

Round the Fire

Catherine Crowe

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'My story will be a very short one,' said Mrs M.; 'for I must tell you that though, like everybody else, I have heard a great many ghost stories, and have met people who assured me they had seen such things, I cannot, for my own part, bring myself to believe in them; but a circumstance occurred when I was abroad that you may perhaps consider of a ghostly nature, though I cannot.

I was travelling through Germany, with no one but my maid—it before the time of railways, and on my road from Leipsic to Dresden I stopped at an inn that appeared to have been long ago part an aristocratic residence—a castle, in short; for there was a stone wall and battlements, and a tower at one side; while the other was a prosaic-looking square building that had evidently been added in modern times. The inn stood at one end of a small village, in which some of the houses looked so antique that they might, I thought, be coeval with the castle itself. There were a good many travellers, but the host said he could accommodate me; and when I asked to see my room, he led me up to the towers, and showed me a tolerably comfortable one. There were only two apartments on each floor; so I asked him if I could have the other for my maid, and he said yes, if no other traveller arrived. None came, and she slept there.

I supped at the table d'hôte, and retired to bed early, as I had an excursion to make on the following day; and I was sufficiently tired with my journey to fall asleep directly.

I don't know how long I had slept—but I think some hours, when I awoke quite suddenly, almost with a start, and beheld near the foot of the bed the most hideous, dreadful-looking old woman, in an antique dress, that imagination can conceive. She seemed to be approaching me—not as if walking, but gliding, with her left arm and hand extended towards me.

"Merciful God, deliver me!" I exclaimed under my first impulse of amazement; and as I said the words she disappeared.'

'Then, though you don't believe in ghosts, you thought it was one when you saw it,' said I.

I don't know what I thought—I admit I was a good deal frightened, and it was a long time before I fell asleep again.

'In the morning,' continued Mrs M., 'my maid knocked, and I told her to come in; but the door was locked, and I had to get out of bed to admit her—I thought I might have forgotten to fasten it. As soon as I was up I examined every part of the room, but I could find nothing to account for this intrusion. There was neither trap nor moving panel, nor door that I could see, except the one I had locked. However, I made up my mind not to speak of the circumstance, for I fancied I must have been deceived in supposing myself awake, and that it was only a dream; more particularly as there was no light in my room, and I could not comprehend how I could have seen this woman.

I went out early, and was away the greater part of the day. When I returned I found more travellers had arrived, and that they had given the room next mine to a German lady and her daughter, who were at the table d'hôte. I therefore had a bed made up in my room for my maid; and before I lay down, I searched thoroughly, that I might be sure nobody was concealed there.

'In the middle of the night—I suppose about the same time I had been disturbed on the preceding one—I and my maid were awakened by a piercing scream; and I heard the voice of the German girl in the adjoining room, exclaiming, "Ach! meine mütter! meine mütter!"

'For some time afterwards I heard them talking, and then I fell asleep—wondering. I confess, whether they had had a visit from the frightful old woman. They left me in no doubt the next morning. They came down to breakfast greatly excited—told everybody the cause—described the old woman exactly as I had seen her, and

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departed from the house incontinently, declaring they would not stay there another hour.'

'What did the host say to it?' we asked.

'Nothing; he said we must have dreamed it—and I suppose we did.'

'Your story,' said I, 'reminds me of a very interesting letter which I received soon after the publication of *The Night Side of Nature*. It was from a clergyman who gave his name, and said he was chaplain to a nobleman. He related that in a house he inhabited, or had inhabited, a lady had one evening gone upstairs and seen, to her amazement, in a room, the door of which was open, a lady in an antique dress standing before a chest of drawers and apparently examining their contents. She stood still, wondering who this stranger could be, when the figure turned her face towards her and, to her horror, she saw there were no eyes. Other members of the family saw the same apparition also. I believe there were further particulars; but I unfortunately lost this letter, with some others, in the confusion of changing my residence.

