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SOME STRANGE EXPERIENCE

THE REMINISCENCES OF A GHOST-SEER,

Being the Result of a Chat on the Kitchen-Stairs

“THEY do say the dead never come back again,” she observed half dreamingly; “but then I have seen such queer things!”

She was a healthy, well built country girl, whom the most critical must have called good looking; robust and ruddy, despite the toil of life in a boarding-house kitchen, but with a strangely thoughtful expression in her large dark eyes, as though she were ever watching the motions of somebody who cast no shadow, and was invisible to all others. Spiritualists were wont to regard her as a strong “medium,” although she had a peculiar dislike of being so regarded. She had never learned to read or write, but possessed naturally a wonderful wealth of verbal description, a more than ordinarily vivid memory, and a gift of conversation which would have charmed an Italian *improvvisatore*. These things we learned during an idle half hour passed one summer’s evening in her company on the kitchen stairs; while the boarders lounged on the porch in the moonlight, and the hall lamp created flickering shadows along the varnished corridors, and the hungry rats held squeaking carnival in the dark dining-room. To the weird earnestness of the story-teller, the melody of her low, soft voice, and the enthralling charm of her conversation, we can not attempt to do justice; nor shall we even undertake to report her own mysterious narrative word for word, but only to convey to the reader those impressions of it which linger in the writer’s memory.

“The first thing I can remember about ghost-people,” she said, “happened to me when I was quite a little child. It was in Bracken County, Kentucky, on a farm, between Dover and Augusta—about half way between the towns—for I remember a great big stone that was set up on the road just above the farm,

which they called the "Half-way Stone," and it had a big letter H cut on it. The farm-house was away back from the river, in a lonely place, among woods of beech and sugartrees; and was one of the weirdest old buildings you ever saw. It was built before there were any nails used out West; so you can imagine how old it was; and I heard that the family who first built it had many a terrible fight with the Indians. Before the house ran a rocky lane full of gutters and mud holes; and behind it was a great apple orchard, where very few apples grew, because no one took care of the trees. Great slimy, creeping plants had grown up about them, and strangled them; and the pathways were almost grown over with high weeds, and strong rank grass; and owls lived in some of the trees, but the family seemed to be afraid to shoot them. At the end of the orchard yawned a great, deep well, unused for many years; cats and dogs and rabbits had found graves in the fetid black water; the stones were green with moss and slime; the bucket was covered with moss; and great black snakes which lived in holes in the sides of the well used to wriggle out on sunny days and blink their wicked, shiny eyes at the house. This well was at the mouth of a deep hollow, choked up with elder-brush and those creeping plants that can never be killed, and there were black-snakes, garter-snakes and dry-land moccasins living there. Near the hollow on the other side flowed a clear "branch" of water over a bed of soft blue clay, which we used to roll into "slate pencils" and make mud pies of. One time we wanted to make a little mill-dam there, to drown some geese in, and while digging into the blue clay with a grubbing-hoe we found four great big Mexican dollars buried there. We did not know what they were then, and we brought them to the farm-house, where they took them from us. Some time afterwards two men came and bought the piece of ground where we had found the money, and they set to digging; but nothing more was ever found there.

"The farm house looked as if it had been built a hundred years ago, but those who built it built well and strong, for it was sound from roof to foundation. Many of the big trees in the orchard, planted by them, had rotted and died, and the bark was peeling off over nests of the gray wood-lice that burrowed under it; but the old house was still strong. It was a very queer, antiquated structure, with ghostly looking gables, and great

limestone chimneys towered up at each end of it. There were four big rooms, two up stairs and two down stairs, and a little kitchen built against the house, making a fifth room; there were five old-fashioned doors of heavy planking, and there were eight or ten narrow windows, with ever so many tiny panes of glass in them. The house was built of heavy sarsaparilla logs, with floors of black walnut, and walls ceiled with blue ash; and there were no shelves, but only recesses in the walls—small, square recesses, where books and little things were kept. The clap-boards were fastened down on the roof with wooden pegs, and the flooring was pegged down to the sleepers. Between the planking and the logs of the south room on the first floor there was an old Revolutionary musket built into the wall. The north room, next to this, was never occupied.

“I remember that room well; for the door was often open, although no one of the family ever entered it since an old lady named Frankie Boyd had died there, years before, of consumption. She had lingered a long time, and coughed a great deal, and used to spit on the wall beside the bed. The bed was an old-time piece of furniture, with posters; and all the furniture was old-fashioned. There was an old-fashioned clothes-chest with legs; an old-fashioned rocking-chair, with great heavy rockers; and an old-fashioned spinning-wheel. One of the old lady’s dresses, a black dress, still hung on the wall where she had placed it the last time she had took it off; but it had become so old and moth-eaten that a touch would have crumbled it like so much burnt paper. The dust was thick on the floor, so thick that the foot would leave an impression in it; and the windows were yellow like parchment for want of cleaning.

