My First Ghost. A Christmas Experience

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MY FIRST GHOST.

A CHRISTMAS EXPERIENCE.

Leighwood Castle,
Dec. 23rd.

It is quite impossible to believe that I have been here only three days! This is Wednesday evening, and I came on Monday. Looking at myself dispassionately I consider that I am a woman of sound common sense. I have gone through life up till now, believing in very little that I could not see, unless, indeed, it was scientifically proven. This talk of the supernatural which is everywhere in the air at present, has seemed to me to be only a sign of the times, the outcome of over-wrought nerves, or, at best, a morbid hankering after untried experiences. I am not even sure whether I would have consented to spend Christmas with these people had I known what I was to be let in for. Yet, what am I writing? Of course I would have accepted, I would have laughed heartily had I been told that I was going to a haunted house. Haunted for three hundred years, they say! I believe I am not quite myself to-night. I hope I am not going to have influenza or any other disease, for I never felt like this before—"creepy" is the word to describe my sensations. I must pull myself together, and, before I go to bed, write down exactly what has happened. I will add nothing, nor detract, if I can help it.

This is a typical Scotch manor house, or rather fortalice, though not very much of the original fortalice remains.

There is still the vaulted kitchen, with the rings let into the roof, where the bullock was slung in the old days, to be cut up. The walls are eight feet thick at this part of the building, and a secret staircase is hidden in one of them with an outlet into the far corner of the huge fireplace. The baking oven of the "king's troops" was only lately done away with, and the main staircase is altogether of stone, narrow and turning back on itself at every eight steps; a "defence" staircase, that a single man could keep with his sword-arm. The rest of the castle is nothing but a jumble. Six hundred, five hundred, three hundred, one hundred, are the dates of the various wings, not counting the three additions made within the last century; and all these varieties, mellowed and softened by the hand of time, have become a cohesive whole, standing high among the heather-clad hills, with the fir trees whispering as no other trees can whisper, and the constant murmur of water from the tumbling stream down the glen, and the scream of the curlews by day, and the owls calling by night; certainly if ghosts do exist, and already I have got as far as that, this is the place to find them.

I arrived late in the afternoon and was welcomed into the midst of a merry party at afternoon tea, sitting round the crackling wood fire. Holly was bristling everywhere, its wealth of red berries glowing in the lamplight, the whole atmosphere, was genial and "Christmasey." I had expected to enjoy myself, and I was sure I would. Another guest had arrived with me, a leaf and elderly gentleman, and shortly afterwards we were taken to our rooms, the one next door to the other. Then followed dinner, an evening with games and music, and to bed. I confess I was not sorry, I had travelled some distance

that day, and was soon in a sound and dreamless sleep. I was awakened almost immediately as it seemed, by a ruthless rapping at the door. I sat up very wide awake, the embers still glowed in the grate, and, as I was wondering whether I had been dreaming, the knock was repeated sharply and insistently. It had a curious metallic sound, as if the handle of a knife, or very bony knuckles had been used; a cold shiver went down my back, I by no means liked it. A few seconds passed, and then came a perfect battery of knocks at the door next mine, rousing my deaf neighbour, for I heard him calling out "Who's there?" There was no reply, but in the silence that followed I clearly heard foot steps leave the door. Someone had been taken ill, I thought, and hurrying on my dressing-gown, I lit my candle, and looked out into the passage. All was dark. Not a sound could be heard in any direction, except the heavy breathing of my next door neighbour, who was already asleep again. It was very unaccountable, but there was nothing for it but to go back to bed, and by next morning I had forgotten all about it.

It was on Tuesday that I had my second experience, and this time I was in company. After all, though I call myself a woman, I am not very far past girlhood, and was quite ready, when invited, to repair to one of the girls' bedrooms when the men adjourned to the smoking-room, to burn nuts and try our fortunes for the coming year. The "Shepherds Room" it was called, with quaint pointed windows, and with legends of poets and great men who had received inspiration within its four walls. It was situated high up in the Tower, but higher still up a winding stair. I was told there was another room, occupied at the time by the son and his wife. She had already retired for the night, whilst in the room below, we, girls burnt nuts, and believed for the moment in their occult properties. So great was our excitement that we determined to summon the occupant of the upper chamber to come and join in the merriment; the door was ajar; already the youngest of the party was on her feet, when a measured footstep ascending the staircase made her pause. It came along the passage, past our door, and continued on its way up the turret stair. "Bother! there is no use going for her now, that's my brother going to bed." The girl came back to her place, and for half an hour longer we continued our efforts. Suddenly voices arrested our attention, in the distance the smoking-room door had opened, and the men were dispersing for the night. One step separated itself from the others and ascended the staircase. Simultaneously my companions looked up, and I felt rather than saw the flash of understanding pass between them. "That is *really* him now" someone said, and then there was silence. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Nothing for little girls to know" I was told, "and it is high time we were all in bed." One of the party escorted me to my room and left me there, and I was alone with my own thoughts. This second experience brought to my mind my midnight visitant. I was tingling with curiosity, longing to unravel the mystery. What family skeleton lay here concealed? Some relative perhaps of feeble intellect given to somnambulistic practices.

