

The Denton Hall Ghost

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A DAY or two after my arrival at Denton Hall, when all around was yet new to me, I had accompanied my friends to a ball given in the neighbourhood, and returned heartily fatigued. At this time I need not blush, nor you smile, when I say that on that evening I had met, for the second time, one with whose destinies my own were doomed to become connected.

I think I was sitting upon an antique carved chair, near to the fire, in the room where I slept, busied in arranging my hair, and thinking over some of the events of the day. Whether I had dropped into a half-slumber, I cannot say; but on looking up—for I had my face bent toward the fire—there seemed sitting on a similar high-backed chair, on the other side of the ancient tiled fireplace, an old lady, whose air and dress were so remarkable that to this hour they seem as fresh in my memory as they were the day after the vision. She appeared to be dressed in a flowered satin gown, of a cut then out of date. It was peaked and long-waisted. The fabric of the satin had that extreme of glossy stiffness which old fabrics of this kind exhibit. She wore a stomacher. On her wrinkled fingers appeared some rings of great size and seeming value; but, what was most remarkable, she wore also a satin hood of a peculiar shape. It was glossy like the gown, but seemed to be stiffened either by whalebone or some other material. Her age seemed considerable, and the face, though not unpleasant, was somewhat hard and severe and indented with minute wrinkles. I confess that so entirely was my attention engrossed by what was passing in my mind, that, though I felt mightily confused, I was not startled (in the emphatic sense) by the apparition. In fact, I deemed it to be some old lady, perhaps a housekeeper, or dependent in the family, and, therefore, though rather astonished, was by no means frightened by my visitant, supposing me to be awake, which I am convinced was the case, though few persons believe me on this point.

My own impression is that I stared somewhat rudely, in the wonder of the moment, at the hard, but lady-like features of my aged visitor. But she left me small time to think, addressing me in a familiar half-whisper and with a constant restless motion of the hand which aged persons, when excited, often exhibit in addressing the young. "Well, young lady," said my mysterious companion, "and so you've been at yon hall to-night! and highly ye've been delighted there! Yet if you could see as I can see, or could know as I can know, troth! I guess your pleasure would abate. 'Tis well for you, young lady, peradventure, ye see not with my eyes"—and at the moment, sure enough, her eyes, which were small, grey, and in no way remarkable, twinkled with a light so severe that the effect was unpleasant in the extreme. "'Tis well for you and them," she continued, "that ye cannot count the cost. Time was when hospitality could be kept in England, and the guest not ruin the master of the feast—but that's all vanished now: pride and poverty—pride and poverty, young lady, are an ill-matched pair, Heaven kens!" My tongue, which had at first almost faltered in its office, now found utterance. By a kind of instinct, I addressed my strange visitant in her own manner and humour. "And are we, then, so much poorer than in days of yore?" were the words that I spoke. My visitor seemed half startled at the sound of my voice, as at something unaccustomed, and went on, rather answering my question by implication than directly: "'Twas not all hollowness then," she exclaimed, ceasing somewhat her hollow whisper; "the land was then the lord's, and that which seemed, was. The child, young lady, was not then mortgaged in the cradle, and, mark ye, the bride, when she kneeled at the altar, gave not herself up, body and soul, to be the bondswoman of the Jew, but to be the helpmate of the spouse." "The Jew!" I exclaimed in surprise, for then I understood not the allusion. "Ay, young lady! the Jew," was the rejoinder. "'Tis plain ye know not who rules. 'Tis all hollow yonder! all hollow, all hollow! to the very glitter of the side-board, all false! all false! all hollow! Away with such make-believe finery!" And here again the hollow voice rose a little, and the dim grey eye glistened. "Ye mortgage the very oaks of your ancestors—I saw the

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planting of them; and now 'tis all painting, gilding, varnishing and veneering. Houses call ye them? Whited sepulchres, young lady, whited sepulchres. Trust not all that seems to glisten. Fair though it seems, 'tis but the product of disease—even as is the pearl in your hair, young lady, that glitters in the mirror yonder,—not more specious than is all,—ay, all ye have seen to—night."

