

The Crimson Blind

Henrietta D. Everett

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I

Ronald McEwan, aged sixteen, was invited to spend a vacation fortnight at his uncle's rectory.

Possibly some qualms of conscience had tardily spurred the Rev. Sylvanus Applegarth to offer this hospitality, aware that he had in the past neglected his dead sister's son. Also, with a view to the future, it might be well for Ronald to make acquaintance with his own two lads, now holidaying from English public schools.

Mr Applegarth was a gentleman and a scholar, one who loved above all things leisure and a quiet house: he retained a curate at his own expense to run matters parochial in Swanmere, and buried himself among his books. The holidays were seasons of trial to him on each of the three yearly occasions, and it would not be much worse, so he reflected, to have three hobbledehoy lads romping about the place, and clumping up and down stairs with heavy boots, when it was inevitable he must have two.

The young Applegarths were not ill-natured lads, but they were somewhat disposed to make a butt of the shy Scottish cousin, who was midway between them in age, and had had a different upbringing and schooling from themselves. Ronald found it advisable to listen much and say little, not airing his own opinions unless they were directly challenged. But in one direction he had been outspoken, afterwards wishing devoutly he had held his tongue. Spooks were under discussion, and it was discovered a source of fiendish glee to the allied brothers that Ronald believed in ghosts, as he preferred more respectfully to term them, and also in such marvels as death-warnings, wraiths, and second-sight.

'That comes of being a Highlander,' said Jack the elder. 'Superstition is a taint that gets into the blood, and so is born with you. But I'll wager anything you have no valid reason for believing. The best evidence is only secondhand; most of it third or fourth hand, if as near. You have never seen a ghost yourself?'

'No,' acknowledged Ronald somewhat sourly, for he had been more than sufficiently badgered. 'But I've spoken with those that have.'

'Would you like to see one? Now give a straight answer for once' and Jack winked at his brother.

'I wouldn't mind.' Then, more stoutly: 'Yes, I would like if I'd the chance.'

'I think we can give you a chance of seeing something, if not exactly a ghost. We've got no Highland castles to trot out, but there's a house here in Swanmere that is said to be haunted. Just the thing for you to investigate, now you are on the spot. Will you take it on?'

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It would have been fatal to say no, and give these cousins the opening to post him as a coward.

Ronald gave again the grudging admission that he 'wouldn't mind.' And then, being Sunday morning, the lads said they would take him round that way after church, and he should have a look at the window which had earned a bad repute. Then they might find out who had the keys in charge, if he felt inclined to pass a night within.

'I suppose, as neither of you believe, you would not be afraid to sleep there?' said Ronald, addressing the two.

'Certainly we would not be afraid.' Jack was speech-valiant at least. 'As we believe there is nothing in it but a sham, like all the other tales.'

Alfred, the younger boy, did not contradict his brother, but it might have been noticed that he kept silence.

'Then I'll do what you do.' This was Ronald's ultimatum. 'If you two choose to sleep in the haunted house, I'll sleep there too.'

But, as the event fell out, the Applegarths did not push matters to the point of borrowing keys from the house-agent and camping out rolled in blankets on the bare floors an attractive picture Jack went on to draw of the venture to which Ronald stood committed. After the morning service the three lads walked some half mile beyond the village in the direction of the seashore.

Here the houses were few and far between, but two or three villas were in course of building, and other plots beyond them were placarded as for sale. Swanmere was 'rising' in other words, in process of being spoiled. Niched in between two of these plots was an empty house to let, well placed in being set some way back from the high road, within the privacy of thick shrubberies, and screened at the back by a belt of forest trees.

A desirable residence, one would have said at a first glance, but closer acquaintance was apt to induce a change of mind. The iron gates of the drive were fastened with padlock and chain, but the young Applegarths effected an entrance by vaulting over the palings at the side. Everywhere was to be seen the encroachment and overgrowth of long neglect: weeds knee-high, and branches pushing themselves across the side-paths, though the carriage approach had been kept clear. The main entrance was at the side, and in front bowed windows, on two floors, were closely shuttered within, and grimed with dirt without.