Well, I would bolt my door I thought, and so I did, and slept the sleep of the just.

I woke next morning to find a wonderful transformation. My breath as I sat up formed ringlets in the suddenly chilled atmosphere of my room, the window panes were dimmed with frost crystals and over all lay a mantle of virgin snow. I sprang to my feet with surprise and delight, it was so sudden, so unexpected, in a few hours a fairy wand had decked the world anew. The branches of the silver firs swept the ground, bending beneath their weighty garment, the noses only of the shrubs were left visible. Landmarks were completely swept away, except where the stream, looking black and cold, cut a channel through the snow wreaths, and the hills in their silent purity looked down on the scene. It was bitterly cold. I hurried through my toilet, and welcomed gladly the gong for breakfast.

The party were assembling when I entered, but there was no surprise on any of their faces; rather unexpected was the verdict, but evidently no unusual occurrence. When the son of the house appeared, however, things took a very different turn, and his first words made all the caterers for breakfast come to a sudden stand-still. "Well! good folks, I've seen her at last!" "Not really." "When." "Where." "Tell us all about it." The exclamations came thick and fast. "There's not much to tell. I was asleep, and I had one of those vivid dreams that you feel is a reality. She came into the room, dressed all in white, just as has been described, and beckoned to me. I got up at once and followed her, and she led me down to the secret staircase. There she stood still. "You are the young laird," she said. "Yes; I believe I am." "Well, you have been a good young laird," and she disappeared quite suddenly. That was all." "I suppose the snow drove her in," someone said. "But who do you mean," I asked. "Who are you talking about?" "Why Lady Ann, of course." "But who is Lady Ann?" "Not know Lady Ann! I am surprised at you." "Don't tell her, Dick. Leave it till to-night. Then we can all go up to the Tower room and tell the whole thing."

So it was settled, and I was left burning with curiosity and, shall I own it, with a slight sensation of fear. I have still one experience to relate, and I want to see it in black and white, whilst it is still fresh in my mind. It happened this way. Everyone went out this afternoon, with the exception of myself. I am not used to these northern climes, and the fireside and a good novel were tempting. What put it into my head I do not know, but I suddenly made up my mind that, as the coast was clear, I would pay a secret visit to the Tower room. I felt a certain amount of perturbation at my daring; but I was determined not to be imposed upon, if I could help it, I had pictured to myself a low-roofed attic; judge of my surprise then, when I found myself in a spacious and very lofty chamber. The walls were hung with large oil paintings, somewhat gruesome subjects, and on the ceiling one larger than the rest was fastened. Life sized portraits of twelve notables who, in ruffles and dainty lace, looked down with supreme contempt at my open-eyed wonder. I sat down in a comfortable chair, more leisurely to study my surroundings,

and unconsciously to myself fell into a train of thought, trying to piece my experiences into a consecutive whole, lost in a profound reverie. I came to myself with a start; someone was coming up the stair. I rose to my feet; my cheeks hot all over at the thought of being discovered in my surreptitious act. There was no escape. I must face the consequence; so I stood and waited. I counted the nineteen steps; my visitor was breathless, for there was a pause when the landing was reached. Then came a distinct, rapid, metallic rapping at the door. A cold chill went through me. I recognised in a second the disturber of my first night's peace. Never again shall I forget that sound. I stood spellbound, until louder and sharper it was repeated. "Come in," I gasped feebly, my eyes riveted on the door. Then, slowly and decidedly, I saw the handle turn, and then there was silence. I could bear it no longer. I rushed forward and threw open the door. I was aghast! I stood facing emptiness. The footsteps, the rapping, all were illusions; no sound but the mocking voice of my former self, whispering, "You fool!"

12 p.m.—I hope no one will ever see this diary. I should not like to be thought of by my family as "convinced at last!" How often I have fought the question with believers, and denied the possibility of footsteps, raps, or any such like demonstrations having to do with spirits, departed or otherwise. It seemed so purile, so futile, so beneath contempt. I put all down to rampant imagination, or if something more substantial were needed—then rats? Now, I don't know what to think, and it will put me in a most unpleasant position with the others; but the fact remains that the last three days have gone far to shake me from my former attitude of utter denial. However, I must now go on with my story.

It was just ten o'clock when a general move was made for the Tower room. Our host treated the whole thing in the light of a play, and marshalled us to our places with much covert amusement. The fire flickered brightly, lighting up the portraits on the ceiling, and casting dark shadows into the corners of the room as we arranged ourselves within its glow. The strangers were impatient for our story, and someone exclaimed:—

"Tell us quickly now—who is Lady Ann?"

