

The Iron Cage

Mrs CROWE

Table of Contents

<u>The Iron Cage</u>	1
<u>Mrs CROWE</u>	1

The Iron Cage

Mrs CROWE

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

[As you express a wish to know what credit is to be attached to a tale sent forth after a lapse of between thirty and forty years, I will state the facts as they were recalled last year by a daughter of Sir William A. C—.]

SIR JAMES, my mother, with myself and my brother Charles, went abroad towards the end of the year 1786. After trying several different places, we determined to settle at Lille, where we had letters of introduction to several of the best French families. There Sir James left us, and after passing a few days in an uncomfortable lodging, we engaged a nice large family house, which we liked much, and which we obtained at a very low rent, even for that part of the world.

About three weeks after we were established there, I walked one day with my mother to the bankers, for the purpose of delivering our letter of credit from Sir Robert Herries and drawing some money, which being paid in heavy five-frank pieces, we found we could not carry, and therefore requested the banker to send, saying, "We live in the Place du Lion d'Or." Whereupon he looked surprised, and observed that he knew of no house there fit for us, "except, indeed," he added, "the one that has been long uninhabited on account of the revenant that walks about it."

He said this quite seriously, and in a natural tone of voice; in spite of which we laughed, and were quite entertained at the idea of a ghost; but, at the same time, we begged him not to mention the thing to our servants, lest they should take any fancies into their heads; and my mother and I resolved to say nothing about the matter to anyone. "I suppose it is the ghost," said my mother, laughing, "that wakes us so often by walking over our heads." We had, in fact, been awakened several nights by a heavy foot, which we supposed to be that of one of the men-servants, of whom we had three English and four French. The English ones, men and women, every one of them, returned ultimately to England with us.

A night or two afterwards, being again awakened by the step, my mother asked Creswell: "Who slept in the room above us?" "No one, my lady," she replied, "it is a large empty garret."

About a week or ten days after this, Creswell came to my mother, one morning, and told her that all the French servants talked of going away, because there was a revenant in the house; adding, that there seemed to be a strange story attached to the place, which was said, together with some other property, to have belonged to a young man, whose guardian, who was also his uncle, had treated him cruelly, and confined him in an iron cage; and as he had subsequently disappeared, it was conjectured he had been murdered. This uncle, after inheriting the property, had suddenly quitted the house, and sold it to the father of the man of whom we had hired it. Since that period, though it had been several times let, nobody had ever stayed in it above a week or two; and, for a considerable time past, it had had no tenant at all.

"And do you really believe all this nonsense, Creswell?" said my mother.

"Well, I don't know, my lady," answered she, "but there is the iron cage in the garret over your bedroom, where you may see it, if you please."

The Iron Cage

Of course we rose to go, and just at that moment an old officer, with his Croix de St Louis, called on us, we invited him to accompany us, and we ascended together. We found, as Creswell had said, a large empty garret, with bare brick walls, and in the further corner of it stood an iron cage, such as wild beasts are kept in, only higher; it was about four feet square, and eight in height, and there was an iron ring in the wall at the back, to which was attached an old rusty chain, with a collar fixed to the end of it! I confess it made my blood creep, when I thought of the possibility of any human being having inhabited it! And our old friend expressed as much horror as ourselves, assuring us that it must certainly have been constructed for some such dreadful purpose. As, however, we were no believer in ghosts, we all agreed that the noises must proceed from somebody who had an interest in keeping the house empty; and since it was very disagreeable to imagine that there were secret means of entering it by night, we resolved, as soon as possible, to look out for another residence, and, in the meantime, to say nothing about the matter to anybody. About ten days after this determination, my mother, observing one morning that Creswell, when she came to dress her, looked exceedingly pale and ill, inquired if anything was the matter with her? "Indeed, my lady," answered she, "we have been frightened to death; and neither I nor Mrs Marsh can sleep again in the room we are now in."

"Well," returned my mother, "you shall both come and sleep in the little spare room next us; but what has alarmed you?"

"Someone, my lady, went through our room in the night; we both saw the figure, but we covered our heads with the bed-clothes, and lay in a dreadful fright till morning."

On hearing this, I could not help laughing, upon which Creswell burst into tears; and seeing how nervous she was, we comforted her by saying we had heard of a good house, and that we should very soon abandon our present habitation.

A few nights afterwards, my mother requested me and Charles to go into her bedroom, and fetch her frame, that she might prepare her work for the next day. It was after supper; and we were ascending the stairs by the light of a lamp which was always kept burning, when we saw going up before us, a tall, thin figure, with hair flowing down his back, and wearing a loose powdering gown. We both at once concluded it was my sister Hannah, and called out: "It won't do, Hannah! you cannot frighten us!" Upon which the figure turned into a recess in the wall; but as there was nobody there when we passed, we concluded that Hannah had contrived, somehow or other, to slip away and make her escape by the back stairs. On telling this to my mother, however, she said, "It is very odd, for Hannah went to bed with a headache before you came in from your walk"; and sure enough, on going to her room, there we found her fast asleep; and Alice, who was at work there, assured us that she had been so for more than an hour. On mentioning this circumstance to Creswell, she turned quite pale, and exclaimed that that was precisely the figure she and Marsh had seen in their bedroom.

