

The Concord of Clofield

Everyone in Clofield knows that a ghost once passed through the vicarage by night. The vicar, who alone saw the apparition, kept his story sacred, relating it only once or twice in the most private manner, but long before he died, and ever since, everyone has known that he saw, or thought he saw, a spirit. Very diverse and fantastic are the garbs in which the ghost story has gone forth, by reason of the imagination of the town-folk. The doctor's wife told me the truth. She has been confined to her arm-chair for many years, and thus she knows everything that everyone does, and the truth of it all, for she is an honest old lady and shrewd.

She lives in the plain brick house, not far from the church, which stands between the row of old cottages and the small greengrocer's shop. She takes a keen interest in the greengrocer, and his wife and daughters, and the caretaker of the church, who is her nearest respectable neighbour on the other side. That, I think, was why these people always had a particular light shed upon their lives from the ghost tale as she told it.

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The main and unvarying parts of the tale are as clear to my mind as if I had seen them all enacted, partly because I know the scene so well—the old grey buildings, the March weather, and even the starlings which are blown about the church on windy days. I have seen the photograph taken by the vicar's first visitor, and heard Rosy's pretty tripping tongue as she prattles to her children.

I would like to say, first, that the vicar, who died some years ago, believed to the last that he had heard a voice from the other side of death, while the doctor always believed that the poor creature had been wandering in the cold night wind before she died. Mr. Burke, the gardener, who, in his way, is an educated man, with a Cockney accent, has always said that it was "all *imagination*."

The Hall gardens are the glory of Clofield. They stretch for the eighth of a mile, it may be, on the slopes to the south of the Hall. Long ago there was a prosperous abbey here, and at one time a bishop's palace. The abbey church still stands, part of it new, most of it old; and hard by to the south of it, forming a quarter-circle, stand the Hall, the vicarage, the house of the head gardener, and the beadle's cottage. These were built long ago on the site of the abbey, with portions of the old walls worked into them. Their gardens lie to the back; they face a broad strip of sandy road with emerald edges of creeping grass, in which stand three plane trees that touch the church roof

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with their branches. On the other side of the church is a fragment of the old village street—cottages with undulating roofs, and, projecting into the street, the blank-looking front of that substantial house which for many generations has belonged to the village doctor. For the last twenty years the term “Clofield” has connoted much more than this. To the east of the doctor’s house is the new town—brick-coloured, garish, swarming with poverty which is not picturesque, and vices which have no rural softening. In the centre of the town, not a mile from the church, stands the Baptist chapel. It is large, and has a look of florid prosperity. Close by is the hospitable dwelling of the minister, at that time one Hopkins.

From this house issued one afternoon a pretty little nursemaid with anxious face. She betook herself towards the church, and turned into the small shop next the doctor’s house, in which flowers and vegetables were displayed.

The little maid’s cheeks were very red, for she had been running; and the grey eyes, which were large with excitement, fixed themselves upon the careworn face of a woman behind the counter.

“Mother, they do say that the new vicar ’ull be ’ere to-morrow, and such a turning out and a routing there ’ull be, yer never saw the like. I ’eerd the minister say as ’e was a red-hot Churchman, and wouldn’t lose a day, as the parish ’ad been so neglect’; but ’e’s coming, and going to have missioners down an’ all.”

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"Th' art Rosy to-day, sure enough," said the mother, fondly stretching out a bony hand and lightly touching the pretty cheek.

"They do say, mother, that 'e'll be round a-scolding every one on us that doesn't go to church reg'lar, and don't ye see that Tom's father is the beadle, and Tom expecting to work into the place, like?"

"Hush now! What's Tom to thee, Rosy? 'E's not been a-speaking to thee without a word to father or me?"

The girl was toying now with some little bunches of snowdrops that lay upon the counter. The only sound that disturbed their talking was a weak cough from an inner room, where a man was lying just out of earshot.