“They said that the old lady used to walk about that room, and that no one could sleep there. Doors used to open and shut without the touch of human hands; and all night long the sound of the rocking-chair rocking, and of the spinning-wheel humming, could be heard through the house. That was why nobody ever went into that room. But the ghost of Frankie Boyd was not the only ghost there. The house had once been owned by the Paddy family, and Lee Paddy, the ‘old man,’ and all his children, had died in the room used when I was there for a kitchen, and had been buried in the family graveyard, on the north side of the house, under the shadow of a great locust

tree. After Frankie Boyd died the house fell into the hands of her nephew, a man named Bean, who had a rich father, a scientific old gentleman, in Lewis County. Both father and son were queer people, and the old man's eccentricity at one time nearly lost him his life. Some one killed an immense black-snake on his farm, and the scientific Mr. Bean had it cooked for dinner after the manner of cooking salmon. Then he invited a friendly neighbor to dine with him. They say that the neighbor was delighted with the repast, and declared that he had never eaten finer salmon. But when old Bean told him that he had eaten a black snake which John killed yesterday morning, the shock nearly killed him, and he staggered home to get his shotgun. Bean did not dare to leave his home for weeks afterwards.

"After the death of Frankie Boyd, the old farmhouse in Bracken County of course became a weirder and ghostlier place than ever—a scary place, as the slaves around there used to call it. It was a dreadfully creaky place, and no one could pass out or down the old staircase without making a prodigious creaking and crackling. Now at all hours of the day or night those stairs creaked and creaked, and doors opened and banged, and steps echoed overhead in the rooms upstairs. I was a very little girl then and had a little boy-playmate, who used to run about with me all over the farm, digging in the blue clay, running after the fowls, watching the great snakes that glided about the noisome well, climbing the strangled apple trees in search of withered and shrunk apples, and throwing pebbles at the great, ugly horned owls that used to sit there among the creepers, blinking with their great yellow eyes. We did not know why the house was haunted by such odd noises; and the old negro servants were strictly forbidden to tell us anything about the queer things that walked about there. But, nevertheless, we had a perfect horror of the house; we dreaded to be left in it alone; we never entered it on sunny days, except at meal time, and when foul weather forced us to stay in-doors the folks often found us sitting down and crying in a corner. We could not at first tell why we cried, further than that we were afraid of something undefinable—a vague fear always weighed upon us like a nightmare. They told us to go up stairs, one evening after dark, and we had to go without a light. Something came after us, and stepped up the stairs behind us, and touched our heads, and followed us

into the room, and seemed to sob and moan. We screamed with fear, and the folks ran up with a lantern and took us down stairs again. Some one used also to play with the rusty old musket that had been built into the wall, and would get under the black walnut floor, knocking loudly and long; and all the time the rocking-chair creaked and thumped in the north room. Bean had got used to it all; but he seldom went up stairs, and the books in the old recesses became black with layers of clammy dust, and the spiders spun thick, glutinous webs across the windows.

“It came to pass about six months after the dead had followed us into the dark room upstairs, that a great storm came down through the woods, wrestling with the ancient trees, tearing away the serpent-creepers in the garden, swelling the springs to torrents, and the old farm-house rattled through all its dry bones. The great limestone chimneys and the main building stood the test bravely: but the little kitchen building where all the Paddy family had died, was shattered from clapboards to doorstep. It had been built in a very curious fashion, a fashion passed away and forgotten; and the cunning of modern house builders could not rebuild it. So they pulled it down, log by log, and brought destruction upon many spider colonies, and mice nests, and serpent holes; building a new pinewood structure in its place, with modern doors and windows. And from that time the strange noises ceased and the dead seemed to rest, except in the room where the yellow spittle had dried upon the walls and the old-fashioned furniture had become hoary with years of dust. The steps on the staircase died away forever, and the knocking beneath the floor ceased.

“But I must not forget to tell you one more curious thing about the place. There was a hen-house near the grave of the Paddy family; and the hens were great in multitude, and laid eggs by hundreds. Somehow or other we could scarcely ever get any eggs for all that. The hens were thin, spectral birds, which looked as if they had been worn out by anxiety and disappointment. Something or other used to steal their eggs the moment they were laid; and what it was no one ever pretended to know. The old negro cook hinted that the ghosts of the Paddy family sucked the eggs; but as we could never find even an egg-shell, this supposition did not hold good. Traps were

laid for pole-cats, weasels, coons, and every variety of wild egg-thieves; but none were ever seen there or caught; and the poultry ceased to propagate their species, so that fresh relays of poultry had to be purchased ever and anon. I don't know whether the old farm-house still stands or whether Bachelor Bean has been gathered to his fathers, for it is many years since I left there to live with friends at Dover.

