

# **The Story of Clifford House**

*Anonymous*

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# The Story of Clifford House

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This story I will tell to you now, as I have promised to do so, and yet I can hardly make you believe in the reluctance with which I even allow my thoughts to go back to the time which I spent in that house my first town residence after I was married.

I had wished so much to go to town that spring grown tired of my lovely country home, I suppose. Tired of wide lawns and quiet, glassy ponds and streams, bordered by luscious, blooming rhododendrons; of silent, mossy avenues, glorious with the flickering light that stole through pale green beech leaves; of rose gardens with grassy paths, jewel-sprinkled with shell-like petals of white, crimson, pink, and cream-like hues; of old-fashioned rooms with narrow, mullioned windows embowered in scarlet japonica and fragrant, starry jessamine.

I suppose I had grown tired of them all, and I begged George to see about getting a nice house in town for the season.

George 'saw about it' viz.: he wrote one letter from my dictation to a house agent, and answered one advertisement, and yawned and grunted for a week afterwards about the 'bore of the thing'.

Of course I had to make him accompany me to town, and to the house agent's, and to the houses too. Let him smoke and yawn as much as he liked, I was determined to take a house, and take a nice one as well.

We had looked at George said fourteen but, in fact, seven, or eight houses I think, before we saw Clifford House.

I had found out a new house-agent's office, and this was the very first house we were shown pressed upon our notice, too, by the enthusiastic encomiums of the said house-agent. It was certainly a very fine house, both as to exterior and interior appearances. Large, massively built, agreeably darkened in woodwork and masonry by Time's shading brush, in excellent repair, and the locality all that could be desired. Wide, lofty apartments, staircases, and landings; a handsome dining-room panelled in velvety dark-green 'flock' and gold; a handsome drawing-room panelled in pale cream-colour and gold; airy bed-chambers and dressing-rooms one, in particular, attached to what seemed the principal bedroom, with a vast mirror occupying the whole side of the apartment which was opposite to the door leading into the bed-chamber.

'What a nice dressing-room!' I exclaimed, having a weakness, I confess, for large, handsome mirrors in the rooms I inhabit George says impertinent things about my 'wishing to see as much of myself as I can'. I know I am not tall, in fact, rather what he should call petite, if he wished to be polite but that is not my reason for liking a large mirror.

As I spoke the words I looked about mechanically for the house-agent's clerk who had been sent with us a nervous-looking little man, with a pasty complexion, and orange-coloured hair meekly plastered down at each side of his face. He had been untiringly trotting up and down stairs, unlocking doors, answering questions, and keeping up a harmless soliloquy of chatter about the beauties and excellencies of the 'mansiond', as he called it, ever since he entered its doors, but now he was nowhere to be seen.

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'What door have you open?' I said, speaking aloud to him, for suddenly a cold blast of air swept up the wide staircase and into the dressing-room, making me shudder.

'No door, ma'am not one, indeed!' said the little clerk, hurrying to the dressing-room door, but not entering. His face looked whiter than before, and in his accents there was an almost terrified earnestness that puzzled me.

The shadows of the afternoon seemed to deepen. The aspect of the suites of rooms and long silent corridors, with their doors ajar, as if unseen inhabitants were stealthily crouching behind them, drearily impressed me with a sense of dull desolation; and it was with a sudden sensation of childish fear and loneliness that I rushed after my husband, and took his arm as he hastily descended the stairs.

'A spacious, handsome staircase, George?' I remarked.

'Yes; and a spacious; handsome rent, you may be sure,' George responded.

But, in this particular, he was exceedingly, and I agreeably, astonished.

The rent was but a hundred and fifty pounds a year; when, judging from the situation and appearance of the house, our lowest estimate had been double that sum.

'How cheap!' I whispered.

A screw loose somewhere,' was George's oracular response.

He repeated his opinion to the clerk in a more business-like expression, to the effect that the rent seemed low, and that he trusted there was no peculiar eh?

'Drains, gas, water, all right, sir right as a a trivet, sir,' said the clerk, looking over his shoulder oddly, as he spoke. 'Chimneys, ventilators, roof, tiles everything in the perfectest repair and order, sir!'

'Hum!' said George, with a frown of thoroughly British dissatisfaction. 'Unpleasant neighbours, then?'

The little clerk coughed violently, and buried his nose and eyes in the depths of a red cotton handkerchief:

'Neighbours? Disagreeable, sir? Ah! dear me! Beg pardon, sir a little cough. No, indeed, sir!

Mrs Carmichael very high lady very rich, widow of young Mr William Carmichael, just opposite, sir old Lady Broadleigh within two doors Sir Thomas '

'Oh, very well!' said George impatiently. 'Come, Helen.'

Nevertheless, I was rather surprised to see how many faces were clustered at the windows of our aristocratic neighbours' houses, and with what intently curious looks they watched our exit and departure, as if visitors, or would-be tenants for Clifford House, were some very wonderful people indeed.

However, wonderful or not, the house seemed all that we could desire; the lowness of the rent made it a decided bargain, the season was advancing, our low-ceiled, country rooms seemed contracted, old-fashioned, and shabby, after those lofty, handsome suites of apartments; and, in three weeks, huge furniture vans, and a clever upholsterer, had carpeted, curtained, and furnished our town mansion from garret to basement, and George and I, our two babies, a nurse, two maids, a cook, and a butler, were installed in Clifford House.