"Minister's that peppery, mother, since 'e 'eerd that 'e'd fly out like anything if I said I go to church. They'd never let me stay on if I didn't go to chapel—and me so fond of the children; there isn't another place I could 'ave in the town. We couldn't afford for me to come home now father's so ill, and if I go away for a place I shall never see you, nor father, nor"— She added after a minute, "Tom 'ud be giving up caring if I was away."

The mother sighed. "It mayn't turn out no way so bad, luv."

"It'll be just the same as at Barton. For they do say that there the vicar's wife made all the church folk take their custom from the shops as go to chapel. It'll be the same here, though this one's a bachelдор. I 'eerd the

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minister telling missus. 'E said the clergy were all o' the same sex nowadays. They's all I, 'e said."

"That's the wrong word ye've got, luv."

"Tom says 'is father 'ull be so set to please the new vicar for fear of losing his place, an' Mr. Hopkins 'ull be mad at me for ever looking at Tom."

A few days after that, the new vicar was showing a clerical friend through the precincts of the church and glebe. A cold March wind swept round the grey tenantless Hall and swayed the ivy on the vicarage porch, shaking the lime trees overhead. The two clergymen, emerging from the southern door, stood opposite the gabled house belonging to the head gardener.

The new vicar was a fair man of comfortable aspect, but in his blue eyes there was the wistful look of intense desire. This desire was embodied in the homely proverb that a new broom should sweep clean. Whatever of mediocrity in self or work he had formerly tolerated was, in this day of new beginnings, to be thrust out.

The head gardener came out from his house door. He was a short, stout man, keen of face, and well dressed. "My nearest neighbour," thought the vicar, and he hurried across the road beneath the planes. The gardener was a Londoner, and well known to be learned. They stood just below a dark barred window.

"No family, sir, except my books. I have enough of them to keep company with—

"Yes, sir, I have a half-sister, but she's been an invalid for many years. She wouldn't see you if you called, but

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I'd be pleased to show you the place at any time. There's a bit of the old cloisters in my garden, and the postern door through your wall, sir, is a bit of the genuine old stuff, I believe."

It was on the invalid that the vicar focussed his mental eye. The gardener looked perplexed at his persistence, lifted the stiff felt hat he wore, and rubbed the level crown of his grey head with the fingers of the hand that held his hat. He was literally a level-headed man.

"The truth is, sir, Miss Burke isn't quite right in her mind. The medical man says it's not insanity—some hysterical affection. It's a good many years since she's spoken, and she has a special objection to the clergy.

"No, I don't go in for Christianity, sir; it is science that I take an interest in. I am content to leave what I can't know anything about. If you want to know why Miss Burke objects to the clergy, I can tell you in a few words. She got into trouble in her youth. The man she married, the foreman at one of the mills here, turned out to have another wife. It's as wicked a place as can be, except in so far as the Methodists have knocked some morals into a few. That's what I think is the good of religion; it sugars the moral pill, sir, with sentiment and fancy for those that haven't the grit to swallow it plain. When we get more of them educated they will want the sugar less. But my half-sister, a tall, handsome, black-eyed thing as she was, found out that the man she had married was a devil, so she came home again."

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The vicar was glad to have an opportunity to show sympathy. "Ah! and not finding consolation, hysteria was the very natural result; but if you had been able to teach her, Mr. Burke, the truth of that line of Moore's hymn with which, as a reader, you are doubtless familiar, 'Earth has no sorrow which Heaven cannot heal'"—

There was a faint twinkle in the gardener's eye. "The story does not end there. She took to Christianity just, as you say, for consolation. It was a time when there was a strange preacher down here, and she took to it in a queer way. I have known people who seemed to have different ideas of it, some one and some another, but she got hold of the idea that Christianity meant that its founder was always an invisible presence beside her, and that she could advise with him about all that she said and did. Well, of course it took the form of her obeying always the best dictates of her heart and conscience, and she was wonderful contented. I hoped it would last. Women need their fancies to live by just as children do."

"My friend," said the vicar, "I cannot in honesty listen to your explanation of the Christian faith. We have hold of the feet of Christ."