"I had another experience, of a much more unpleasant kind, I think, during the time I remained at Dover. All the country round there is hilly; and there are two broad turnpike roads winding out of the city—one called the Maysville pike, the other the Dover pike, running from Dover beyond Minerva. Now, both of the pikes have been the scene of violent death; and both are said to be haunted. Of the latter fact I have the testimony of my own eyes—which, I make bold to remark, are very sharp eyes.

"About four miles from Dover, on the Maysville pike, the road, following the winding of the hills, crosses a rude bridge of rocks and timber over a swift stream, and curves into the shape of a gigantic horse-shoe. This place is called 'Horse-shoe Bend,' is situated between two hills, and is wild and 'scary' in the extreme. Since the occurrence which gave a specter to Horse-shoe Bend, few have the courage to pass the spot after nightfall; and those who must, put spurs to their horses and gallop by as though the Devil were riding behind them; for the specter of a suicide haunts the bend.

"I can't well remember when it happened, but I do not think it was more than half a dozen years ago; and I even forget the man's name. I only know that he was a married man, pretty well-to-do, and lived at Rock Springs, below Augusta. One day he left his home on business, and was detained in town beyond his usual hour for returning. It was a bright, frosty winter's night; the pike was white and hard as iron, and his horse's hoofs made merry music on the long trot home, until he saw his farm-house and its shadow lying black and sharp on the fields, and the blood-red glow of the wood fire in the great limestone fireplace. Then it occurred to him, strangely enough, to dismount, tie his horse to a tree, and creep softly up to the window. His wife sat by the fire, but not alone; the arm of a stranger was about her waist, and the fingers of a stranger were

playing with her hair. Then he turned, sick at heart, from the window, and crept along in the shadows to where his horse stood, and mounted and rode away, recklessly, madly, furiously. People who looked out of their windows as he passed say they never saw man ride so before. The hard pike flashed into fire under the iron hoofs of the flying horse, the rider cursed like a fiend, and the great watch-dogs in the farmhouses howled as though a specter were sweeping by. Neither horse nor horseman ever returned. Some little school children next morning passing by Horse-shoe Bend, in the golden light of the early sun, saw the farmer hanging from a tree by his bridle rein; and the horse laying by the side of the road, dead, and frozen like his rider. Preacher Holton and Sam Berry cut down the body; but the specter of the suicide has never left the spot. They say the only way to make the spirit of a suicide rest is to bury the body with a stake driven through it. I don't know whether that is true; but I know that every time I passed Horse-shoe Bend I could see the farmer leaning against a tree, dressed in his gray winter suit, and the horse lying down by the side of the road. You could see the very woof of the cloth, the very hair of the black horse; yet the moment you got near enough to touch the specter with the hand, it passed away like the flame of a candle blown out. I have often seen it.

“I don't know very much about the history of the apparition which haunts the other pike; I have forgotten the name, but I have seen the thing which walks there. About three miles from Dover, on the way to Minerva, is a toll gate, and about a mile and a half above the toll gate is a place called Firman's Woods, a hilly place, with trees. In a hollow by the side of the road at this point, a farmer was murdered for his money, and his body flung into the brush. He had ridden over that road a hundred times, and paid many a toll at the toll-gate; everybody knew his grizzled beard and broad-brimmed hat when he passed by. On the night of the murder he had disposed of some stock and was returning home with a well filled pocket-book, when he met another horseman traveling toward Minerva. Perhaps he was incautious with his new acquaintance; perhaps he foolishly displayed the greasy pocket-book, fat with rolls of green bills, for on reaching Firman's Woods the stranger stabbed him to the heart with a bowie-knife, hid the

corpse in the hollow, and galloped off with the dead man's money. The victim of the murder has never found the sleepy rest of death. A spectral rider gallops nightly along the pike, sometimes flying past the toll-gate invisible, his horse's hoofs echoing loud and sharply of cold nights, and splashing through the mud with a soggy sound on rainy evenings. But he is only seen at Firman's Woods—a shadowy figure, headless and horrible. I have seen it, and beheld it dissolve like the flame of a candle in a strong current of wind.

