

Reality or Delusion?

Mrs Henry Wood

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This is a ghost story. Every word of it is true. And I don't mind confessing that for ages afterwards some of us did not care to pass the spot alone at night. Some people do not care to pass it yet.

It was autumn, and we were at Crabb Cot. Lena had been ailing; and in October Mrs Todhetley proposed to the Squire that they should remove with her there, to see if the change would do her good.

We Worcestershire people call North Crabb a village; but one might count the houses in it, little and great, and not find four-and-twenty. South Crabb, half a mile off, is ever so much larger; but the church and school are at North Crabb.

John Ferrar had been employed by Squire Todhetley as a sort of overlooker on the estate, or working bailiff. He had died the previous winter; leaving nothing behind him except some debts; for he was not provident; and his handsome son Daniel. Daniel Ferrar, who was rather superior as far as education went, disliked work: he would make a show of helping his father, but it came to little. Old Ferrar had not put him to any particular trade or occupation, and Daniel, who was as proud as Lucifer, would not turn to it himself. He liked to be a gentleman. All he did now was to work in his garden, and feed his fowls, ducks, rabbits, and pigeons, of which he kept a great quantity, selling them to the houses around and sending them to market.

But, as every one said, poultry would not maintain him. Mrs Lease, in the pretty cottage hard by Ferrar's, grew tired of saying it. This Mrs Lease and her daughter, Maria, must not be confounded with Lease the pointsman: they were in a better condition of life, and not related to him. Daniel Ferrar used to run in and out of their house at will when a boy, and he was now engaged to be married to Maria. She would have a little money, and the Leases were respected in North Crabb. People began to whisper a query as to how Ferrar got his corn for the poultry: he was not known to buy much: and he would have to go out of his house at Christmas, for its owner, Mr Coney, had given him notice. Mrs Lease, anxious about Maria's prospects, asked Daniel what he intended to do then, and he answered, 'Make his fortune: he should begin to do it as soon as he could turn himself round.' But the time was going on, and the turning round seemed to be as far off as ever.

After Midsummer, a niece of the schoolmistress's, Miss Timmens, had come to the school to stay: her name was Harriet Roe. The father, Humphrey Roe, was half-brother to Miss Timmens.

He had married a Frenchwoman, and lived more in France than in England until his death. The girl had been christened Henriette; but North Crabb, not understanding much French, converted it into Harriet. She was a showy, free-mannered, good-looking girl, and made speedy acquaintance with Daniel Ferrar; or he with her. They improved upon it so rapidly that Maria Lease grew jealous, and North Crabb began to say he cared for Harriet more than for Maria.

When Tod and I got home the latter end of October, to spend the Squire's birthday, things were in this state. James Hill, the bailiff who had been taken on by the Squire in John Ferrar's place (but a far inferior man to Ferrar; not much better, in fact, than a common workman, and of whose doings you will hear soon in regard to his little step-son, David Garth) gave us an account of matters in general. Daniel Ferrar had been drinking lately, Hill added, and his head was not strong enough to stand it; and he was also beginning to look as if he had some care upon him.

'A nice lot, he, for them two women to be fighting for,' cried Hill, who was no friend to Ferrar.

'There'll be mischief between 'em if they don't draw in a bit. Maria Lease is next door to mad over it, I know; and t'other, finding herself the best liked, crows over her. It's something like the Bible story of Leah and Rachel, young gents, Dan Ferrar likes the one, and he's bound by promise to the t'other. As to the French jade,' concluded Hill, giving his head a toss, 'she'd make a show of liking any man that followed her, she would; a dozen of 'em on

a string.'

It was all very well for surly Hill to call Daniel Ferrar a 'nice lot', but he was the best-looking fellow in the church on Sunday morning—well-dressed too. But his colour seemed brighter; and his hands shook as they were raised, often, to push back his hair, that the sun shone upon through the south-window, turning it to gold. He scarcely looked up, not even at Harriet Roe, with her dark eyes roving everywhere, and her streaming pink ribbons. Maria Lease was pale, quiet, and nice, as usual; she had no beauty, but her face was sensible, and her deep grey eyes had a strange and curious earnestness. The new parson preached, a young man just appointed to the parish of Crabb. He went in for great observances of Saints' days, and told his congregation that he should expect to see them at church on the morrow, which would be the Feast of All Saints.