The boys pushed their way round to the back, where the kitchen offices were enclosed by a yard. But midway between the better and the inferior part of the house a large flat window on the first floor overlooked the flower-garden and shrubbery. This window was not shuttered, but was completely screened by a wide blind of faded red, drawn down to meet the sill. Jack pointed to it.

'That is where the ghost shows not every night, but sometimes. Maybe you'll have to watch for a whole week before there is anything to see. But, if rumour says true, you will be repaid in the end. Whatever the appearance maybe.'

Ronald thought he saw a wink pass between the brothers. He was to be hoaxed in some way; of that he felt assured.

'I'll go, if we three go together, you and Alfred and I. If there is a real ghost to be seen, you shall see it too. What is it said to be like?'

'A light comes behind the red blind, and some people see a figure, or the shadow of a figure, in the room. Perhaps it is according to the open eye, some less and some more. You may see more still, being Highland born and bred. Very well, as you make it a condition, we will go together.'

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'To-night?'

'Better not to-night. There's evening church and supper, and the governor might not like it, being Sunday. We will go to-morrow. That will serve as well for you.'

The fake, whatever it might be, could not be prepared in time for that first evening, Ronald reflected. He was quite unbelieving about the red blind and the light, but firm in his resolve. If he was to be trotted out to see a ghost, the Applegarth cousins should go too. It was a matter of indifference to him which night was chosen for the expedition, so Monday was agreed upon, the trio to set out at midnight, when all respectable inhabitants of Swanmere should be in their beds.

When Monday night came, the sky was clear and starlit, but it was the dark of the moon. One of the lads possessed an electric torch, which Jack put in his pocket. And when it came to the point, it appeared that only Jack was going with him. Alfred, according to his brother, had developed a sore throat, and Mrs Dawson, the housekeeper, was putting him on a poultice which had to be applied in bed.

So it was the younger Applegarth who had been chosen to play the ghost, Ronald instantly concluded: he had no faith at all in the poultice, or in Mrs Dawson's application of it, though he remembered Alfred had complained of the soreness of his throat more than once during the day.

There was little interchange of words between the two lads as they went. Ronald was inwardly resentful, and Jack seemed to have some private thoughts which amused him, for he smiled to himself in the darkness. Arrived at the Portsmouth road, they got over the fence at the same place as before; and now Jack's torch was of use, as they pushed their way through the tangled garden to the spot determined on as likely to afford the best view of the window with the crimson blind.

Neither blind nor window could now be distinguished; the house reared itself before them a silhouette of blacker darkness, against that other darkness of the night.

'We can sit on this bench while we wait,' and young Applegarth flashed his torch on a rustic structure, set beneath overshadowing trees. 'I propose to time ourselves and give an hour to the watch. Then, if you have seen nothing, we can come away and return another night. For myself, sceptic as I am, I don't expect to see.'

He could hardly be more sceptical than Ronald felt at the moment. Certain that a trick was about to be played on him, all his senses had been on the alert from the moment they left the road, and he felt sure that as they plunged through the wilderness of shrubbery he had heard another footstep following. He did not refuse to seat himself on the bench, but he took care to have the bole of the tree immediately at his back, as some protection from assault in the rear.

Some five or six minutes went by, and he was paying little attention to the house, but much to certain rustling noises in the shrubbery behind them, when Jack Applegarth exclaimed in an altered voice: 'By Jove, there is a light there after all!' and he became aware that the broad parallelogram of the window was now faintly illuminated behind the crimson blind, sufficiently to show its shape and size, and also the colour of the screen. Could young Alfred have found some means of entrance, and set up a lighted candle in the room? but somehow he doubted whether, without his brother to back him, the boy would have ventured into the ghostly house alone. The fake he anticipated was of a different sort to this.

As the boys watched, the light grew stronger, glowing through the blind; the lamp within that room must have been a strong one of many candlepower. Then a shadow became visible as if cast by some person moving to and fro in front of the light; this was faint at first, but gradually it increased in intensity, and presently came close to the window, pulling the blind aside to look out.