'The absence of eyes I take to be emblematical of moral blindness; for in the world of spirits there is no deceiving each other by false seemings; as we are, so we appear.

'Then,' said Mrs W.C., 'the apparition—if it was an apparition—that two of my servants saw lately, must be in a very degraded state.

'There is a road, and on one side of it a path, just beyond my garden wall. Not long ago two of my servants were in the dusk of the evening walking up this path, when they saw a large, dark object coming towards them. At first they thought it was an animal; and when it got close one of them stretched out her hand to touch it; but she could feel nothing, and it passed on between her and the garden wall, although there was no space, the path being only wide enough for two; and on looking back, they saw it walking down the hill behind them. Three men were coming up on the path, and as the thing approached they jumped off into the road.

'"Good heavens, what is that!" cried the women.

'"I don't know," replied the men; "I never saw such a thing as that before."

'The women came home greatly agitated; and we have since heard there is a tradition that the spot is haunted by the ghost of a man who was killed in a quarry close by.'

'I have travelled a great deal,' said our next speaker, the Chevalier de La C.G.; 'and, certainly, I have never been in any country where instances of these spiritual appearances were not adduced on apparently credible authority. I have heard numerous stories of the sort, but the one that most readily occurs to me at present was told to me not long ago, in Paris, by Count P.—the nephew of the celebrated Count P. whose name occurs in the history of the remarkable incidents connected with the death of the Emperor Paul.

'Count P., my authority for the following story, was attached to the Russian embassy; and he told me, one evening, when the conversation turned on the inconveniences of travelling in the East of Europe, that on one occasion, when in Poland, he found himself about seven o'clock in an autumn evening on a forest road, where there was no possibility of finding a house of public entertainment within many miles. There was a frightful storm; the road, not good at the best, was almost impracticable from the weather, and his horses were completely knocked up. On consulting his people what was best to be done, they said that to go back was as impossible as to go forward; but that by turning a little out of the main road, they should soon reach a castle where possibly shelter might be procured for the night. The count gladly consented, and it was not long before they found themselves at the gate of what appeared a building on a very splendid scale. The courier quickly alighted and rang at the bell, and while waiting for admission he inquired who the castle belonged to, and was told that it was Count X's.

'It was some time before the bell was answered, but at length all elderly man appeared at a wicket, with a lantern, and peeped out. On perceiving the equipage, he came forward and stepped up to the carriage, holding the light aloft to discover who was inside. Count P. handed him his card, and explained his distress.

'"There is no one here, my lord," replied the man, "but myself and my family; the castle is not inhabited."

'"That's bad news," said the count; "but nevertheless, you can give me what I am most in need of, and that is—shelter for the night."

'"Willingly," said the man, "if your lordship will put up with such accommodation as we can hastily prepare."

'"So," said the count, "I alighted and walked in; and the old man unbarred the great gates to admit my carriages and people. We found ourselves in an immense cour, with the castle en face, and stables and offices on each side. As we had a fourgon with us, with provender for the cattle and provisions for ourselves, we wanted nothing but beds and a good fire; and as the only one lighted was in the old man's apartments, he first took us

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there. They consisted of a suite of small rooms in the left wing, that had probably been formerly occupied by the upper servants. They were comfortably furnished, and he and his large family appeared to be very well lodged.

Besides the wife, there were three sons, with their wives and children, and two nieces; and in a part of the offices, where I saw a light, I was told there were labourers and women servants, for it was a valuable estate, with a fine forest, and the sons acted as gardes chasse.

' "Is there much game in the forest?" I asked.

' "A great deal of all sorts," they answered.

' "Then I suppose during the season the family live here?"

' "Never," they replied. "None of the family ever reside here."

' "Indeed!" I said; "how is that? It seems a very fine place."

' "Superb," answered the wife of the custodian; "but the castle is haunted."

'She said this with a simple gravity that made me laugh; upon which they all stared at me with the most edifying amazement.

' "I beg your pardon," I said; "but you know, perhaps, in great cities, such as I usually inhabit, there are no ghosts."