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Dear George had been very generous nay, almost extravagant in his provisions for the comfort and pleasure of his wife and children; and my dressing-room and their nursery were fitted up so luxuriously and tastefully, that my feeling at the first inspection of them was that of self-gratulation on being such a fortunate woman, in having such a home, such babies, and such a husband.

I arrayed myself for dinner that evening quite gleefully; standing before my splendid mirror amid the blue drapery, cushions, and couches of my charming dressing-room. I put on George's favourite dress a bronze-brown lustrous silk, with sparkling gold ornaments: he invariably kissed me when he saw it on, stroked my brown curls and brunette face, and called me 'Maid Marian' and was still standing before the glass smiling at myself, like the happy, foolish little woman I was, when I perceived to my discomfiture that George was standing in the doorway watching my doings, and grinning very visibly under his moustache.

'Don't mind me, my dear, I beg! don't mind me in the least. But when you have done admiring Mrs George Russell, perhaps you will be kind enough to let me know' then, suddenly changing his tone, he exclaimed, 'Have you the window open, Helen, this chilly evening?'

'No, George,' I replied, glancing at it to make sure of the fact.

'Change in the weather, then,' my husband said. 'Come, Helen, there is no use in making yourself any prettier!' He had just uttered the last words when I saw him spring aside suddenly, and look around.

'What is the matter?' I said 'George, dear, what is the matter?' For his face had grown quite white, and with his back against the wall, he was staring about him wildly 'I don't know Helen something' he ejaculated in a low tone; then recovering himself, with a laugh, he cried 'I struck myself against the door, I suppose! I declare one would think I was composed of old china, or wax, or sugar candy, it hurt and stunned me so! Come, dearest.'

He had not struck himself, for I had been watching him going out on the lobby, and I felt an uneasy conviction that he knew he had not done so, and only spoke as he did in order to deceive or satisfy me. Why? Why did I think so? As I live I cannot tell why I thought so then I know now. We had the 'babies' as George always called them in with the dessert, after the time-honoured fashion of making olives as well as olive branches of them; and then, when the little ones had gone to bed, we sat side by side in the summer twilight, I lazily fanning myself, George bending over me like the lover-husband he was. Then came the lamps, and I played for him, and we sang duets and spent as happy an evening in our new home as a married pair could wish to spend. I cannot tell why I felt so disinclined to go upstairs that night, tired as I was, too for we had had a long journey up from the country. However, as eleven struck, I routed George out of the easy chair where he had been indulging in a preliminary doze, and, ringing for my maid, went up to my dressing-room.

I like gas in my dressing-room, though not in my bedroom, and the globes at either side the great mirror were a blaze of light. As I entered I caught the reflection of a woman's figure in the depth of the glass, not my maid's. The glimpse I had was of a tall woman, strongly built, and broad-shouldered, a quantity of light hair hanging in a disordered manner on her neck, and the profile of a white, hard, masculine face, with the keen glittering eye turned watchfully towards the door.

This may seem an elaborately detailed description for the momentary glance I obtained, but it is well known with what lightning rapidity the organs of vision will, in moments of terror and amazement, convey impressions to the startled brain, impressions accurate and indelible.

I had taken but one step on entering, the next step the figure had vanished, and the mirror reflected but my own terrified face, and the homely, cheerful one of my maid Harriet, as she stooped over the dressing-table opening a jewel case.

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I dropped down on the nearest chair, and, in answer to the girl's alarmed questions, replied that I did not feel very well. I was sick and shuddering from head to foot.

Suddenly it flashed across me that it was from a similar cause I had seen my husband's face grow ghastly, and that strange, terrified look come into his eyes, he, who had been a soldier and unflinchingly had fought amidst the dead and dying on bloody Indian battlefields, almost boy as he was then! What was it? What had he seen? Nonsense! was I going to believe I had seen a ghost? Nonsense, a thousand times over! I heard my husband's cheery voice as he ascended the stairs, and, quite angry with myself for giving way to such folly, I threw on my dressing gown, and, snatching up the brush from Harriet, I pulled my hair down and brushed it quite savagely, until my head ached well for punishment.

If the bright morning light disperses sweet illusions formed overnight, as people say it does, it disperses gloomy ones as well. With the warmth and brightness of the unclouded summer's sun streaming in through softly coloured blinds, bringing out the velvety green of soft new carpets and lounges, the rainbow tints of glittering chandeliers, vases, and ornaments, the gilding on bright fresh wallpaper, and the spotless folds of snowy window drapery, it was impossible for an instant to connect anything dark or dismal with Clifford House. Why, my dressing-room even, where I had been so silly last evening, was like a woodland bower, with its deep purple-blue hangings and rose painted china flower-vases, filled with bouquets from our country home.

Clustering fragrant honeysuckle half-opened moss roses, drooping emerald-green fern, and masses of delicious jessamine dropping its over-blown blossoms on the white toilet cover, lace-flounced and tied with blue ribbons, as Harriet delighted to have it.

'I think this such a charming room and such a charming house altogether, George!' I said; 'and you have been such a dear, thoughtful old darling!' For I had perceived that the dear fellow had had his own half-length portrait hung over my writing-table. Quite a pleasant surprise for me, for I thought he intended it to be hung in the dining-room, and I delighted in having the dear pleasant brown eyes looking down at me when I was busy writing or sewing.