Daniel Ferrar walked home with Mrs Lease and Maria after service, was invited to dinner. I ran across to shake hands with the old dame, who had once nursed me through an illness, and promised to look in and see her later. We were going back to school on the morrow. As I turned away, Harriet Roe passed, her pink ribbons and her cheap gay silk dress gleaming in the sunlight.

She stared at me, and I stared back again. And now, the explanation of matters being over, the real story begins. But I shall have to tell some of it as it was told by others.

The tea-things waited on Mrs Lease's table in the afternoon; waited for Daniel Ferrar. He had left them shortly before to go and attend to his poultry. Nothing had been said about his coming back for tea: that he would do so had been looked upon as a matter of course. But he did not make his appearance, and the tea was taken without him. At half-past five the church-bell rang out for evening service, and Maria put her things on. Mrs Lease did not go out at night.

'You are starting early, Maria. You'll be in church before other people.'

'That won't matter, mother.'

A jealous suspicion lay on Maria—that the secret of Daniel Ferrar's absence was his having fallen in with Harriet Roe: perhaps he had gone of his own accord to seek her. She walked slowly along. The gloom of dusk, and a deep dusk, had stolen over the evening, but the moon would be up later. As Maria passed the school-house, she halted to glance in at the little sitting-room window: the shutters were not closed yet, and the room was lighted by the blazing fire.

Harriet was not there. She only saw Miss Timmens, the mistress, who was putting on her bonnet before a hand-glass propped upright on the mantelpiece. Without warning, Miss Timmens turned and threw open the window. It was only for the purpose of pulling-to the shutters, but Maria thought she must have been observed, and spoke.

'Good evening, Miss Timmens.'

'Who is it?' cried out Miss Timmens, in answer, peering into the dusk. 'Oh, it's you, Maria Lease! Have you seen anything of Harriet? She went off somewhere this afternoon, and never came in to tea.'

'I have not seen her.'

'She's gone to the Batleys', I'll be bound. She knows I don't like her to be with the Batley girls: they make her ten times flightier than she would otherwise be.'

Miss Timmens drew in her shutters with a jerk, without which they would not close, and Maria Lease turned away.

'Not at the Batleys', not at the Batleys', but with him,' she cried, in bitter rebellion, as she turned away from the church. From the church, not to it. Was Maria to blame for wishing to see whether she was right or not?—for walking about a little in the thought of meeting them? At any rate it is what she did. And had her reward; such as it was.

As she was passing the top of the withy walk, their voices reached her ear. People often walked there, and it was one of the ways to South Crabb. Maria drew back amidst the trees, and they came on: Harriet Roe and Daniel Ferrar, walking arm-in-arm.

'I think I had better take it off,' Harriet was saying. 'No need to invoke a storm upon my head.'

And that would come in a shower of hail from stiff old Aunt Timmens.'

The answer seemed one of quick accent, but Ferrar spoke low. Maria Lease had hard work to control herself: anger, passion, jealousy, all blazed up. With her arms stretched out to a friendly tree on either side,—with her heart beating,—with her pulses coursing on to fever-heat, she watched them across the bit of common to the road.

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Harriet went one way then; he another, in the direction of Mrs Lease's cottage. No doubt to fetch her—Maria—to church, with a plausible excuse of having been detained. Until now she had had no proof of his falseness; had never perfectly believed in it.

She took her arms from the trees and went forward, a sharp faint cry of despair breaking forth on the night air. Maria Lease was one of those silent-natured girls who can never speak of a wrong like this. She had to bury it within her; down, down, out of sight and show; and she went into church with her usual quiet step. Harriet Roe with Miss Timmens came next, quite demure, as if she had been singing some of the infant scholars to sleep at their own homes. Daniel Ferrar did not go to church at all: he staved, as was found afterwards, with Mrs Lease.