“The most frightful experience I ever had—at least the one which frightened me most—was in the town of Minerva. I was working for a family there as cook, and my room was a dark and shadowy apartment, in the back of the building. It had a window, but the window gave scarcely any light, because it faced a higher building across the alley, and had not been cleaned for years. I thought there was something queer about the room, because the first day I came to the house Joe — took me up stairs with a candle in his hand, and said, ‘You won't be afraid to sleep here, will you?’ Well, I said, ‘No.’”

[Here we ventured to ask the narrator what Joe's other name was, but she objected, for private reasons, to mention it, and we had to content ourselves with the fact that Joe was the proprietor of the house and a man of family.]

“I worked there only one day. When supper was over, and the dishes had been washed up, and every thing put in order, I went up-stairs to bed. I remember that I felt afraid—I could not tell why—to blow the candle out; but I thought the folks would scold me for wasting candles, so I blew it out at last, and crept into bed, and tried to pull the covers up over me. I found I could not move them at first; they seemed to be nailed to the foot of the bed. Then I gave a very strong pull, and succeeded in getting the clothes up, although it seemed as if a heavy weight had been lying on them. Suddenly I felt a distinct pull back—something was pulling the clothes off of the bed. I pulled them back again, and they were again pulled off. Of course I felt frightened; but I had seen and heard strange things before, and concluded to lie down quietly and let the clothes be, because I thought that if I would let the Thing alone, it would let me alone. And at last I fell asleep.

“I don't know how long I slept; but I had a hideous night-

mare, and awoke panting in the dark, feeling that something was in the room with me. About a minute afterward it put its fingers on my mouth, and then stroked my nose. I thought of getting up, but I was too frightened to move; when I felt an immense hand placed on my chest, pressing me down to the bed—a hand so vast that it covered me from shoulder to shoulder, and felt heavier than iron. I was too frightened to faint, too spell-bound to scream, too powerless to move under that giant pressure. And with the pressure came horror, a horror of hell, unspeakably awful, worse than the ghastly enchantment of a thousand nightmares. I remember that I would have wished to die but for the hideous fancy that my ghost would go out in the dark to that awful Thing. The hand was suddenly removed, and I shrieked like a maniac in the dungeon of a lunatic asylum. Every one heard that shriek; and they came running up with lights and white faces. They showed me the doors and the windows securely fastened, and showed me that no human being had been in the room besides myself; but I did not need to be told that. I left the house next day.

“There was something of the same kind in a house in Lexington, where I used to live. It had once been owned by a lady named Jane —, a slaveholder in the days before the war; but she had passed to the place of Shadows, and her house had fallen into other hands. Still her sins haunted it—haunted it horribly. They say that one winter’s night, many years ago, she had whipped a negro slave to death with her own hands for some trifling act of disobedience. He was a powerful man, but they had stripped and securely tied him so that resistance was impossible, and the woman beat him with a leather strap, dipped in water, for eight consecutive hours. And the body died and was buried under the floor, and became green with rotteness; but the ghost of the man walked about and groaned, and tormented all who lived in the building. The woman used to sit on her doorstep all night crying in the moonshine, while the ghost groaned within. At last she moved away, and died in another neighborhood; but even when I was there the specter used to pull the bedclothing off the beds down stairs, if any one dared to sleep there.

“I have seen and heard many odd things of this kind; and once I saw what they call a wraith or a double, but I don’t think

you would find them so interesting as my last experience in a Cincinnati house. It was on West Fifth street, and I was working there both as cook and chambermaid. There was a story connected with the house, which I never knew correctly, and will therefore not attempt to relate, beyond that a certain young girl died there and came back afterwards. But I was not told about this circumstance until I had worked there for some time. It happened one evening, about dusk, that I went up stairs to one of the bed-rooms on an errand; and I saw a young lady, all in white, standing before the mirror, tall and silent. The sun had set the color of blood that evening, and a faint rosy-glow still mingled with the gloomy gray, so that objects were plainly discernible and sharply outlined. Now, as I had left all the boarders at supper, I thought on first entering the room that the figure before the mirror must be that of some lady visitor, whose coming I had not known. I stood for a moment and looked at her, but did not see any face, for her back was turned to me, and, as she seemed unusually tall, I thought that the blackness of her hair was lost in the blackness of the shadows above the mirror. But it suddenly occurred to me to glance at the mirror. I did so. There was the figure, tall, silent and white, but there was no face or head visible. I approached to touch the white shadow; it vanished like the flame of a candle vanishes, or as the breath vanishes from the mirror that has been breathed upon.

“People call me a medium, sometimes, and ask me to sit in dark circles and help to call up spirits. I have always refused—do you wonder at it? I tell you the truth, sir, when I say that far from refusing to leave the dead alone, I would be only too happy if they would leave me alone.”

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