About this time my brother Harry came to spend a few days with us, and we gave him a room up another pair of stairs, at the opposite end of the house. A morning or two after his arrival, when he came down to breakfast, he asked my mother, angrily, whether she thought he went to bed drunk and could not put out his own candle, that she sent those French rascals to watch him. My mother assured him that she had never thought of doing such a thing; but he persisted in the accusation, adding, "last night I jumped up and opened the door, and by the light of the moon, through the skylight, I saw the fellow in his loose gown at the bottom of the stairs. If I had not been in my shirt, I would have gone after him, and made him remember coming to watch me."

We were now preparing to quit the house, having secured another, belonging to a gentleman who was going to spend some time in Italy; but a few days before our removal, it happened that a Mr and Mrs Atkyns, some English friends of ours, called, to whom we mentioned these strange circumstances, observing how extremely unpleasant it was to live in a house that somebody found means of getting into, though how they contrived it we could not discover, nor what their motive could be, except it was to frighten us; observing that nobody could sleep in the room Marsh and Creswell had been obliged to give up. Upon this, Mrs Atkyns laughed heartily, and said that she

The Iron Cage

should like, of all things, to sleep there, if my mother would allow her, adding that, with her little terrier, she should not be afraid of any ghost that ever appeared. As my mother had, of course, no objection to this fancy of hers, Mrs Atkyns requested her husband to ride home with the groom, in order that the latter might bring her night-things before the gates of the town were shut, as they were then residing a little way in the country. Mr Atkyns smiled, and said she was very bold; but he made no difficulties, and sent the things, and his wife retired with her dog to her room when we retired to ours, apparently without the least apprehension.

When she came down in the morning we were immediately struck at seeing her look very ill; and, on inquiring if she, too, had been frightened, she said she had been awakened in the night by something moving in her room, and that, by the light of the night lamp, she saw most distinctly a figure, and that the dog, which was very spirited and flew at everything, never stirred, although she endeavoured to make him. We saw clearly that she had been very much alarmed; and when Mr Atkyns came and endeavoured to dissipate the feeling by persuading her that she might have dreamt it, she got quite angry. We could not help thinking that she had actually seen something; and my mother said, after she was gone, that though she could not bring herself to believe it was really a ghost, still she earnestly hoped that she might get out of the house without seeing this figure which frightened people so much.

We were now within three days of the one fixed for our removal; I had been taking a long ride, and being tired, had fallen asleep the moment I lay down, but in the middle of the night I was suddenly awakened—I cannot tell by what, for the step over our heads we had become so used to that it no longer disturbed us. Well, I awoke; I had been lying with my face towards my mother, who was asleep beside me, and, as one usually does on awaking, I turned to the other side, where, the weather being warm, the curtain of the bed was undrawn, as it was also at the foot, and I saw standing by a chest of drawers, which were betwixt me and the window, a thin, tall figure, in a loose powdering gown, one arm resting on the drawers, and the face turned towards me. I saw it quite distinctly by the night-light, which burnt clearly; it was a long, thin, pale, young face, with oh! such a melancholy expression as can never be effaced from my memory! I was, certainly, very much frightened; but my great horror was lest my mother should awake and see the figure. I turned my head gently towards her, and heard her breathing high in a sound sleep. Just then the clock on the stairs struck four. I daresay it was nearly an hour before I ventured to look again; and when I did take courage to turn my eyes towards the drawers there was nothing, yet I had not heard the slightest sound, though I had been listening with the greatest intensity.

As you may suppose, I never closed my eyes again; and glad I was when Creswell knocked at the door, as she did every morning, for we always locked it, and it was my business to get out of bed and let her in. But on this occasion, instead of doing so, I called out, "Come in, the door is not fastened"; upon which she answered that it was, and I was obliged to get out of bed and admit her as usual.

When I told my mother what had happened she was very grateful to me for not waking her, and commended me much for my resolution; but as she was always my first object, that was not to be wondered at. She, however, resolved not to risk another night in the house, and we got out of it that very day, after instituting, with the aid of the servants, a thorough search, with a view to ascertain whether there was any possible means of getting into the rooms except by the usual modes of ingress; but our search was vain; none could be discovered.

Considering the number of people that were in the house, the fearlessness of the family, and their disinclination to believe in what is called the supernatural, together with the great interest the owner of this large and handsome house must have had in discovering the trick, if there had been one, I think it is difficult to find any other explanation of this strange story than that the sad and disappointed spirit of this poor injured, and probably murdered boy, had never been disengaged from its earthly relations, to which regret for its frustrated hopes and violated rights still held it attached.