'I am so glad you like everything, Nellie,' said he.

'Why, George, don't you?'

But George had walked off whistling, and presently I heard uproarious baby-laughter, and baby-chatter, and thumping, trotting of small fat feet, as George put the tidy nursery into dire confusion by his morning game of romps with his son and heir, and red-cheeked baby-daughter.

And it did seem as if I must have been dreaming or delirious, when this day and many a succeeding one passed away swiftly and pleasantly, without the slightest recurring event to remind me of my strange alarm on the night of our arrival.

We had been in Clifford House about a fortnight, when one morning I received a visit from our opposite neighbour the young widow, Mrs Carmichael. A very pretty, lady-like person she was, and as we had some common acquaintances we chattered away very freely and pleasantly for half-an-hour or so. As she rose to go she asked suddenly if we liked the house. I replied in the affirmative rather warmly.

She was opposite the light, and I saw an involuntary elevation of her eye-brows and compression of her lips that puzzled me. I fancied it was because I had spoken so enthusiastically. Yet her own manner was anything but languidly fashionable, being very cordial and decided.

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'Yes; it is a very nice house, roomy and well-built,' said she, after a moment's pause; 'I am so glad you like it we may be permanent neighbours.'

We went out to dinner at a friend's house in Seymour Street that evening, and when we returned about half-past eleven, in spite of a yawning remonstrance from George, I tripped off softly to have a peep at my darlings, before I went to bed.

The nursery was a large, pleasant room at the end of the long corridor leading from our own apartments, and, gently turning the handle and gathering my rustling silk dress around me, I opened the door and went in. There was the night-lamp burning clearly, shining softly on the tiny cribs with the sweet flushed infant faces, the long golden-brown lashes lying on the dimpled-apple-bloom cheeks, the waxen hands and little rounded arms thrown above the tossed golden curls, and the heavenly calm of the little sleeping forms and pure, peaceful breathing.

I wonder would any mother, no matter how cold and careless, have neglected doing what I did, as I bent over my treasures, and prayed God that His angels might keep watch over each cherub head on its little, soft, white pillow?

I had looked at and kissed them, and turned to go, when I glanced towards the nurse's bed.

'Are you not well, Mary? What is the matter?' I said in an anxious whisper.

She was a very respectable and trustworthy servant, as well as being a kind, gentle creature with the little ones, and consequently highly valued by me, but her health was never very good, and she was subject to severe attacks of nervous headache and sleeplessness. She was sitting up in bed, her hands grasping the bedclothes, her face and lips ashy white, and her eyes staring wildly, as if they would start from their sockets.

'Mary! Good Heavens! what is the matter?' I gasped.

'Ma'am! Oh, ma'am oh, mistress, I am dying!' And with a stifled cry the poor girl fell back on the pillow, her eyes still retaining their frenzied stare. It was but the work of a few moments to ring bells and summon the household, to dispatch the man-servant for a doctor, and to have the sleeping children taken into my own bedchamber, while Harriet and I administered restoratives, and chafed the half-senseless girl's damp, cold hands.

I could imagine no cause for her sudden illness, and the other servants were very voluble in exclamations and laments. But when the physician a pale, kindly, grave-looking man arrived after a moment's examination, he demanded if she had been frightened? I replied in the negative, and was proceeding to describe to him the state in which I had found her, when I heard the housemaid and Harriet whispering energetically together.

'She has!'

'Hush!'

'I know she has!'

'What is it? Speak out at once my good girl!' said the doctor sternly to the housemaid; 'you know something of this.'

Both servants looked apprehensively at me and at George.

'Speak up at once, Margaret; the girl's life may depend on it! Tell the truth, my girl, and don't be afraid,' said her master kindly, but firmly.

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'I don't know nothing, sir indeed, no, ma'am,' said Margaret confusedly; 'but I think, ma'am she's seen the ghost, sir!'

'The what!' cried George angrily.

'She have, sir!' persisted Margaret eagerly, now that her confession was made. 'We're all afraid, sir; but she's been worser nor the rest of us. And she says to me only this morning, "Margaret", she says, "if I see it, I'll die!"'

'What ghost, you fool?' cried George more angrily. 'A pretty set you are! great, grown men and women, afraid of some bogie story you have heard when you were gossiping with the servants on the terrace, I suppose!'

'No, indeed, sir,' said Margaret; 'I wasn't gossipin', sir; but the parlour-maid over the way, sir Mrs Carmichael's parlour-maid, ma'am she told me that there was somethin' 'I thought so!' interrupted George. 'You ought to be ashamed of yourselves not to have an ounce of brains among you.'

'But, sir!' Margaret burst out again, unheeding her master's rather uncomplimentary phrenological verdict, 'we didn't mind, sir, though we was a bit frightened, until we seen it, sir!'

The butler see it, and he ran, and cook ran.'

'And you ran after them?' said George, with an indignant laugh.

'I did, sir, for I saw it too a big woman with fair hair all over her shoulders,' said Margaret, in an awestruck whisper to Harriet, who nodded her head.

The doctor looked up, gravely and without a smile. The servants clustered together near the door, and muttered in undertones. George looked at me with a forced smile, which died away in an instant:

'You are not so foolish as to credit any of this nonsense, Helen?' he said.