Maria might as well have been at home as at church: better perhaps that she had been. Not a syllable of the service did she hear: her brain was a sea of confusion; the tumult within it rising higher and higher. She did not hear even the text, 'Peace, be still', or the sermon; both so singularly appropriate. The passions in men's minds, the preacher said, raged and foamed just like the angry waves of the sea in a storm, until Jesus came to still them.

I ran after Maria when church was over, and went in to pay the promised visit to old Mother Lease. Daniel Ferrar was sitting in the parlour. He got up and offered Maria a chair at the fire, but she turned her back and stood at the table under the window, taking off her gloves. An open Bible was before Mrs Lease: I wondered whether she had been reading aloud to Daniel.

'What was the text, child?' asked the old lady.

No answer.

'Do you hear, Maria! What was the text?'

Maria turned at that, as if suddenly awakened. Her face was white; her eyes had in them an uncertain terror.

'The text?' she stammered. 'I—I forget it, mother. It was from Genesis, I think.'

'Was it, Master Johnny?'

'It was from the fourth chapter of St Mark, "Peace, be still." '

Mrs Lease stared at me. 'Why, that is the very chapter I've been reading. Well now, that's curious. But there's never a better in the Bible, and never a better text was taken from it than those three words. I have been telling Daniel here, Master Johnny, that when once that peace, Christ's peace, is got into the head, storms can't hurt us much. And you are going away again tomorrow, sir?' she added, after a pause. 'It's a short stay?'

I was not going away on the morrow. Tod and I, taking the Squire in a genial moment after dinner, had pressed to be let stay until Tuesday, Tod using the argument, and laughing while he did it, that it must be wrong to travel on All Saints' Day, when the parson had specially enjoined us to be at church. The Squire told us we were a couple of encroaching rascals, and if he did let us stay it should be upon condition that we did go to church. This I said to them.

'He may send you all the same, sir, when the morning comes,' remarked Daniel Ferrar.

'Knowing Mr Todhetley as you do Ferrar, you may remember that he never breaks his promises.'

Daniel laughed. 'He grumbles over them, though, Master Johnny.'

'Well, he may grumble tomorrow about our staying, say it is wasting time that ought to be spent in study, but he will not send us back until Tuesday.'

Until Tuesday! If I could have foreseen then what would have happened before Tuesday! If all of us could have foreseen! Seen the few hours between now and then depicted, as in a mirror, event by event! Would it have saved the calamity, the dreadful sin that could never be redeemed?

Why, yes; surely it would. Daniel Ferrar turned and looked at Maria.

'Why don't you come to the fire?'

'I am very well here, thank you.'

She had sat down where she was, her bonnet touching the curtain. Mrs Lease, not noticing that anything was wrong, had begun talking about Lena, whose illness was turning to low fever, when the house door opened and Harriet Roe came in.

'What a lovely night it is!' she said, taking of own accord the chair I had not cared to take, for I kept saying I must go. 'Maria, what went with you after church? I hunted for you everywhere.'

Maria gave no answer. She looked black and angry; and her bosom heaved as if a storm were brewing. Harriet Roe slightly laughed.

'Do you intend to take holiday tomorrow, Mrs Lease?'

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'Me take holiday! what is there in tomorrow to take holiday for?' returned Mrs Lease.

'I shall,' continued Harriet, not answering the question: 'I have been used to it in France. All Saints' Day is a grand holiday there; we go to church in our best clothes, and pay visits afterwards. Following it, like a dark shadow, comes the gloomy Jour des Morts.'

'The what?' cried Mrs Lease, bending her ear.

'The day of the dead. All Souls' Day. But you English don't go to the cemeteries to pray.'

Mrs Lease put on her spectacles, which lay upon the open pages of the Bible, and stared at Harriet. Perhaps she thought they might help her to understand. The girl laughed.

'On All Souls' Day, whether it be wet or dry, the French cemeteries are full of kneeling women draped in black; all praying for the repose of their dead relatives, after the manner of the Roman Catholics.'