As my strange visitor pronounced these words, I instinctively turned my gaze to a large old-fashioned mirror that leaned from the wall of the chamber. 'Twas but for a moment. But when I again turned my head, my visitant was no longer there! I heard plainly, as I turned, the distinct rustle of the silk, as if she had risen and was leaving the room. I seemed distinctly to hear this, together with the quick, short, easy footstep with which females of rank of that period were taught to glide rather than to walk; this I seemed to hear, but of what appeared the antique old lady I saw no more. The suddenness and strangeness of this event for a moment sent the blood back to my heart. Could I have found voice, I should, I think, have screamed, but that was, for a moment, beyond my power. A few seconds recovered me. By a sort of impulse I rushed to the door, outside which I now heard the footsteps of some of the family, when, to my utter astonishment, I found it was—locked! I now recollected that I myself locked it before sitting down.

Though somewhat ashamed to give utterance to what I really believed as to this matter, the strange adventure of the night was made a subject of conversation at the breakfast-table next morning. On the words leaving my lips, I saw my host and hostess exchange looks with each other, and soon found that the tale I had to tell was not received with the air which generally meets such relations. I was not repelled by an angry or ill-bred incredulity, or treated as one of diseased fancy, to whom silence is indirectly recommended as the alternative of being laughed at. In short, it was not attempted to be denied or concealed that I was not the first who had been alarmed in a manner, if not exactly similar, yet just as mysterious; that visitors, like myself, had actually given way to these terrors so far as to quit the house in consequence; and that servants were sometimes not to be prevented from sharing in the same contagion. At the same time they told me this, my host and hostess declared that custom and continued residence had long exempted all regular inmates of the mansion from any alarms or terrors. The visitations, whatever they were, seemed to be confined to newcomers, and to them it was by no means a matter of frequent occurrence.

In the neighbourhood, I found, this strange story was well known; that the house was regularly set down as "haunted" all the country round, and that the spirit, or goblin, or whatever it was that was embodied in these appearances, was familiarly known by the name of "Silky."

At a distance, those to whom I have related my night's adventure have one and all been sceptical, and accounted for the whole by supposing me to have been half asleep, or in a state resembling somnambulism. All I can say is, that my own impressions are directly contrary to this supposition; and that I feel as sure that I saw the figure that sat before me with my bodily eyes, as I am sure I now see you with them. Without affecting to deny that I was somewhat shocked by the adventure, I must repeat that I suffered no unreasonable alarm, nor suffered my fancy to overcome my better spirit of womanhood.

I certainly slept no more in that room, and in that to which I removed I had one of the daughters of my hostess as a companion; but I have never, from that hour to this, been convinced that I did not actually encounter something more than is natural—if not an actual being in some other state of existence. My ears have not been deceived, if my eyes were—which, I repeat, I cannot believe.

The warnings so strongly shadowed forth have been too true. The gentleman at whose house I that night was a guest has long since filled an untimely grave! In that splendid hall, since that time, strangers have lorded it—and I myself have long since ceased to think of such scenes as I partook of that evening—the envied object of the attention of one whose virtues have survived the splendid inheritance to which he seemed destined.

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Whether this be a tale of delusion and superstition, or something more than that, it is, at all events, not without a legend for its foundation. There is some obscure and dark rumour of secrets strangely obtained and enviously betrayed by a rival sister, ending in deprivation of reason and death; and that the betrayer still walks by times in the deserted Hall which she rendered tenantless, always prophetic of disaster to those she encounters. So has it been with me, certainly; and more than me, if those who say it say true. It is many, many years since I saw the scene of this adventure; but I have heard that since that time the same mysterious visitings have more than once been renewed; that midnight curtains have been drawn by an arm clothed in rustling silks; and the same form, clad in dark brocade, has been seen gliding along the dark corridors of that ancient, grey, and time-worn mansion, ever prophetic of death or misfortune.