The servants all turned eagerly to hear their mistress's opinion. I am afraid it was written in my pallid face. Was it true? Was it what I had seen? Could there be any reality in this, that here, in our pleasant, happy home, here, beneath the roof with our helpless little ones, was a dreadful, unblessed presence a shadowy horror; that that thing with the watchful, cruel eyes had not been a mere vision of imagination, the mere offspring of an active brain, and the unstrung nerves of an overtired frame?

'Oh! they imagined something from the stories they heard, I dare say,' I faltered.

The butler shook his head solemnly:

'I could swear to it, ma'am.'

'And so could I, ma'am!' chorused the cook and housemaid.

'Hush!' said the doctor, as the nurse, roused, at length, from her stupor, lay quietly, with closed eyes, from which the tears streamed down her face. 'Some one must sit up with her now,' said the doctor, looking around.

'I will, sir, if my mistress allows me,' said Harriet.

'Certainly, Harriet,' said I at once.



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He communicated his instructions to her and took his leave, promising to call in the morning.

'Did you ever hear anything like this folly, doctor?' said George, as he shook hands with him at the head of the stairs.

'Oh! yes, sir, I often hear such stories,' said the doctor quietly, as he bade us both goodnight.

'George! what has frightened the girl? What has she seen?' I whispered, clasping my husband's arm.

'Nellie, go to bed, and don't be a goose,' was George's reply.

'George I saw that thing that woman, in my dressing-room,' I said, trembling, 'and oh!

think if the children were to see it and be frightened like poor Mary!'

'Well, Helen,' said my husband sharply, 'if you are going to listen to Ignorant servants'

superstitions and run out of your house, just as we are comfortably settled in it, on account of a foolish sickly woman fainting from hearing a ghost story I say it is a pity you ever came into it.'

He spoke very decidedly and sternly, and yet I felt in my inmost heart that he uttered what he wished me to believe, not what he believed himself.

I said no more, but went to my bedroom not into the dreaded dressing-room and lay awake listening and fevered with nervous anxiety until the morning dawned.

The nurse was better and able to speak next day, though extremely weak and unnerved yet. The doctor forbade much questioning, and all that could be got from her at intervals was that something had come up the staircase and ran through the corridor, that she heard struggling and scuffling outside, and then the nursery door opened and she saw a woman's face peering in, the eyes gleaming wickedly at her, and it had the yellow hair that 'belonged to the ghost'.

'The woman has had a bad fit of nightmare that is all, Helen,' said George, rattling his paper unconcernedly, when I repeated to him the story I had just heard from poor Mary's trembling lips.

It might be so; but why were they all agreed as to what they had seen? Why did they all speak of the tangled fair hair, and the wicked gleaming eyes? Was our house haunted? Was this the mysterious cause of the exceedingly moderate rent and the house-agent's profuse civility? The nurse did not recover strength, and being worse than useless in her present weak, hysterical condition, I sent her down to her country home for change of air, and hired another temporarily in her place.

The newcomer was a stout, small, cheerful woman of about forty. I liked her face the moment I saw her; for, besides its smiling, honest expression, there was a good deal of decided character in the large firm features. 'You appear to be a sensible person,' I said, when giving her her first instructions in the nursery, 'and I think I can rely on you. You know my nurse is leaving because of illness, and that illness was caused by her being frightened by a ghost-story.' I paused; but the woman remained unmoved, listening to me in respectful silence.

'The servants downstairs have got some nonsense of the kind into their heads,' I went on; 'they will try to frighten you, too, and tell you they have seen ' I could not go on. For my life I could not calmly give her the description of that shadowy image of fear.

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'They cannot frighten me, ma'am,' said my new nurse quietly. 'I am not afraid of spirits.'

I thought she spoke in jest, and smiled.

'I am not indeed, ma'am,' she repeated. 'I have lived where there were such things seen, but they never harmed me.'

'You don't mean to say you believe such nonsense?' said I, hypocritically trying to speak carelessly.

'Oh yes, ma'am, I do! I could not disbelieve it,' said the nurse, opening her eyes with earnestness, 'I know the story of this house, ma'am.'

'What story?' I cried.

The woman coloured and looked confused.

'I beg your pardon, ma'am I mean what people say is seen here.'

'What do they say? Do not frighten me,' I said, and my voice quivered in spite of me; 'I have heard nothing but what the servants said.'

The nurse looked deeply concerned.

'I am very stupid, ma'am; I beg your pardon for repeating such stories to you I daresay it is only idle people's gossip.'

She went about her duties, and I went not into my dressing-room but down into the drawing-room, where I sat by the window looking out until my husband returned.

Two or three weeks more passed away without any more alarms. The summer had deepened into its longest days and hottest sunshine; the gay season had reached and passed its meridian of wealth, beauty, luxury, extravagance, success, misery, hopes, and disappointments. I had enjoyed it very much at first; but I soon wearied of it as my bodily strength weakened in the ordeal of constant excitement, late hours, hot rooms, heavy perfumed atmosphere, ices, and diaphanous ball-dresses.

'Poor Maid Marian,' George said, 'she is pining for her green wild woods.' However, by following the doctor's advice the same whom he had summoned the night of the nurse's illness, and whom we both liked very much and living more quietly, I was able to enjoy quiet entertainments and my favourite operas very fairly, although my red brunette cheeks had faded dismally.

'An invitation for us, Helen, I know, and that is Willesden's writing.'

It was a sultry morning at the close of June. I felt tired and languid, and it was with a bad grace I tore open the envelope lying beside the breakfast tray.