Daniel Ferrar, who had not spoken a word since she came in, but sat with his face to the fire, turned and looked at her. Upon which she tossed back her head and her pink ribbons, and smiled till all her teeth were seen. Good teeth they were. As to reverence in her tone, there was none.

'I have seen them kneeling when the slish and wet have been ankle-deep. Did you ever see a ghost?' added she, with energy. 'The French believe that the spirits of the dead come abroad on the night of All Saints' Day. You'd scarcely get a French woman to go out of her house after dark. It is their chief superstition.'

'What is the superstition?' questioned Mrs Lease.

'Why, that,' said Harriet. 'They believe that the dead are allowed to revisit the world after dark on the Eve of All Souls; that they hover in the air, waiting to appear to any of their living relatives, who may venture out, lest they should forget to pray on the morrow for the rest of their souls.' 'Well, I never!' cried Mrs Lease, staring excessively. 'Did you ever hear the like of that, sir?'

turning to me.

'Yes; I have heard of it.'

Harriet Roe looked up at me; I was standing at the corner of the mantelpiece. She laughed a free laugh.

'I say, wouldn't it be fun to go out tomorrow night, and meet the ghosts? Only, perhaps they don't visit this country, as it is not under Rome.'

'Now just you behave yourself before your betters, Harriet Roe,' put in Mrs Lease, sharply.

'That gentleman is young Mr Ludlow of Crabb Cot.'

'And very happy I am to make young Mr Ludlow's acquaintance,' returned easy Harriet, flinging back her mantle from her shoulders. 'How hot your parlour is, Mrs Lease.'

The hook of the cloak had caught in a thin chain of twisted gold that she wore round her neck, displaying it to view. She hurriedly folded her cloak together, as if wishing to conceal the chain.

But Mrs Lease's spectacles had seen it.

'What's that you've got on, Harriet? A gold chain?'

A moment's pause, and then Harriet Roe flung back her mantle again, defiance upon her face, and touched the chain with her hand.

'That's what it is, Mrs Lease: a gold chain. And a very pretty one, too.'

'Was it your mother's?'

'It was never anybody's but mine. I had it made a present to me this afternoon; for a keepsake.'

Happening to look at Maria, I was startled at her face, it was so white and dark: white with emotion, dark with an angry despair that I for one did not comprehend. Harriet Roe, throwing at her a look of saucy triumph, went out with as little ceremony as she had come in, just calling back a general good night; and we heard her footsteps outside getting gradually fainter in the distance. Daniel Ferrar rose.

'I'll take my departure too, I think. You are very unsociable tonight, Maria.'

'Perhaps I am. Perhaps I have cause to be.'

She flung his hand back when he held it out; and in another moment, as if a thought struck her, ran after him into the passage to speak. I, standing near the door in the small room, caught the words.

'I must have an explanation with you, Daniel Ferrar. Now. Tonight. We cannot go on thus for a single hour longer.'

'Not tonight, Maria; I have no time to spare. And I don't know what you mean.'

'You do know. Listen. I will not go to my rest, no, though it were for twenty nights to come, until we have had

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it out. I vow I will not. There. You are playing with me. Others have long said so, and I know it now.'

He seemed to speak some quieting words to her, for the tone was low and soothing; and then went out, closing the door behind him. Maria came back and stood with her face and its ghastliness turned from us. And still the old mother noticed nothing.

'Why don't you take your things off, Maria?' she asked.

'Presently,' was the answer.

I A superstition obtaining amongst some of the lower orders in France.

I said good night in my turn, and went away. Half-way home I met Tod with the two young Lexoms. The Lexoms made us go in and stay to supper, and it was ten o'clock before we left them.

'We shall catch it,' said Tod, setting off at a run. They never let us stay out late on a Sunday evening, on account of the reading.