"Call it what you will, sir; I call it *imagination*."

"You were going to continue"—

"I was just about to add that there got up a great opposition just then between the Church folks and the Baptists. Our last vicar did not do much, but when the

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Baptists got lively he got a curate down who set the place by the ears. He talked, and the Baptists talked louder. And one day when she was in the house my sister gave a great cry, and we ran to her, and she said, "'Tis plain my Lord cannot be with them, and yet they both do pray.' From that her mind darkened, and the hysteria grew on her. It's a long time since she took this fit not to speak, and the doctor thinks she will have lost her voice for want of use. Good-day; I shall be pleased to show you round the buildings at any time, and the gardens."

The vicar's visitor, who had an artistic turn, came walking backwards, his eye travelling from the carving on the south door up wall and roof and tower.

"This would be the best place for a photograph," he said, "if one could get farther back."

He stepped back and back, until his shoulders rested against the dark window in the wall of the gardener's house, and the vicar moved beside him, his outward eye upon the building, his mind upon the spiritual Church.

"How terrible is the guilt of schism!" he remarked absently.

The friend replied cheerfully, for his mind was upon his photograph, "Yes, yes, you have got your work cut out for you here. You are in a very hotbed of Dissent."

"It passes my imagination to conceive how these sectarians cannot see that they are causing the little ones to offend," said the vicar.

It so chanced that the Baptist minister and the minister

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of a small Methodist cause which had been started at the farther side of the town, came by just then, walking together to a temperance meeting to be held at the next village. The new vicar was ready again; his was the right to make acquaintance with high and low. Kindliness blent with a touch of distant severity was now his rôle. Both Dissenters, who had been talking and walking easily, drew themselves up with an air of company manners. They were neither of them men of much education or refinement. One of them simpered under the gentlemen's greeting, and one of them swaggered with an awkward claim to equality. Behind the exterior manner of their greeting there was the defiance of conviction.

The vicar made bland general inquiries concerning the affairs of the town. With trained perceptions he took the measure of both men as to mental ability and social position. There was another element in the character of each which is commonly called the spiritual life, but at this moment it shrank so far out of sight that the vicar, who was not seeking it with much faith or desire, made no note of it at all. He came back against the low window of the gardener's house, where the camera was being focussed.

"They are neither of them persons of weight," he said. "The Baptist has perhaps the qualities to attract the people; a little vulgarity and servility in a fairly honest and respectable character go far in that direction. I suppose these two are honest men. I always say we

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should deal with Dissenters as the law deals with us all, counting us innocent till we are proved guilty. I always believe them to be in earnest until something proves the contrary."

A yellow watery light from the western cloud began to shine upon the square grey tower above them, making high lights and shadows. Three starlings quarrelling together as they flew, dropped from the tower upon the slate roof and made a blur in the photograph. The yellow patches on the trunks of the planes met the glow with such sympathy of colour that it almost seemed as if sunlight flickered.

Behind the two clergymen, within the dark barred window of the gardener's house, a dark figure like a shadow moved and withdrew.

That night was Rosy's "evening out." The beadle's wife had invited her to supper. Rosy came in the tremulous flutter of hope and fear in which she always met Tom. There was nothing heroic or queenly about Rosy. She ardently desired that Tom should get so far in his love-making as to speak of marriage; she ardently feared anything that might come in the way of so joyful a consummation. Thinking little of her own attractions and much of his, she was withal a modest little soul, far too shy to say much in the bliss of his presence, yet betraying her desire to please by so many artless wiles, that Tom's father and mother were almost as much captivated as Tom himself.

Said the beadle's wife, "You might take Rosy home,

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Tom, by the lane. I'm fearing if she holds by the Church, as in duty bound she ought, her folks never having been Dissenters, she'll be losing her place, and maybe she'll be leaving the town for a bit, as her mother was telling me."

Rosy walked shyly and silently beside Tom by a part of the old cloister wall in the beadle's little three-cornered bit of ground.