' "Indeed!" said they. "No ghosts!"

' "At least," I said, "I never heard of any; and we don't believe in such things."

'They looked at each other with surprise, but said nothing; not appearing to have any desire to convince me. "But do you mean to say," said I, "that that is the reason the family don't live here, and that the castle is abandoned on that account?"

' "Yes," they replied, "that is the reason nobody has resided here for many years."

' "But how can you live here then?"

' "We are never troubled in this part of the building," said she. "We hear noises, but we are used to that."

' "Well, if there is a ghost, I hope I shall see it," said I.

' "God forbid!" said the woman, crossing herself. "But we shall guard against that; your seigneurie will sleep not far from this, where you will be quite safe."

' "Oh! but," said I, "I am quite serious: if there is a ghost I should particularly like to see him, and I should be much obliged to you to put me in the apartments he most frequents." They opposed this proposition earnestly, and begged me not to think of it; besides, they said if anything was to happen to my lord, how should they answer for it; but as I insisted, the women went to call the members of the family who were lighting fires and preparing beds in some rooms on the same floor as they occupied themselves. When they came they were as earnest against the indulgence of my wishes as the women had been. Still I insisted.

' "Are you afraid," I said, "to go yourselves in the haunted chambers?"

' "No," they answered. "We are the custodians of the castle and have to keep the rooms clean and well aired lest the furniture be spoiled—my lord talks always of removing it, but it has never been removed yet—but we would not sleep up there for all the world."

' "Then it is the upper floors that are haunted?"

' "Yes, especially the long room, no one could pass a night there; the last that did is in a lunatic asylum now at Warsaw," said the custodian.

' "What happened to him?"

' "I don't know," said the man; "he was never able to tell."

' "Who was he?" I asked.

' "He was a lawyer. My lord did business with him; and one day he was speaking of this place, and saying that it was a pity he was not at liberty to pull it down and sell the materials; but he cannot, because it is family property and goes with the title; and the lawyer said he wished it was his, and that no ghost should keep him out of it. My lord said that it was easy for any one to say that who knew nothing about it, and that he must suppose the family had not abandoned such a fine place without good reasons. But the lawyer said it was some trick, and that it was coiners, or robbers, who had got a footing in the castle, and contrived to frighten people away that they might keep it to themselves; so my lord said if he could prove that he should be very much obliged to him, and more than that, he would give him a great sum—I don't know how much.

So the lawyer said he would; and my lord wrote to me that he was coming to inspect the property, and I was to

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let him do anything he liked.

' "Well, he came, and with him his son, a fine young man and a soldier. They asked me all sorts of questions, and went over the castle and examined every part of it. From what they said, I could see that they thought the ghost was all nonsense, and that I and my family were in collusion with the robbers or coiners. However, I did not care for that; my lord knew that the castle had been haunted before I was born.

' "I had prepared rooms on this floor for them—the same I am preparing for your lordship, and they slept there, keeping the keys of the upper rooms to themselves, so I did not interfere with them. But one morning, very early, we were awakened by someone knocking at our bedroom door, and when we opened it we saw Mr Thaddeus—that was the lawyer's son— standing there half-dressed and as pale as a ghost; and he said his father was very ill and he begged us to go to him; to our surprise he led us upstairs to the haunted chamber, and there we found the poor gentleman speechless, and we thought they had gone up there early and that he had had a stroke. But it was not so; Mr Thaddeus said that after we were all in bed they had gone up there to pass the night. I know they thought that there was no ghost but us, and that's why they would not let us know their intention. They laid down upon some sofas, wrapt up in their fur cloaks, I and resolved to keep awake, and they did so for some time, but at last the young man was overcome by drowsiness; he struggled against it, but could not conquer it, and the last thing he recollects was his father shaking him and saying, "Thaddeus, Thaddeus, for God's sake keep awake!" But he could not, and he knew no more till he woke and saw that day was breaking, and found his father sitting in a corner of the room speechless, and looking like a corpse; and there he was when we went up. The young man thought he'd been taken ill or had a stroke, as we supposed at first; but when we found they had passed the night in the haunted chambers, we had no doubt what had happened—he had seen some terrible sight and so lost his senses."