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This was so ordinary an action that it did not suggest the supernatural. A moment later, however, the whole framework of the window seemed to give way and fall outwards with a crash of breaking glass. The figure now showed clearly defined, standing outside on the sill with the red illumination behind; but its pause there was one only of seconds before it leaped to the ground and came rushing towards them; a figure so far in ghostly likeness that it appeared to be clad in white. Following the crash of glass came other sounds, a pistol-shot and a scream, but the rush of the flying figure was unaccompanied by noise. It passed close to the bench where they were seated, and young Applegarth grasped Ronald's arm in a terror well-acted if unreal.

'Come away,' he said thickly. 'I've had enough of this. Come away.'

The light behind the blind was dying out, and presently the window was again in darkness, but these spectators did not stay to see. Jack Applegarth dragged Ronald back towards the road, and the younger lad broke from the bushes and followed them, sobbing in what seemed to be real affright, and with a white bundle hugged in his arms. They climbed the palings and went pelting home, and not till the distance was half accomplished did any one of them speak. Then Ronald had the first word:

'Why, Alfred, I thought you were in bed. I hope your throat will not suffer through coming out to trick me with a sham ghost. I made sure all along that was what you and Jack would do.'

Alfred hugged tighter the bundle he was carrying: did he fear it would be snatched off him and displayed? it looked exceedingly like a white sheet.

'I had nothing to do with that thing,' he blurted out between chattering teeth. 'I don't know what it was, or where it came from. But I swear I'll never go near the blamed place again, either by night or by day!'

II

Whether there was any natural explanation of what they had seen, Ronald never knew. His visit to his Applegarth relatives was drawing to a close, and, shortly after, the old Rector died suddenly during the service in church. The home was broken up, the two schoolboy cousins had their way to make in the world, and, whether ill or well made, this history knows them no more.

And between the just concluded chapter, and this which is now begun, must be set an interval of twenty years.

Ronald had done well for himself in the meantime. He had become an alert, hard-headed business man, a good deal detached from the softer side of life, for which, he told himself, there would be time and to spare by-and-by. But now, at thirty-six there began to be a different telling.

He could afford to keep a wife in comfort, and it seemed to him that the time for choice had come.

This does not pretend to be a love-story, so it will only briefly chronicle that it was the business of wife-selection which took Ronald again to Swanmere. He happened to act as best man at his friend Parkinson's wedding, and one of the bridesmaids seemed to him an unusually attractive girl, happy herself, and likely to make others happy, which is better than mere beauty.

Probably he let fall a wish that he might see Lilian again; anyway, some time later, he was invited to run down and pay a weekend visit to the newly married pair, when Lilian was at the same time expected to stay. And, as it happened, the Peregrine Parkinsons had settled at Swanmere.

'Do you know this place at all?' queried Mrs Parkinson, who was meeting him at the station with the small

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pony-carriage, of which, and of her skill as a whip, she was inordinately proud.

'I was here once before, many years ago,' was Ronald's answer. 'I was only a schoolboy in those days, visiting an old uncle, who then was rector of the parish. Swanmere seems to have grown a good deal bigger than I remember it, or else my recollection is at fault.'

'Oh yes, it has grown; places do grow, don't they? There was a great deal of new building before the War villas you know, and that style; but 1914 stopped everything. Peregrine and I were fortunate in meeting with an older house, in a quite delightful well-grown garden. Oh no, not old enough to be inconvenient, and it has been brought up-to-date for us. We were lucky to get it, I can assure you: it is so difficult in these days to find anything moderate-sized. They are snapped up directly they are vacant; the demand is so much in excess of the supply.'

Ronald did not recognize the direction taken, even when the pony willingly turned in at an open pair of iron gates, which he had last seen chained and padlocked or, if not these gates, their predecessors, as gates have a way of perishing in untended years. All was trim within, pruned and swept and gravelled, and the garden a riot of colour with its summer flowers. But the front of the house, with double bows carried up to the first floor, did strike a chord of association. 'I wonder!' he said to himself, and then the wonder was negated. 'No, it isn't possible; it would be too odd a coincidence.' And upon this he dismissed the thought from his mind.