'Yes, "Colonel and Mrs Willesden request the pleasure" why George, it is for this evening!'

'Written the day before yesterday, though delayed somehow,' said George, reading over my shoulder. 'Well, Helen, what do you say? It is only for a quiet, friendly dinner, and I like Willesden very much.'

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'No, dear,' I replied wearily. 'You can go and make apologies for me. I am tired of dinner-parties, and, besides, George is not well.'

'My dear, the young urchin is far better than yourself,' replied George, dissecting a sardine with amazing relish; 'but just as you like, Nellie. There's "Mudie's last" on the sofa-table, and perhaps it is as well you should stay quiet this evening, and amuse yourself reading it.'

But 'Mudie's last' failed to possess either interest or the power of amusing me in the long, quiet evening hours, after I had fidgeted about George whilst he was dressing, until he spoiled two white ties, and played with my darlings, and heard them lisp their prayers, and sang them asleep; after the clock had struck eight, and through the open windows the echoes of footsteps in the hot, dusty street grew fewer and fewer. No, 'Mudie's last' was a failure, as far as I was concerned; and, after a faint attempt at practising an intricate Morceau de Salon, I lay down on my pet chintz-covered couch, near the window, to look at the sky and the stars when they came.

The house was as still as the grave, save for the far-off sound of some of the servants' voices; for I had given leave to Harriet and the housemaid for an evening out, escorted and protected by Charles gravest and most stupid of butlers, between whom and my maid there existed tender relations, which were to be consummated by 'the goodwill of a public' from master, and a silk wedding-dress from mistress, some happy future day.

Accordingly they had donned all their finery, and set off in high glee; at least, I had heard much giggling and rustling of ribbons, and Charles's dignified cockney accents, as he opened the area gate wide for the young ladies' crinolines, and then dead silence again. Cook and the nurse were ensconced in one of the garret windows comparing notes and chatting busily, and all the lower part of the house was left to darkness and to me.

Dead silence and the 'ting, ting' of the little French clock on the mantelpiece marked the half-hour after eight. Dear me, how dark it was growing! this brooding storm I supposed, which had been making me feel so languid and restless. I wish it would come down and cool the air not tonight, though. Dear me, how lonely it is! I wish George were home. Those women are talking very loudly I wonder nurse would here I got drowsy, and my eyes ached looking for the stars that had not come.

In a few minutes I roused again, my maternal anxiety changing into indignation as I heard the women's voices growing louder and shriller, and some doors opened and shut violently.

What can nurse be thinking of? They will wake the children most certainly, and Georgie was so long in falling asleep quite feverish, my own boy! I shall really reprove her very plainly. I never needed to do so before. What could she be thinking of? Dead silence again. Well, this was lonely; I was inclined to ring for lights, and turn on all the burners in the chandelier by way of company. Then I remembered there were some wax matches in one of the drawers of a writing-tray just at hand, and thought I would light the gas myself instead of bringing the servants down yes but I wanted company. It was so dark and dreary, and and I was afraid.

Afraid to stir afraid to get off the couch on which I was lying afraid to look at the door! a numbing, chilling tide of icy fear ebbing through even vein afraid to draw a breath afraid to move hand or foot, in a nightmare of supernatural terror. At last, by a violent effort, I sprang at the bell-handle, and pulled it frantically, and as soon as I had done so, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, I felt thoroughly ashamed of my childish cowardice, although I could not have helped it, and it had overcome me as suddenly as unexpectedly. How George would have laughed at me!

There were those servants talking again, tramping about and banging the doors as before.

Really, this was unbearable; cook must be in one of her fits of temper, and certainly had forgotten herself strangely.

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And, as the quarrelsome tones grew louder and louder evidently in bitter recrimination, although I could not catch a word my own anger rose proportionately, and, forgetting loneliness and darkness in my indignant anxiety lest my children should be waked by this most unseemly behaviour of the servants, I ran hastily out of the room and up the wide staircase.

The dim light from the clouded evening sky, still further subdued by the gold and purple–stained glass of the conservatory door, streamed faintly down the steps from the first landing, and by it, just as I had ascended halfway, I discovered the short, thick–set figure of the nurse rushing down of course, in answer to my ring, I supposed.

Involuntarily I stepped aside to avoid coming in violent contact with her as she fled past. No, it was not the nurse; and the woman following her in headlong haste, sweeping by me so that the current of air from their floating dresses struck icily Cold on my brow where the clammy dew of perspiration had started in great drops, was was Merciful Heavens! What was that tall figure, with the coarse, disordered, yellow hair, the white face, and glittering, steel–blue eyes, that glinted fiendishly on me for one dreadful instant, and then vanished? Vanished as the pursued and pursuing figures had vanished in the shadows of the wide, lofty hall, without sound of voice or footstep?

I would have cried out would have shrieked, if every nerve had not been paralyzed. I could not doubt the evidence of my senses if I could have done so the cold, unearthly horror which sickened my very soul would have borne its undeniable testimony that I had beheld the impersonation of the hidden curse that rested on this dwelling.

I stood there rigid and immovable, as if that blighting Medusa–glance had indeed changed me into stone.

It may have been but a very few minutes it seemed to me a cycle of painful ages, when the light of a brightly burning lamp shone before me, and I heard the cheerful sound of the new nurse's voice in my ears:

'Come along, cook. Bless your heart my dear! you needn't be nervous; there's no occasion.

