

The Deserted Mansion

Elizabeth Gaskell

Table of Contents

<u>The Deserted Mansion</u>	1
<u>Elizabeth Gaskell</u>	1

The Deserted Mansion

Elizabeth Gaskell

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

A few years ago, a picture appeared in the Exhibition of the Royal Academy, which peculiarly impressed my imagination; it represented an ancient ruinous dwelling, surrounded by dilapidated gardens set in somber woods. The venerable trees, the moat filled with nettle and rubbish, the broken fences, green stagnant waters, the gabled, turreted, many-windowed, mouldering mansion, a perfect medley of chaotic architecture. The visible silence, the spirit of supreme desolation brooding over the precincts, filled my mind with involuntary sadness; while fancy conjured up strange, wild tales of other days, in connexion with the scene. I could not shake off the belief that reality was portrayed on the canvass; and writing an account of the various pictures to a friend who resided in the country, I dwelt on this particular one, and my singular impressions respecting it. When I next received a letter from my friend, she remarked how unaccountable my fancies were; fancies which were, however, based on the foundation of truth.

She went on to say, that reading my letter to Mrs. L — — , an octogenarian in wonderful preservation, that lady informed her of the locality of my deserted mansion, and also of its history; the picture being actually painted for Mrs. L — — 's son; and the tale attached to it, which my friend eventually gave me in the old lady's own words, was as follows: —

"Fifty years ago the mansion of St. Elan's Wood was reckoned ancient, but it was a healthful, vigorous age, interesting and picturesque. Then, emerald turf lined the sides of the moat, and blooming flowers clustered within its sloping shelter; white drapery fluttered within the quaint latticed windows, and delicate climbers festooned them without; terraced walks and thick holly hedges were in trim order, fountains sparkled in the sunshine, and blushing roses bent over and kissed the clear rejoicing waters.

"Fifty years ago, joyous laughter resounded amid the greenwood glades, and buoyant footsteps pressed the greensward; for the master of St. Elans had brought home a bride, and friends and relatives hastened thither to offer congratulations, and to share the hospitalities of the festive season.

"Lady St. Elan was a very young wife; a soft-eyed, timid creature; her mother had died during her daughter's infancy, and her father (an officer of high rank in the army) being abroad, a lady whom we shall call Sabina, by whom she had been educated, accompanied her beloved pupil, now Lady St. Elan, to this new home. The death of Lady St. Elan's father, and the birth of a daughter, eventually mingled rejoicing and mourning together, while great anxiety was felt for the young mother, whose recovery was extremely tedious. The visits of eminent physicians, who were sent from great distances, evinced the fears which were still entertained, even when the invalid roamed once more in the pleasant gardens and woods around. Alas! it was not for the poor lady's bodily health they feared; the hereditary mental malady of her family on the maternal side, but which had slumbered for two generations, again darkly shadowed forth its dread approaches. Slight, indeed, had been the warning as yet, subtle the demonstrations of the deadly enemy, but enough to alarm the watchful husband, who was well acquainted with the facts. But the alarm passed away, the physicians came no more, and apparent health and strength, both mental and physical, were fully restored to the patient, while the sweet babe really deserved the epithets lavished on it by the delighted mother of the "divinest baby in the world."

The Deserted Mansion

"During the temporary absence of her husband, on affairs of urgent business, Lady St. Elan requested Sabina to share her chamber at night, on the plea of timidity and loneliness; this wish was cheerfully complied with, and two or three days passed pleasantly away.

"St. Elan was expected to return home on the following morning, and when the friends retired to rest on the previous night, Sabina withdrew the window curtains, to gaze upon the glorious landscape which stretched far away, all bathed in silver radiance, and she soon fell into a tranquil slumber, communing with holy thoughts and prayerful aspirations. She was suddenly awakened by a curious kind of sound in the room, accompanied by a half-stifled jeering laugh. She knew not how long sleep had lulled her in oblivion, but when Sabina turned round to see from whence the sound proceeded, imagine her horror and dismay at beholding Lady St. Elan standing near the door, sharpening a large knife on her slipper, looking wildly round now and then, muttering and jibing.

"Not sharp enough yet — , not sharp enough yet," she exclaimed, intently pursuing her occupation.

"Sabina felt instinctively, that this was no practical joke she knew instinctively the dread reality — , by the maniac's eye — , by the tone of voice — and she sprang from the bed, darting towards the door. It was locked. Lady St. Elan looked cunningly up, muttering, —

"So you thought I was so silly, did you? But I double-locked it, and threw the key out of the window; and perhaps you may spy it out in the moonshine you're so fond of admiring," pointing to an open casement, at an immense height from the ground — for this apartment was at the summit of a turret, commanding an extensive view, chosen for that reason, as well as for its seclusion and repose, being so far distant from the rest of the household.

"Sabina was not afflicted with weak nerves, and as the full danger of her position flashed across her mind, she remembered to have heard that the human eye possesses extraordinary power to quell and keep in abeyance all unruly passions thus terrifically displayed. She was also aware, that in a contest where mere bodily energy was concerned, her powers must prove utterly inadequate and unavailing, when brought into competition with those of the unfortunate lady during a continuance of the paroxysm. Sabina feigned a calmness which she was far from feeling at that trying moment, and though her voice trembled, yet she said cheerfully, and with a careless air, —

"I think your knife will soon be sharp enough, Lady St. Elan; what do you want it for?"

