place where four cross-roads meet.

Determined to know the worst, I pulled up the horse. I fetched Bose, unwilling, out by the ears. He was a good dog at anything from a rat to a man, but he slunk away that night into the hedge, and lay there, his head between his paws, whining and howling. I walked straight up to the figure, still standing by the horse's head. As I walked, the figure turned, and I saw Harriet's face as plainly as I see you now—white and calm—placid, as idealised and beautified by death. I must own that, though not a nervous man, in that instant I felt sick and faint. Harriet looked me full in the face with a long, eager, silent look. I knew then it was her spirit, and felt a strange calm come over me, for I knew it was nothing to harm me. When I could speak, I asked what troubled her. She looked at me still, never changing that cold fixed stare. Then I felt in my mind it was her children, and I said:

"Harriet! is it for your children you are troubled?"

No answer.

"Harriet," I continued, "if for these you are troubled, be assured they shall never want while I have power to help them. Rest in peace!"

Still no answer.

I put up my hand to wipe from my forehead the cold perspiration which had gathered there. When I took my hand away from shading my eyes, the figure was gone. I was alone on the bleak snow-covered ground. The breeze, that had been hushed before, breathed coolly and gratefully on my face, and the cold stars glimmered and sparkled sharply in the far blue heavens. My dog crept up to me and furtively licked my hand, as who would say, "Good master, don't be angry. I have served you in all but this."

I took the children and brought them up till they could help themselves.