It did not return during the evening, not even when he went up in a hurry, and at the last moment to dress for dinner in the bedroom allotted to him: a spacious and well-appointed one, where his port-manteau had been unpacked and habiliments laid out. After dinner there was the diversion of some good music; Mrs Parkinson played and Lilian sang. The Swanmere experience of twenty years ago was quite out of mind when he retired for the night; pleasanter thoughts had pushed it into the background and held the stage. But the recollection was vaguely renewed last thing, when he drew aside the curtains and opened the window, noting its unusual square shape, divided into three uprights, two of which opened casement fashion.

It was the only window in the room, but so wide that it nearly filled the outer wall. Certainly its shape recalled the window of twenty years ago which was screened by a crimson blind, and his watch in the garden with Jack Applegarth. He was never likely to forget that night, though he was far from sure whether the ghost was ghost indeed, or a sham faked by the Applegarth boys for his discomfiture. Probably these suburban villas were built all upon one plan, and an older foundation had set the note of fashion for those that followed. He never knew the name or number of the haunted house, or locality, except that it was entered from the Portsmouth road, so in that way he could not identify it. And again he dismissed the idea, and addressed himself to sleep.

Neither this recollection nor the dawning love interest was potent to keep him awake. He slept well the early part of the night, and did not wake till morning was brightening in the east. Then, as he opened his eyes and turned to face the light, he saw, and was astonished seeing, that the window was covered with a crimson blind, drawn down from top to sill.

He could have declared that nothing of the sort was in place there overnight. The drawn-back curtains had revealed a quite ordinary green venetian, which he had raised till it clicked into stoppage at its height. To all outward seeming this was a material blind, swaying in the air of the open casement, and with no light behind it but that of the summer dawn. And yet, for all that, he lay staring at it with nerves on edge, and hammering pulses which beat thickly in his ears and throat: something within him recognized the nature of the appearance and responded with agitation, despite the scepticism of the outward man. That was a bird's song vocal outside, wheels went by in the road, the ordinary world was astir. He would rise and assure himself that the blind was a mundane affair, palpable to touch; it had of course slipped down in the night owing to a loosened cord, and was hung within the other.

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And then he discovered that his limbs were powerless: it was as if invisible bands restrained him. He writhed against them in vain, and in the end, despite those rapid pulses of the affrighted heart, he fell suddenly into trance or sleep.

He had had a seizure of nightmare, he concluded when he awoke later, with the servant knocking at the door to bring in tea and shaving-water, and the open window cheerful and unscreened, letting in the summer air.

His first act was to examine the window-frame, but of course, as he told himself there was no crimson blind, nothing but the green venetian, and the curtains drawing on their rod. He had dreamt the whole thing, on the suggestion of that memory of a schoolboy visit long ago.

He was well assured of the folly of it all, and yet he had again and again to reason the thing out, and repeat that it was folly himself in colloquy with himself. This was still more necessary when in the course of the morning he strolled out into the garden and round the shrubbery paths. Though the wild growth of long ago had been pruned back and certain changes made, he had no difficulty in finding the spot what he thought the spot where he and Jack Applegarth had watched. There was still a rustic seat under the trees, full in view of the square window of his room where the red blind no longer was displayed. He sat down to light a cigarette, and presently his host appeared, pipe in mouth, and joined him on the bench in the shade.

'You have a nice place here,' Ronald said, by way of opening conversation.

'Yes,' Parkinson agreed. 'I like it, and Cecilia likes it, and in every way it suits us well.'

Convenient for business you know, and not too pretentious for young beginners. We both fell in love with it at first sight. But I heard something the other day' (poking with his knife at a pipe which declined to draw), 'something that rather disturbed me. Not that I believe it, you know; I'm not that sort. I only hope and trust that no busybody will consider it his or her duty to inform Cecilia.'

'What did you hear?'