But, as it happened, we escaped scot-free this time, for the house was in a commotion about Lena. She had been better in the afternoon, but at nine o'clock the fever returned worse than ever. Her little cheeks and lips were scarlet as she lay on the bed, her wide-open eyes were bright and glistening. The Squire had gone up to look at her, and was fuming and fretting in his usual fashion.

'The doctor has never sent the medicine,' said patient Mrs Todhetley, who must have been worn out with nursing. 'She ought to take it; I am sure she ought.'

'These boys are good to run over to Cole's for that,' cried the Squire. 'It won't hurt them; it's a fine night.'

Of course we were good for it. And we got our caps again; being charged to enjoin Mr Cole to come over the first thing in the morning.

'Do you care much about my going with you, Johnny?' Tod asked as we were turning out at the door. 'I am awfully tired.'

'Not a bit. I'd as soon go alone as not. You'll see me back in half-an-hour.'

I took the nearest way; flying across the fields at a canter, and startling the hares. Mr Cole lived near South Crabb, and I don't believe more than ten minutes had gone by when I knocked at his door. But to get back as quickly was another thing. The doctor was not at home. He had been called out to a patient at eight o'clock, and had not yet returned.

I went in to wait: the servant said he might be expected to come in from minute to minute. It was of no use to go away without the medicine; and I sat down in the surgery in front of the shelves, and fell asleep counting the white jars and physic bottles. The doctor's entrance awoke me.

'I am sorry you should have had to come over and to wait,' he said. 'When my other patient, with whom I was detained a considerable time, was done with, I went on to Crabb Cot with the child's medicine, which I had in my pocket.'

'They think her very ill tonight, sir.'

'I left her better, and going quietly to sleep. She will soon be well again, I hope.'

'Why! is that the time?' I exclaimed, happening to catch sight of the clock as I was crossing the hall. It was nearly twelve. Mr Cole laughed, saying time passed quickly when folk were asleep.

I went back slowly. The sleep, or the canter before it, had made me feel as tired as Tod had said he was. It was a night to be abroad in and to enjoy; calm, warm, light. The moon, high in the sky, illumined every blade of grass; sparkled on the water of the little rivulet; brought out the moss on the grey walls of the old church; played on its round-faced clock, then striking twelve.

Twelve o'clock at night at North Crabb answers to about three in the morning in London, for country people are mostly in bed and asleep at ten. Therefore, when loud and angry voices struck up in dispute, just as the last stroke of the hour was dying away on the midnight air, I stood still and doubted my ears.

I was getting near home then. The sounds came from the back of a building standing alone in a solitary place on the left-hand side of the road. It belonged to the Squire, and was called the yellow barn, its walls being covered with a yellow wash; but it was in fact used as a storehouse for corn. I was passing in front of it when the voices rose upon the air. Round the building I ran, and saw—Maria Lease: and something else that I could not at first comprehend. In the pursuit of her vow, not to go to rest until she had 'had it out' with Daniel Ferrar, Maria had been abroad searching for him. What ill fate brought her looking for him up near our barn?—perhaps because she had fruitlessly searched in every other spot.

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At the back of this barn, up some steps, was an unused door. Unused partly because it was not required, the principal entrance being in front; partly because the key of it had been for a long time missing. Stealing out at this door, a bag of corn upon his shoulders, had come Daniel Ferrar in a smock-frock. Maria saw him, and stood back in the shade. She watched him lock the door and put the key in his pocket; she watched him give the heavy bag a jerk as he turned to come down the steps. Then she burst out. Her loud reproaches petrified him, and he stood there as one suddenly turned to stone. It was at that moment that I appeared.

I understood it all soon; it needed not Maria's words to enlighten me. Daniel Ferrar possessed the lost key and could come in and out at will in the midnight hours when the world was sleeping, and help himself to the corn. No wonder his poultry thrived; no wonder there had been grumblings at Crabb Cot at the mysterious disappearance of the good grain.

Maria Lease was decidedly mad in those few first moments. Stealing is looked upon in an honest village as an awful thing; a disgrace, a crime; and there was the night's earlier misery besides. Daniel Ferrar was a thief! Daniel Ferrar was false to her! A storm of words and reproaches poured forth from her in confusion, none of it very distinct. 'Living upon theft!