Mrs Russell, ma'am, aren't you well, ma'am?'

'No,' I said faintly, staggering to the woman's outstretched hands. 'Not down there upstairs to the children.'

She turned as I bade her, and supported me up the stairs and into the nursery, the cook following close at my skirts, muttering fervent prayers and ejaculations.

The sight of the peacefully sleeping little ones did far more to restore me than all the essences and chafing and unlacing which the two women busily administered.

I had got suddenly ill when coming upstairs was the explanation I gave, which the cook, I plainly perceived, most thoroughly doubted, at least without the cause she suspected being assigned, which, even in the midst of my terror–stricken condition, I refrained from giving. I did not speak to the nurse either of what had happened, but I felt that she knew as well as if she had been by my side all the time. But when George returned I told him.

Distressed and alarmed on my account though he was, yet he did not, as before, refuse credence to my story. 'We must leave the house, George. I should die here very soon,' I said.

'Yes Helen; of course we must leave if you have anything to distress or terrify you in this manner, though it does seem absurd to be driven out of one's house and home by a thing of this kind. Someone's practical joke, or a trick prompted by malice against the owner of the property in order to lessen its value. I have heard of such things

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often.'

'George it is nothing of the kind,' I said earnestly; 'you know it is not.'

'No, I don't,' said George shortly and grimly, as he opened his case of revolvers, 'and I wish I did.'

The night passed away quietly, to our cars at least; but next morning when George had concluded the usual morning prayers, instead of the usual move of the servants, they remained clustered at the door, Charles with an exceedingly elongated visage standing slightly in advance of the group as spokesman.

'Please, sir and ma'am, we can't tell what to do.'

'Why, go and do your work,' retorted George, with a nervous tug at his moustache and an uneasy glance at me.

Charles shook his head slowly. 'It can't be done, sir can't be done, ma'am. Why, no living Christian, not to speak of humble, but respectable servants,' said Charles with a flourish, quite unconscious of the nice distinction he had made, 'could stand it any longer.'

'What is the matter, pray?' said my husband.

'Ghosts, sir spirits, sir unclean spirits,' said Charles, in an awe-struck whisper which was re-echoed in the cook's 'Lor' 'a' mercy!' as she dodged back from the doorway with the housemaid holding fast to one of her ample sleeves, and the lady's maid holding fast to the other.

The new nurse, quietly dandling the baby in her arms, was alone unmoved.

'What stories have you been listening to now?' said their master, with a slight laugh and a frown.

'No stories, sir; but what we've seen with our eyes and understood with our ears, and and comprehended with our hearts,' said Charles, with an unsuccessful attempt at quoting Scripture. 'What was it as walked the floors last night between one and two, sir? What was it as talked and shrieked and run and raced? What was it as frightened the mistress on the stairs last evening?' And the whole posse of them turned to me, triumphantly awaiting my testimony.

I was feeling very ill, and looking so, I daresay, having struggled downstairs in order to prevent the servants having any additional confirmation of their surmises.

'That is no affair of yours,' said George gravely; 'your mistress is in delicate health, and was feeling unwell all day.'

'Will you allow me to speak, please, sir?' said the nurse, and, as her master nodded assent, she turned to the frightened group with a pleasant smile.

'You have no cause to be afraid, cook, or Mr Charles, or any of you,' said she, addressing the most important functionary first 'not in the least. I am only a servant like the rest, and here a shorter time than any one; but I think you are very foolish to unsettle yourselves in a good situation and frighten yourselves. You needn't think they'll harm you. Fear God and do your duty, and you needn't mind wandering, poor, lonely souls '

'Lor' 'a' mercy! 'ow you do talk, Mrs Hamley!' said the cook indignantly.

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'I've seen them more times than one many and many a time, Mrs Cook; and they never harmed a hair of my head,' said the nurse, 'nor they'll never harm yours.'

'Well, then,' said the cook, packing into the hall, followed by her satellites, 'not to be made Queen Victorier of, nor Hemperor of Rooshia neither, would I stay to be frightened out of my seven senses, and made into a lunatic creature like poor Mary was!'

'Please to make better omelettes for luncheon, cook, than you did yesterday,' said George calmly, though he looked pale and angry enough, 'and leave me to deal with the ghosts I'll settle accounts with them!'

The nurse turned quickly and looked earnestly at him: 'I would not say that, sir God forbid,'

said she in an undertone, and the next moment was singing softly and blithely as she carried the children away to their morning bath.

George and I looked at each other in silence.

'I wish we had never come into this house, dear,' I said.

'I wish from my heart that we never had, Helen,' he responded; 'but we must manage to stay the season out, at all events. It would be too absurd to run away like frightened hares, not to speak of the expense and trouble we have gone to.'

'We can get it taken off our hands without loss, perhaps,' I suggested. 'Sec the house-agent, George.'

'I have seen him,' he replied.

'Oh! all politeness and amiability, of course. Deeply regretted that we should have any occasion to find fault. No other tenants ever did. Happy to do anything in the way of clearing up this little mystery, etcetera. Of course he was laughing at me in his sleeve.'