'Why, some fools were saying the house used to be haunted, and that was the reason why it stood long unlet and fell into bad repair. Stories of that sort are always put about when a place happens to be nobody's fancy, whether the real drawback is rats or drains, or somebody wanting to keep it vacant for interests of their own. As you know. In this case I should say it was the latter. Because the man told me lights were seen when the place was shut up and empty. A thieves' dumping ground, no doubt. Or possibly coiners.'

This in pauses, between whiffs of the pipe. Parkinson ended:

'I don't want Cecilia to know. She is fond of the place, and I wouldn't like her to be nervous or upset.'

'Couldn't you warn the man?'

'I did that. But there are other men who know. And, what is worse, women. You know what women's tongues are. Especially when they think they have got hold of something spicy. Or what will annoy somebody else!'

'Why not tell your wife yourself, and trust to her good sense not to mind. Better for her to learn it so, than by chance whispers from a stranger. She won't like it if she thinks you were aware, and kept it up your sleeve.'

But Parkinson shook his head. Fond as he was of his Cecilia, perhaps his opinion of her good sense had not been heightened by the experience of four or five months of marriage. And Ronald checked his own impulse to communicate the history of that former episode, together with the odd dream if it was a dream which visited

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him the night before. But he had found out one thing: now it was beyond doubt. This smartly done-up villa with its modern improvements was identical with the closed and neglected house of long ago.

That day was Saturday. He had been invited to stay over the weekend, so there were two more nights that he was bound to spend at the villa. He did not enjoy the anticipation of those nights, though some slight uneasiness would cheaply purchase the intermediate day to be spent with Lilian. And what harm could any ghost do him, and what did it matter whether the window was covered with a crimson blind, or a white or a green!

It mattered little when regarded in the day, but during the watches of the night such affairs take on a different complexion, though Ronald McEwan was no coward. He woke earlier on this second night, woke to be aware of a faint illumination in the room, and of he thought after, though it was hardly realized at the time the instantaneous glimpse of a figure crossing from wall to wall. One thing he did distinctly see: over the window there hung again the crimson blind! Then in the space of half a dozen heart-beats the faint light faded out, and the room was left in darkness.

This time the paralysis of the night before did not recur. He had been careful to place within reach at the bedside the means of striking a light, and presently his candle showed the window unscreened and open, and the door locked as he left it overnight. He did not extinguish that candle, but let it burn down in the socket; and he was not again disturbed.

During Sunday he debated with himself the question to speak or not to speak. That spare room might next be occupied by someone to whom the terror of such a visitation would be harmful; and yet, he supposed, all turned on whether or not the occupier was gifted (or shall we say, cursed?) with the open eye. He felt thankful he had been quartered there and not Lilian. Finally he resolved that Parkinson must be warned, but not till he himself was on the point of leaving not till he had passed a third night in the haunted room, disturbed or not disturbed. And, after all, what had he to allege against it in this later time? Could a room be haunted by the apparition of a crimson blind?

Saturday had been brilliantly fine throughout, but Sunday dawned upon unsettled weather, and a wet gale rushing over from the not distant sea. He went to rest that night resolved to keep a light burning through the dark hours, but found it necessary to shut the window on account of the driven storm. He strove to reason himself into indifference and so prepare for sleep, which visited him sooner than he expected, and for a while was profound. It was somewhere between two and three o'clock when he started up, broad awake on the instant, with the consciousness of something wrong.

It was not the moderate light of his candle which now illuminated the room, but the fierce glow of mounting flames, though he could not see whence they proceeded. The red blind hung again over the window, but that was a negligible matter: some carelessness of his had set the Parkinsons' house on fire, and he must give the alarm. He struggled up in bed, only to find he was not alone. There at the bed-foot stood gazing at him a man, a stranger, plainly seen in the glare of light. A man haggard of countenance, with the look of a soul that despaired; clad in white or light-coloured garments, possibly a sleeping-suit.