Convicted felon! Transportation for life! Squire Todhetley's corn! Fattening poultry on stolen goods! Buying gold chains with the profits for that bold, flaunting French girl, Harriet Roe!

Taking his stealthy walks with her!'

My going up to them stopped the charge. There was a pause; and then Maria, in her mad passion, denounced him to me, as representative (so she put it) of the Squire—the breaker—in upon our premises! the robber of our stored corn!

Daniel Ferrar came down the steps; he had remained there still as a statue, immovable; and turned his white face to me. Never a word in defence said he: the blow had crushed him; he was a proud man (if any one can understand that), and to be discovered in this ill-doing was worse than death to him.

'Don't think of me more hardly than you can help, Master Johnny,' he said in a quiet tone. 'I have been almost tired of my life this long while.'

Putting down the bag of corn near the steps, he took the key from his pocket and handed it to me. The man's aspect had so changed; there was something so grievously subdued and sad about him altogether, that I felt I as sorry for him as if he had not been guilty. Maria Lease went on in her fiery passion.

'You'll be more tired of it tomorrow when the police are taking you to Worcester gaol. Squire Todhetley will not spare you, though your father was his many-years bailiff. He could not, you know, if he wished; Master Ludlow has seen you in the act.'

'Let me have the key again for a minute, sir,' he said, as quietly as though he had not heard a word. And I gave it to him. I'm not sure but I should have given him my head had he asked for it.

He swung the bag on his shoulders, unlocked the granary door, and put the bag beside the other sacks. The bag was his own, as we found afterwards, but he left it there. Locking the door again, he gave me the key, and went away with a weary step.

'Good-bye, Master Johnny.' I answered back good night civilly, though he had been stealing. When he was out of sight, Maria Lease, her passion full upon her still, dashed off towards her mother's cottage, a strange cry of despair breaking from her lips.

'Where have you been lingering, Johnny?' roared the Squire, who was sitting up for me. 'You have been throwing at the owls, sir, that's what you've been at; you have been scudding after the hares.'

I said I had waited for Mr Cole, and had come back slower than I went; but I said no more, and went up to my room at once. And the Squire went to his.

I know I am only a muff; people tell me so, often: but I can't help it; I did not make myself. I lay awake till nearly daylight, first wishing Daniel Ferrar could be screened, and then thinking it might perhaps be done. If he would only take the lesson to heart and go straight for the future, what a capital thing it would be. We had liked old Ferrar; he had done me and Tod many a good turn: and, for the matter of that, we liked Daniel. So I never said a word when morning came of the past night's work.

'Is Daniel at home?' I asked, going to Ferrar's the first thing before breakfast. I meant to tell him that if he would keep right, I would keep counsel.

'He went out at dawn, sir,' answered the old woman who did for him, and sold his poultry at market. 'He'll be

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in presently: he have had no breakfast yet.'

'Then tell him when he comes, to wait in, and see me: tell him it's all right. Can you remember, Goody? "It is all right."'

'I'll remember, safe enough, Master Ludlow.'

Tod and I, being on our honour, went to church, and found about ten people in the pews.

Harriet Roe was one, with her pink ribbons, the twisted gold chain showing outside a short-cut velvet jacket.

'No, sir; he has not been home yet; I can't think where he can have got to,' was the old Goody's reply when I went again to Ferrar's. And so I wrote a word in pencil, and told her to give it him when he came in, for I could not go dodging there every hour of the day.

After luncheon, strolling by the back of the barn: a certain reminiscence I suppose taking me there, for it was not a frequented spot: I saw Maria Lease coming along.

Well, it was a change! The passionate woman of the previous night had subsided into a poor, wild-looking, sorrow-stricken thing, ready to die of remorse. Excessive passion had wrought its usual consequences; a reaction: a reaction in favour of Daniel Ferrar. She came up to me, clasping her hands in agony—beseeching that I would spare him; that I would not tell of him; that I would give him a chance for the future: and her lips quivered and trembled, and there were dark circles round her hollow eyes.