' "He lost his senses, I should say, from terror when his son fell asleep," said I, "and he felt himself alone. He could have been a man of no nerve. At all events, what you tell me raises my curiosity. Will you take me upstairs and shew me these rooms?"

' "Willingly," said the man, and fetching a bunch of keys and a light, and calling one of his sons to follow him with another, he led the way up the great staircase to a suite of apartments on the first floor. The rooms were lofty and large, and the man said the furniture was very handsome, but old. Being all covered with canvas cases, I could not judge of it. "Which is the long room?" I said.

' Upon which he led me into a long narrow room that might rather have been called a gallery.

There were sofas along each side, something like a dais at the upper end; and several large pictures hanging on the walls.

' I had with me a bull dog, of a very fine breed, that had been given me in England by Lord F.

She had followed me upstairs—indeed, she followed me everywhere— and I watched her narrowly as she went smelling about, but there were no indications of her perceiving anything extraordinary. Beyond this gallery there was only a small octagon room, with a door that led out upon another staircase. When I had examined it all thoroughly, I returned to the long room and told the man as that was the place especially frequented by the ghost, I should feel much obliged if he would allow me to pass the night there. I could take upon myself to say that Count X. would have no objection.

' "It is not that," replied the man; "but the danger to your lordship," and he conjured me not to insist on such a perilous experiment.

' When he found I was resolved, he gave way, but on condition that I signed a paper, stating that in spite of his representations I had determined to sleep in the long room.

' I confess the more anxious these people seemed to prevent my sleeping there, the more curious I was; not that I believed in the ghost the least in the world. I thought that the lawyer had been right in his conjecture, but that he hadn't nerve enough to investigate whatever he saw or heard; and that they had succeeded in frightening him out of his senses. I saw what an excellent place these people had got, and how much it was their interest to maintain the idea that the castle was uninhabitable. Now, I have pretty good nerves—I have been in situations that have tried them severely—and I did not believe that any ghost, if there was such a thing, or any jugglery by which a semblance of one might be contrived, would shake them. As for any real danger, I did not apprehend it; the people knew who I was, and any mischief happening to me would have led to consequences they well understood. So they lighted fires in both the grates of the gallery and as they had abundance of dry wood they soon blazed up. I

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was determined not to leave the room after I was once in it, lest, if my suspicions were correct, they might have time to make their arrangements; I desired my people to bring up my supper, and I ate it there.

'My courier said he had always heard the castle was haunted, but he dare say there was no ghost but the people below, who had a very comfortable berth of it; and he offered to pass the night with me, but I declined any companion and preferred trusting to myself and my dog. My valet, on the contrary, strongly advised me against the enterprise, assuring me that he had lived with a family in France whose chateau was haunted, and had left his place in consequence.

'By the time I had finished my supper it was ten o'clock, and everything was prepared for the night. My bed, though an impromptu, was very comfortable, made of amply stuffed cushions and thick coverlets, placed in front of the fire. I was provided with light and plenty of wood; and I had my regimental cutlass, and a case of excellent pistols, which I carefully primed and loaded in presence of the custodian, saying, "You see I am determined to fire at the ghost, so if he cannot stand a bullet he had better not pay me a visit."

'The old man shook his head calmly, but made no answer. Having desired the courier, who said he should not go to bed, to come upstairs immediately if he heard the report of firearms, I dismissed my people and locked the doors, barricading each with a heavy ottoman besides. There was no arras or hangings of any sort behind which a door could be concealed; and I went round the room, the walls of which were panelled with white and gold, knocking every part, but neither the sound, nor Dido, the dog, gave any indications of there being anything unusual. Then I undressed and lay down with my sword and my pistols beside me; and Dido at the foot of my bed, where she always slept.