"What do I want it for?" mimicked the mad woman; "why what should I want it for, Sabina, but to cut your throat with?"

"Well, that is an odd fancy," exclaimed Sabina, endeavouring not to scream or to faint: "but you had better sit down, for the knife is not sharp enough for that job — there — there's a chair. Now give me your attention while you sharpen and sharpen, and I'll sit opposite to you; for I have had such an extraordinary dream, and I want you to listen to it."

"The lady looked maliciously sly, as much as to say, "you shall not cheat me, if I do listen." But she sat down, and Sabina opposite to her, who began pouring forth a farrago of nonsense, which she pretended to have dreamt. Lady St. Elan had always been much addicted to perusing works of romantic fiction, and this taste for the marvellous was, probably, the means of saving Sabina's life, who during that long and awful night never flagged for one moment, continuing her repetition of marvels in the Arabian Night's style. The maniac sat perfectly still, with the knife in one hand, the slipper in the other, and her large eyes intently fixed on the narrator. Oh, those weary, weary hours! When, at length, repeated signals and knocks were heard at the chamber-door, as the morning sun arose, Sabina had presence of mind not to notice them, as her terrible companion appeared not to do so; but she continued her sing-song, monotonous strain, until the barrier was fairly burst open, and St. Elan himself, who had just returned, alarmed at the portentous murmurs within, and accompanied by several domestics, came to the

The Deserted Mansion

rescue.

"Had Sabina moved, or screamed for help, or appeared to recognise the aid which was at hand, ere it could have reached her, the knife might have been sheathed in her heart. This knife was a foreign one of quaint workmanship, usually hanging up in St. Elan's dressing-room; and the premeditation evinced in thus secreting it was a mystery not to be solved. Sabina's hair which was black as the raven's wing, when she retired to rest on that fearful night, had changed to the similitude of extreme age when they found her in the morning. Lady St. Elan never recovered this sudden and total overthrow of reason, but died — alas! it was rumoured, by her own hand — within two years afterwards. The infant heiress was entrusted to the guidance of her mother's friend and governess; she became an orphan at an early age, and on completing her twenty-first year was uncontrolled mistress of the fortune and estates of her ancestors.

"But long ere that period arrived, a serious question had arisen in Sabina's mind respecting the duty and expediency of informing Mary St. Elan what her true position was, and gently imparting the sad knowledge of that visitation overshadowing the destinies of her race. It was true that in her individual case the catastrophe might be warded off, while, on the other hand, there was lurking, threatening danger; but a high religious principle seemed to demand a sacrifice, or self-immolation, in order to prevent the possibility of a perpetuation of the direful malady.

"Sabina felt assured that were her noble-hearted pupil once to learn the facts, there would be no hesitation on her part in strictly adhering to the prescribed line of right; it was a bitter task for Sabina to undertake, but she did not shrink from performing it when peacefully away to a better world, bequeathing the mansion house and estate of St. Elan's Wood to Sabina and her heirs. In Sabina's estimation, however, this munificent gift was as the "price of blood;" as, but for her instrumentality, the fatal knowledge would not have been imparted; but for her the ancestral woods and pleasant home might have descended to children's children in the St. Elan's line, — tainted, indeed, and doomed; but now the race was extinct.

"There were many persons who laughed at Sabina's sensitive feelings on this subject, which they could not understand; and even well-meaning, pious folk thought that she carried her strict notions "too far." Yet Sabina remained immovable; nor would she ever consent that the wealth thus left should be enjoyed by her or hers.

"Thus the deserted mansion still remains unclaimed, though it will not be long ere it is appropriated to the useful and beneficent purpose specified in Mary St. Elan's will — namely, failing Sabina and her issue, to be converted into a lunatic asylum — a kind of lunatic alms-house for decayed gentle-women, who, with the requisite qualifications, will here find refuge from the double storms of life assailing them, poor souls! both from within and without."

"But what became of Sabina, and what interest has your son in this picture?" asked my friend of old Mrs. L — — , as that venerable lady concluded her narration; "for if none live to claim the property, why does it remain thus?"

"Your justifiable curiosity shall be gratified, my dear," responded the kindly dame. "Look at my hair — it did not turn white from age: I retired to rest one night with glossy braids, black as the raven's wing, and they found me in the morning as you now behold me! Yes, it is even so; and you no longer wonder that Sabina's son desired to possess this identical painting: my pilgrimage is drawing towards its close — protracted as it has been beyond the allotted age of man — but, according to the tenor of the afore-named will, the mansion and estate of St. Elan must remain as they now stand until I am no more; while the accumulated funds will amply endow the excellent charity. Were my son less honourable or scrupulous, he might, of course, claim the property on my decease; but respect for his mother's memory, with firm adherence to her principles, will keep him, with God's blessing, from yielding to temptation. He is not a rich man, but with proud humility he may gaze on this memorial picture, and hand it down to posterity with the traditionary lore attached; and may none of our descendants ever lament the use which will be made, nor covet the possession, of this deserted mansion."