Again, as after our previous alarms, days passed on and lengthened into weeks in undisturbed quietude. George had a good many business matters to arrange; the children looked as rosy and healthy as in their country home, From their constant walking and playing in the airy, pleasant parks. My own health was not very good; and Dr Winchester was kindest and wisest of grave, gentlemanly doctors; so, all things considered, we stayed in London until August very willingly, too and only spoke of an excursion of a few weeks to the Isle of Man as a probability in September. Only on my husband's account, I wished for any change. Something seemed to affect his health strangely, although he never complained of anything beyond the usual lassitude and want of tune which a gay London season might be expected to bequeath him. He was sleepless, frequently depressed, nervous, and irritable; and still he vehemently declared he was quite well, and seemed almost annoyed when I urged him to put his business aside for the present and leave town.

He had been induced to enter into a large mining speculation, and hid, besides, some heavy money matters to arrange, connected with his sister's marriage settlements, which he expected would be required about Christmas. So, all things considered, he had some cause for looking as haggard as he did.

'It will be as well for him to leave London, Mrs Russell, as soon as he can,' said Dr Winchester at the close of one of his pleasant 'run-in' visits. His nerves are shaky. We men get nervous nearly as often as the ladies, though we don't confess to the fact quite so openly. A link unstrung, you know nothing more. A few weeks in sea or mountain air will quite brace him up again.' And as I dressed for dinner that evening, I determined that if wifely entreaties, arguments, and authority, should not fail for the first time in our wedded life, George should have the

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sea or mountain air without another week's delay; and, of course, I determined, likewise, to back up entreaties, arguments, and authority with the prettiest dress I could put on. I cannot tell why wives, and young wives too, will neglect their personal appearance when 'only one's husband' is present. It is unpolitic, unbecoming, and unloving; and men and husbands don't like neglect direct or implied, be sure of that, ladies young, middle-aged, or old.

'Your brown silk, ma'am? it is rather cold this evening for that cream-coloured grenadine,'

said Harriet, rustling at my wardrobe.

'No, Harriet, I won't have that brown, I am tired of it,' I replied. If I had said I was afraid of it, I should have kept closer to the truth. It so happened that it was this dress which I had worn on the three occasions when I had been terrified by the strange occurrences in this house; and I had acquired a superstitious aversion for this particular robe. So Harriet arrayed me in a particularly charming demi-toilette of pale yellow silk grenadine and white lace; and I felt myself to be a most amiable and affectionate little wife, as I went downstairs to await George's return for dinner.

I never sat in my pretty dressing-room alone. Truth to tell, I disliked the apartment secretly and intensely, and only for fear of troubling and displeasing George I would have shut it up from the first evening I spent in it.

He was late for dinner, and I was quite shocked to see how thin and ill he looked by the gas-light; and, as soon as it was concluded, and that by the aid of excellent coffee and a vast amount of petting, I had coaxed him into his usual smiles and good-humour, I began my petition that he would leave town for his own sake.

He listened to me in silence, and then said, 'Very well, Helen, we will go as soon as we can get the house disposed of; I suppose you will not come back here again?'

'Oh! no, I think not,' I replied, 'we will spend the winter in Hertfordshire, in our dear old house, George.'

'Very well,' he said wearily, 'though you must know, Helen, I am not going on account of this thing. I would hardly quit my house, indeed, because of ghostly or bodily sights or sounds.'

He had started up from the couch on which he was lying, flushed and excited as he always was when the subject was mentioned, his eyes gleaming as brightly as the flashing scabbard which hung on the wall before him.

'Certainly not, dearest,' I said soothingly.

'I wish I could solve the mystery,' he pursued, more excitedly; 'I would make somebody suffer for it! One's peace destroyed, and people terrified, and servants driven away, as if one was living in the dark ages, with some cursed necromancer next door!'

'Oh! well, it is some time ago now, and the servants have got over their fright. Pray, don't distress yourself about it, dear George.'

'Ah well you don't never mind,' he muttered; 'but I mean to have tangible evidence before ever I leave this house I have sworn it!'

He was not easily roused, and I felt both surprise and alarm to see him so now, and for so inadequate a cause. I had almost fancied he had forgotten the matter, as we, by tacit consent, never alluded to it.

'Don't you allow yourself to be alarmed, Helen, that is all I care about,' he went on, pacing the floor. 'I have been half mad with anxiety on your account, for fear those idiotic servants should manage to startle you to death some

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dark evening cowards, every one of them; but I mean to have someone to stay here and sit up. He paused suddenly, and listened, then stepped noiselessly to the door, and opening it, listened again intently.

'George,' I whispered.

He took no heed of me; but rapidly unlocking a cabinet drawer, he drew out a six-barrelled revolver, loaded and capped, and with his finger on the trigger stole softly to the door and into the hall, whither I followed him.

Everything was silent, and the hail and stairs lamps were burning clear and high. I could hear the throbbing of my own heart as I stood there watching. Suddenly we both heard heavy rapid footsteps, seemingly overhead; and then confused noises, as of struggling, and quarreling, and sobbing, mingled in a swelling clamour which sounded now near, deafeningly near, and then far, far away; now overhead, now beside us, now beneath, undistinguishable, indescribable, and unearthly.

Then the rushing footsteps came nearer and nearer. And, clenching his teeth, while his face grew rigid and white in desperate resolve, George sprang up the staircase with a bound like a tiger.

It had all passed in less than half the time I have taken to relate it, and while I yet stood breathless and with straining eyes, George had nearly reached the last step when I saw him stagger backwards, the revolver raised in his hand.