I said that I had not told and did not intend to tell. Upon which she was going to fall down on her knees, but I rushed off.

'Do you know where he is?' I asked, when she came to her sober senses.

'Oh, I wish I did know! Master Johnny, he is just the man to go and do something desperate.

He would never face shame; and I was a mad, hard-hearted, wicked girl to do what I did last night. He might run away to sea; he might go and enlist for a soldier.'

'I dare say he is at home by this time. I have left a word for him there, and promised to go in and see him tonight. If he will undertake not to be up to wrong things again, no one shall ever know of this from me.'

She went away easier, and I sauntered on towards South Crabb. Eager as Tod and I had been for the day's holiday, it did not seem to be turning out much of a boon. In going home again—there was nothing worth staying out for—I had come to the spot by the three-cornered grove where I saw Maria, when a galloping policeman overtook me. My heart stood still; for I thought he must have come after Daniel Ferrar.

'Can you tell me if I am near to Crabb Cot—Squire Todhetley's?' he asked, reining-in his horse.

'You will reach it in a minute or two. I live there. Squire Todhetley is not at home. What do you want with him?'

'It's only to give in an official paper, sir. I have to leave one personally upon all the county magistrates.'

He rode on. When I got in I saw the folded paper upon the hall-table; the man and horse had already gone onwards. It was worse indoors than out; less to be done. Tod had disappeared after church; the Squire was abroad; Mrs Todhetley sat upstairs with Lena: and I strolled out again. It was only three o'clock then.

An hour, or more, was got through somehow; meeting one, talking to another, throwing at the ducks and geese; anything. Mrs Lease had her head, smothered in a yellow shawl, stretched out over the palings as I passed her cottage.

'Don't catch cold, mother.'

'I am looking for Maria, sir. I can't think what has come to her today, Master Johnny,' she added, dropping her voice to a confidential tone. 'The girl seems demented: she has been going in and out ever since daylight like a dog in a fair.'

'If I meet her I will send her home.'

And in another minute I did meet her. For she was coming out of Daniel Ferrar's yard. I supposed he was at home again.

'No,' she said looking more wild, worn, haggard than before; 'that's what I have been to ask. I am just out of my senses, sir. He has gone for certain. Gone!'

I did not think it. He would not be likely to go away without clothes.

'Well, I know he is, Master Johnny; something tells me. I've been all about everywhere.

There's a great dread upon me, sir; I never felt anything like it.'

'Wait until night, Maria; I dare say he will go home then. Your mother is looking out for you; I said if I met

you I'd send you in.'

Mechanically she turned towards the cottage, and I went on. Presently, as I was sitting on a gate watching the sunset. Harriet Roe passed towards the withy walk, and gave me a nod in her free but good-natured way.

'Are you going there to look out for the ghosts this evening?' I asked: and I wished not long afterwards I had not said it. 'It will soon be dark.'

'So it will,' she said, turning to the red sky in the west. 'But I have no time to give to the ghosts tonight.'

'Have you seen Ferrar today?' I cried, an idea occurring to me.

'No. And I can't think where he has got to; unless he is off to Worcester. He told me he should have to go there some day this week.'

She evidently knew nothing about him, and went on her way with another free—and—easy nod. I sat on the gate till the sun had gone down, and then thought it was time to be getting homewards.

Close against the yellow barn, the scene of last night's trouble, whom should I come upon but Maria Lease. She was standing still, and turned quickly at the sound of my footsteps. Her face was bright again, but had a puzzled look upon it.

'I have just seen him: he has not gone,' she said in a happy whisper. 'You were right, Master Johnny, and I was wrong.'

'Where did you see him?'

'Here; not a minute ago. I saw him twice. He is angry, very, and will not let me speak to him; both times he got away before I could reach him. He is close by somewhere.'

I looked round, naturally; but Ferrar was nowhere to be seen. There was nothing to conceal him except the barn, and that was locked up. The account she gave was this—and her face grew puzzled again as she related it.