I confess I was in a state of pleasing excitement; my curiosity and my love of adventure were roused; and whether it was ghost, or robber, or coiner, I was to have a visit from, the interview was likely to be equally interesting. It was half-past ten when I lay down; my expectations were too vivid to admit of sleep; and after an attempt at a French novel, I was obliged to give it up; I could not fix my attention to it. Besides, my chief care was not to be surprised. I could not help thinking the custodian and his family had some secret way of getting into the room, and I hoped to detect them in the act; so I lay with my eyes and ears open in a position that gave me a view of every part of it, till my travelling clock struck twelve, which being pre-eminently the ghostly hour, I thought the critical moment was arrived. But no, no sound, no interruption of any sort to the silence and solitude of the night occurred. When half-past twelve and one struck, I pretty well made up my mind that I should be disappointed in expectations, and that the ghost, whoever he was, knew better than encounter Dido and a brace of well charged pistols; but just as I arrived at this conclusion an unaccountable frisson came over me, and I saw Dido, who tired with her day's journey had lain till now quietly curled up asleep, begin to move, and slowly get upon her feet. I thought she was only going to turn, but, instead of lying down, she stood still with her ears erect and her head towards the dais, uttering a low growl.

'The dais, I should mention, was but the skeleton of a dais, for the draperies were taken off.

There was only remaining a canopy covered with crimson velvet, and an arm-chair covered with velvet too, but cased in canvas like the rest of the furniture. I had examined this part of the room thoroughly, and had moved the chair aside to ascertain that there was nothing under it.

'Well, I sat up in bed and looked steadily in the same direction as the dog, but I could see nothing at first, though it appeared that she did; but as I looked I began to perceive something like a cloud in the chair, while at while at the same time a chill which seemed to pervade the very marrow in my bones crept through me, yet the fire was good; and it was not the chill of fear, for I cocked my pistols with perfect self-possession and abstained from giving Dido the signal to advance, because I wished eagerly to see the dénouement of the adventure.

'Gradually this cloud took a form, and assumed the shape of a tall white figure that reached from the ceiling to the floor of the dais, which was raised by two steps. "At him, Dido! At him!"

I said, and away she dashed to the steps, but instantly turned and crept back completely cowed.

As her courage was undoubted, I own this astonished me, and I should have fired, but that I was perfectly satisfied that what I saw was not a substantial human form, for I had seen it grow into its present shape and height from the undefined cloud that first appeared in the chair. I laid my hand on the dog, who had crept up to my side, and I felt her shaking in her skin. I was about to rise myself and approach the figure, though I confess I was a good deal awestruck, when it stepped majestically from the dais, and seemed to be advancing. "At him!" I said, "At him, Dido!" and I gave the dog every encouragement to go forward; she made a sorry attempt, but returned

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when she had got half-way and crouched beside me whining with terror. The figure advanced upon me; the cold became icy; the dog crouched and trembled; and I, as it approached, honestly confess,' said Count P., 'that I hid my head under the bedclothes and did not venture to look up till morning. I know not what it was—as it passed over me I felt a sensation of undefinable horror, that no words can describe—and I can only say that nothing on earth would tempt me to pass another night in that room, and I am sure if Dido could speak you'd find her of the same opinion.

'I had desired to be called at seven o'clock, and when the custodian, who accompanied my valet, found me safe and in my perfect senses, I must say the poor man appeared greatly relieved; and when I descended the whole family seemed to look upon me as a hero. I thought it only just to them to admit that something had happened in the night that I felt impossible to account for, and that I should not recommend anybody who was not very sure of their nerves to repeat the experiment.'

When the Chevalier had concluded this extraordinary story, I suggested that the apparition of the castle very much resembled that mentioned by the late Professor Gregory, in his letters on mesmerism, as having appeared in the Tower of London some years ago, and, from the alarm it created, having occasioned the death of a lady, the wife of an officer quartered there, and one of the sentries. Every one who had read that very interesting publication was struck by the resemblance.