There was a struggle, a rushing, swooping sound, two shots fired in rapid succession, a floating cloud of white smoke, through which I saw the streaming yellow hair and steel-blue eyes flash downwards, and then a shriek rang out the dreadful cry of a man in mortal terror a crashing fall, beneath which the house trembled to its foundations, and I saw my husband's body stretched before the conservatory door, whither he had toppled backwards whether dead or dying I knew not.

I remember dimly hearing my own voice in agonized screams, and the terror-stricken servants hurrying from the kitchens below. I remember the kind face of my new nurse as she bravely rushed down and dispatched someone for the doctor, and made others help her to carry the senseless figure, with blood slowly dripping from the parted lips and staining the snowy linen shirt-front in great gouts and splashes, up to the chamber, where they laid him on his bed, and I, a wretched frenzied woman, knelt beside him with the sole, ceaseless prayer that brain or lips could form 'God help me!'

I remember the physician's arrival, and the grave face and low clear voice of Dr Winchester, as he made his enquiries; and then another physician summoned, and the low frightened voices, and peering frightened faces, and the lighted candles guttering away in currents of air from opening and shutting doors, and the long hours of night, and the cold grey dawning, and the heart-rending suspense, and speechless, tearless, wordless agony, and the sun rose, gloriously cloudless, smiling in radiance, as if there was not the shadow of death over the weary world beneath his rays, and I heard the verdict 'There was scarcely a hope.'

But God was merciful to me and to him, and my darling did not die.

With a fevered brain and a shattered limb he lay there for weeks lay there with the dark portals half open to receive him; lay there, when I could no longer watch beside him, but lay prostrate and suffering in another apartment, tended by kind relatives and friends; but at length, when the mellow sunshine, and the crisp clear air of the soft shadowy October days stole into the sick room, George was able to be dressed and sit up for an hour or two amongst the pillows of his easy-chair by the window.

And there he was, longing to be gone away from London.



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'Helen, darling, weak or strong I must go,' he said in his trembling uncertain voice, and with a restless longing in his faded eyes, 'I shall never get better in this house.'

And so a few days afterwards, accompanied by the doctor and two nurses, we went down in a pleasant swift railroad journey to our dear, beautiful, peaceful home in Hertfordshire.

George never spoke of that night of horror but once, when Dr Winchester told us the story connected with Clifford House.

Thirty years before, the man who was both proprietor and tenant of Clifford House died, leaving his two daughters all he possessed.

He had been a bad man, led a bad wild life, and died in a fit brought on by drunkenness; and these two daughters, grown to womanhood, inherited with his ill-gotten gold his evil nature.

They were only half-sisters, and were believed to have been illegitimate also. The elder, a tall, masculine, strongly built woman, with masses of coarse fair hair, and bright, glittering blue eyes; and the younger, a plump, dark-haired rather pretty girl, but as treacherous, vain, and bold, as her elder sister was fierce, passionate, and cruel. They lived in this house, with only their servants, for several years after their father's death, a life of quarrelling and bickering, jealousy and heart-burnings, on various accounts. The elder strove to tyrannize over the younger, who repaid it by deceit and crafty selfishness. At length a lover came, whom the elder sister favoured; whom she loved as fiercely and rashly as such wild untamed natures do; and by falsehood and deep-laid treachery the younger sister won the man's fickle fancy from the great, harsh-featured, haughty, passionate elder one.

The elder woman soon perceived it, and there were dreadful scenes between the two sisters, when the younger taunted the elder, and the elder cursed the younger; and at length one night when there had been a fiercer encounter of words than usual, and the dark-haired girl maddened her sister by insults, and the sudden information that she intended leaving the house in the morning, to stay with a relative until her marriage, which was to take place in one week from that time the wronged woman, demon-possessed from that moment, waited in her dressing-room until her sister entered, and then she sprang on her, and, screaming and struggling, they both wrestled until they reached the staircase, where the younger sister, escaping for an instant, rushed wildly down, followed by her murderess, who overpowered her in spite of her frantic struggles, and with her strong, cruel, bony hands deliberately strangled her, until she lay a disfigured palpitating corpse at her feet.

The officers of justice arrested the murderess a few hours afterwards, but she died by poison self-administered on the second day of her imprisonment.

Clifford House had been shut up and silent for many a year afterwards, and when, at length, an enterprising landlord put it in habitable order, and found tenants for it again, he only found them to lose them.

Year after year passed away, its evil fame darkening with its massive masonry, for none could be found to sanctify with the sacred name and pleasures of home that dwelling blighted by an abiding curse.

'I never told you, Helen,' George said, 'although I told Dr Winchester, that from the first evening I led a haunted life in that dreadful house, and the more I struggled to disbelieve the evidence of my senses, and to keep the knowledge from you, the more unbearable it became, until I tilt myself going mad. I knew I was haunted, but until that last night I had never witnessed what I dreaded day and night to see. And then, Helen, when I fired, and I saw the devilish murderess face, with its demon eyes blazing on me, and the tall unearthly figure hurrying down to meet me, dragging the other struggling, writhing figure, With her long sinewy fingers seemingly pressed around the convulsed face, then I knew it was all over with me. If there had been a flaming furnace beside me I think I

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should have leaped into it to escape that awful sight.'

That is years ago now. We have spent many a pleasant month in the great metropolis since, but love our country home best of all. But we never speak of that terrible time when we learned the story of Clifford House.