Unable to rest indoors, she had wandered up here again, and saw Ferrar standing at the corner of the barn, looking very hard at her. She thought he was waiting for her to come up, but before she got close to him he had disappeared, and she did not see which way. She hastened past the front of the barn, ran round to the back, and there he was. He stood near the steps looking out for her; waiting for her, as it again seemed; and was gazing at her with the same fixed stare. But again she missed him before she could get quite up; and it was at that moment that I arrived on the scene.

I went all round the barn, but could see nothing of Ferrar. It was an extraordinary thing where he could have got to. Inside the barn he could not be: it was securely locked; and there was no appearance of him in the open country. It was, so to say, broad daylight yet, or at least not far short of it; the red light was still in the west. Beyond the field at the back of the barn, was a grove of trees in the form of a triangle; and this grove was flanked by Crabb Ravine, which ran right and left. Crabb Ravine had the reputation of being haunted; for a light was sometimes seen dodging about its deep descending banks at night that no one could account for. A lively spot altogether for those who liked gloom.

'Are you sure it was Ferrar, Maria?'

'Sure!' she returned in surprise. 'You don't think I could mistake him, Master Johnny, do you?'

He wore that ugly seal-skin winter-cap of his tied over his ears, and his thick grey coat. The coat was buttoned closely round him. I have not seen him wear either since last winter.'

That Ferrar must have gone into hiding somewhere seemed quite evident; and yet there was nothing but the ground to receive him. Maria said she lost sight of him the last time in a moment; both times in fact; and it was absolutely impossible that he could have made off to the triangle or elsewhere, as she must have seen him cross the open land. For that matter I must have seen him also.

On the whole, not two minutes had elapsed since I came up, though it seems to have been longer in telling it: when, before we could look further, voices were heard approaching from the direction of Crabb Cot; and Maria, not caring to be seen, went away quickly. I was still puzzling about Ferrar's hiding-place, when they reached me the Squire, Tod, and two or three men. Tod came slowly up, his face dark and grave.

'I say, Johnny, what a shocking thing this is!'

'What is a shocking thing?'

'You have not heard of it?—But I don't see how you could hear it.'

I had heard nothing. I did not know what there was to hear. Tod told me in a whisper.

'Daniel Ferrar's dead, lad.'

Reality or Delusion?

'What?'

'He has destroyed himself. Not more than half-an-hour ago. Hung himself in the grove.'

I turned sick, taking one thing with another, comparing this recollection with that; which I dare say you will think no one but a muff would do.

Ferrar was indeed dead. He had been hiding all day in the three-cornered grove: perhaps waiting for night to get away—perhaps only waiting for night to go home again. Who can tell?

About half-past two, Luke Macintosh, a man who sometimes worked for us, sometimes for old Coney, happening to go through the grove, saw him there, and talked with him. The same man, passing back a little before sunset, found him hanging from a tree, dead. Macintosh ran with the news to Crabb Cot, and they were now flocking to the scene. When facts came to be examined there appeared only too much reason to think that the unfortunate appearance of the galloping policeman had terrified Ferrar into the act; perhaps—we all hoped it!—had scared his senses quite away. Look at it as we would, it was very dreadful.

But what of the appearance Maria Lease saw? At that time, Ferrar had been dead at least half-an-hour. Was it reality or delusion? That is (as the Squire put it), did her eyes see a real, spectral Daniel Ferrar; or were they deceived by some imagination of the brain? Opinions were divided.

Nothing can shake her own steadfast belief in its reality; to her it remains an awful certainty, true and sure as heaven.

If I say that I believe in it too, I shall be called a muff and a double muff. But there is no stumbling-block difficult to be got over. Ferrar, when found, was wearing the seal-skin cap tied over the ears and the thick grey coat buttoned up round him, just as Maria Lease had described to me; and he had never worn them since the previous winter, or taken them out of the chest where they were kept. The old woman at his home did not know he had done it then. When told that he had died in these things, she protested that they were in the chest, and ran up to look for them.

But the things were gone.