Ronald believed he made an attempt to speak to this creature, to ask who he was and what he was doing there, but whether he really achieved articulate words he does not know. For the space of perhaps a minute the two stared at each other, the man in the flesh and he who was flesh no more; then the latter sprang to the window, standing on the low sill, and tore aside the crimson blind. There was a great crash of glass like that other crash he remembered, a cry from below in the garden, and a report like a pistol-shot; the figure had disappeared, leaping through the broken gap. Then all was still and the room in darkness; those fierce flames were suddenly extinguished, and his own candle had gone out.

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He groped for the matches and struck a light. The red blind had disappeared from the window, there was no broken glass and no fire, and everything remained as he had left it overnight.

No one else appeared to have heard that shot and cry in the dead middle of the night. After breakfast he took Parkinson into confidence, who heard the story gloomily enough, plainly discomfited though unwilling to believe.

'You have been right to tell me, my dear fellow, and I am sure you think you experienced all these impossible things. But look at probability. Those Applegarth boys hoaxed you years ago, the impression dwelt on your mind, and was revived by discovering this house to be the same.

Such was the simple cause of your visions; any doctor would tell you so. As for my own action, I don't see clear. It is a horribly awkward affair, and we have been to no end of expense settling in.

Cecilia likes the place, and it suits her. So long as she does not know !'

'Look here, Parkinson. There is one thing I think I may ask suggest, at least. You have another spare bedroom. Don't put any other guest where I have been sleeping. Couldn't you make it a store-room box-room anything that is not used at night?'

Parkinson still was doubtful: he shook his head.

'Not without an explanation to Cecilia. She happens to be particularly gone on that room on account of the big window. It was just a toss-up that she didn't put Lilian there, and you in the other. And if in time to come a nursery should be needed, that is the room on which she has her eye. She would never consent to give it up for a glory-hole or a store-room without a strong reason a very strong reason indeed.' Ronald could do no more: his friend was warned, the responsibility was no longer his. It was some comfort to know that Lilian was leaving two days later, going on to another visit, and the fatal house did not seem to have affected her up to now.

After this, a couple of months went by, during which the Parkinsons made no sign, and he for his part kept his lips entirely sealed about his experiences at Swanmere. It might be, as Jack Applegarth said long before, his Highland blood which rendered him vulnerable to uncanny influences, and the Parkinsons and their Southern friends might remain entirely immune. But at the end of two months he received the following letter:

DEAR OLD CHUM, It is all up with us here, and I think you will wish to know how it came about. I am trying to sub-let Ashcroft, and hope to find somebody fool enough to take it. I haven't a fault to find with the place, neither of us have seen or heard a thing, and really it seems absurd. The servants picked up some gossip about the haunting, and then one of them was scared by her own shadow, I expect, and promptly had hysterics. After that, all three of them went to Cecilia in a body, and said they were willing to forfeit their wages, and sorry to cause us inconvenience, but nothing would induce them to stop on in a haunted house not if we paid them hundreds and they must leave at once. Then I had to have it out with Cecilia, and she was not pleased to have been kept in the dark. She says I hoodwinked her but if I did, it was for her own good; and when we took the place, I had not the least idea. Of course she could not stay when the servants cleared out and nor could I; so she has gone to her mother's, and I am at the hotel with everyone asking questions, which I can assure you is not pleasant. I shall take jolly good care not to be trapped a second time into a place where ghosts are on the loose.

There is one thing that may interest you, as it seems to throw light on your experience. The house was built by a doctor who took in lunatic patients harmless ones they were supposed to be, and he was properly certificated and all that: there was no humbug about it that I know. One man who was thought quite a mild case suddenly became violent. He locked himself into his room and set it on fire, and then smashed a window I believe it was that window and jumped out. It was only from the first floor, but he was so badly injured that he died: a good

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riddance of bad rubbish, I should say. I don't know anything about a red blind or a pistol-shot:

those matters seem to have been embroidered on. But the coincidence is an odd one, I allow.

We were pleased to hear of your engagement to Lilian, and I send you both congratulations and good wishes, in which Cecilia would join if here. I suppose you will soon be Benedick the married man.

Yours ever,

PEREGRINE PARKINSON