It was the eldest daughter who answered, and she spoke so quietly, with such conviction, that one felt intuitively that for her at least there were no "ifs" about the matter. You could have heard a pin drop when she proceeded as follows:—

"Lady Ann is our ghost, and her story is a very sad one, for it is said that she has haunted this house for three hundred years! She was an Earl's daughter, and in those days she lived here with her father. We know absolutely nothing about her life up to the date of her marriage, when she became the wife of one of the Earls of B. From that moment her sorrows began, for he was utterly bad and cruel, and some months after her marriage, in the autumn season, she ran away from him and wandered back for shelter to her old home. Broken-hearted and desolate, the weeks went on as she waited for the birth of her child. Then at

Christmas, when the snow was on the ground just as it is now, the baby came. A few days evidently went by, when Lady Ann, unknown to her attendants, escaped from her room out into the snow, with the baby in her arms. For hours, so the story goes, she wandered in the woods, her reason completely gone, and then she died."

"Yes, and now?"

"She still wanders; she still haunts her old home. More especially in the winter time she is heard, however, and only a few years ago, when we were from home; and the coachman and his family were living in the house, one Sunday night, he having gone to the stables, the women sitting chatting over the fire were startled by a thundering knocking at the hall door. The dog went wild with excitement, and rushed along the intervening passages, followed by the women, and on arriving at the door did his best to tear it down in his rage. 'It was like an army o' dragoons at the door,' the mother afterwards told us. For twenty minutes the rapping continued at intervals, and then ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Soon afterwards the husband returned, but he had seen no one, heard nothing of the disturbance. No thoughts of Lady Ann had ever entered the women's heads, rather their fears had been roused by stories of drunken miners, burglars, and such like. Their bravery returned when the husband appeared, and with a lantern, accompanied by the dog, they sallied along the stone passages, and boldly opened the door. Not a sound was to be heard but the murmur of the stream, whilst up through the leafless branches of the lime trees, the stars twinkled frostily. Over all lay a garment of deep unbroken snow; not a footstep, not a track in any direction. Still unconvinced, they searched every corner of the shrubberies with the same result. No human foot had trod the snow that night!"

There was silence in the room. On the window panes the ivy fluttered uneasily, and a low cry from an owl sounded weird and uncanny.

"There are more footsteps than one," she continued. "I have heard others several times. Once in the vaulted kitchen as I sat by the fire, a man's strong, heavy tread came along the passage, and passed in front of me, but I saw nothing though I heard it for some seconds in the distance echoing on the stone floor."

"Then, you have lived here all your life, and really, honestly believe this house to be haunted?" I hardly knew my own voice, so still and small it had grown.

"How can I doubt it," she exclaimed, rising to her feet. "Listen!"

Oh, God! Shall I ever forget that moment. I heard it, we all heard it, that footstep slowly coming up the stair, and—then the rap, short, sharp, and insistent.

"Come in," she cried, "come in"

Did she come in? None of us can tell. Only one thing I know for certain. I think I now believe!

M. E. GREENE.

'TILL quite recently I never had but one ghostly experience, and hope very sincerely I shall never have another.

One morning, after breakfast, when I was about five years old, I was in a

wood fronting the hall door of my father's house, and doing, I forget, what. It was winter, but a bright, sunny morning. The place was a country parsonage with a short avenue.

Through the leafless trees I saw a covered-car drive to the gate, and stop there. Some one got out of the car, and came up the avenue. I took notice of the driver first, who got down from his seat, and stood beside the car, flourishing a pocket handkerchief. I believe that at this time I had never even heard of a ghost.

The man who came out of the car walked through the closed gate, and then very swiftly up the avenue, and passed quite close to me. He was dressed in complete black, but showing a good deal of white shirt front. I this I am not quite sure, but his trousers seemed to have no legs in them, as if the man were wooden-legged, with the trousers flapping. He had a white face, and wore a large hat, black, but I cannot recall the pattern. He came with long strides and very swiftly, walking straight towards the hall-door.

I was frightened, very frightened. I ran through the wood, and fetching a compass, returned to the house by the back yard, and knocked and kicked at the back door for a long time before any one opened it.

At last a servant came and opened the door. She had a Bible in her hand, and had been at morning family prayers. I asked whether anyone had knocked at the front door, and she said "No."

That it was a real ghost I have no doubt at all. I was so horribly frightened when there was nothing calculated to frighten. I may add that no calamity followed as a consequence of this apparition. Presumably it was the phantasm of some former rector of the parish and occupant of the parsonage.

A WEST OF IRELAND BALLAD.

Ballyhaunis, Co. Mayo.

SIR—I beg to enclose a copy of a once popular street ballad, which I have corrected as far as my memory serves, and which seems to me to contain much of the spirit of antique ballad poetry.

Brennan and the Pedlar Bawn were executed about the beginning of the last century.

P. LYONS.

BOLD BRENNAN ON THE MOOR.

It's of a fearless highwayman a story I will tell,

His name was Willie Brennan, in Ireland he did dwell,

And on the Kilword mountains he commenced his wild career,

Where many a wealthy gentleman before him shook with fear.

Chorus—

Brennan on the Moor! Brennan on the Moor.

Bold and undaunted stood bold Brennan on the Moor.

A brace of loaded pistols he carried night and day,

He never robbed a poor man upon the king's highway,

But when he'd taken from the rich, like Turpin and "Black Bess,"

He always did divide with the widow in distress