She was just a little less shy with Tom than she was with his parents. "Mr. Hopkins is going to preach a whole set of sermons against the vicar, leastways, against the Church, on the horrors of doctoring, I 'eerd him say."

Tom was thinking entirely of Rosy, and not of the conversation on general themes which she was trying to keep up. He was not a reverent youth; he longed unspeakably to get hold of the parsons and knock their heads together. He could not possibly marry for some years to come, and if Rosy must go away it was a dreary prospect.

Something not love, or anything akin to love, made Tom slacken speed and Rosy shrink nearer to him.

"What was it?" he asked, after a minute.

"I thought I see'd something pass, through the chink of the wall, but it wasn't Mr. Burke nor the woman that works there."

"I thought I see'd it too," said Tom briefly.

"Do ye think it could have been a ghost, Tom?"

"No; Mr. Burke says there ain't no ghosts."

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"It couldn't be that Miss Burke that none of us ever sees? The doctor told mother that she's an awful historical woman."

Late that night the new vicar knelt at his private devotions in the desolate study where the old vicar had idled away a long life. Bookshelves, empty now, striped the time-stained walls from floor to ceiling. A heavy screen was fixed to shut out draughts from the low mullioned window that opened only upon shrubs and lawn. More shut in from the imperious beat of the world's pulse a man could hardly be. The new vicar felt the disgrace of his predecessor's seclusion keenly, repenting in vicarious humiliation for this sin as well as his own. He set his crucifix temporarily upon the still empty centre table and knelt before it.

When he had been praying silently for a long time, and the church clock had struck the midnight hour, he became aware, even through closed lids, that someone was looking at him. He opened his eyes and saw the figure of a woman standing just within the screen. She was tall, and wore black garments. Her face was so white and thin that it seemed to the vicar as if his gas-light, flickering with the wind that strained against the house, almost shone through the pallid features. There was but one gas jet in a large dreary room.

From the first moment the vicar seems to have believed that he saw a spirit. He was a sensible man, and as he was there and we were not, it is only fair to admit that he may have been the best judge. It was

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this belief, the thought that the hour was in a sense supreme, which no doubt caused all that his visitor said and did to be branded for ever on his memory. When he told the doctor's wife, he said that his mind was prepared to feel the full solemnity of such a visitant, but that the presence was not only solemn, but also far more gruesome and awful than he could have before conceived. Not only was there an aspect of hideous death about the countenance and black cerements, but the accent and speech used (for the ghost spoke) were just such as the uneducated use in this life, and the manner was just that of a sickly woman, embittered, ironical, and defiant.

She held her head a little on one side, poised upward, turning slightly away from him, as if from some nervous affection she could not hold it straight; she looked at him the while. She lifted a hard, work-worn hand, which was now white and bloodless, and, pointing at him and then at the crucifix, she spoke sharply, sarcastically, but the tone had a far-off, unearthly sound.

"Hypocrite!" she said.

The vicar never denied the fear he felt; he showed himself all the braver because he feared. He got up, keeping his eyes fixed upon her; he found his voice, and said, as firmly as he might, that he was no hypocrite—a statement which in all modesty he called Heaven to witness.

She pointed again at the crucifix, and jerked a crude question defiantly at him.

"Did *he* think that *his* company and Paradise were

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too good for the thief who spoke kindly to him when *he* was dying?"

"Miserable soul!" cried the vicar. "Who are you and what do you desire from me?"

She took no notice of the question.

"You've come here to represent *him*. Well, there's two men here better than thieves; they've been praying for the town, one of them these twelve years, and they've lived poor and worked hard for *him*, and now you've come there's three of you standing together, an' hell lying all about you. What I want to know is, how are you going to behave to them two?"

"I shall always behave to them with perfect civility," said the vicar firmly.

Her hand had fallen. She raised her finger again, pointing to the crucifix, further interrogation sternly indicated.

The vicar hesitated. He would not for worlds have promised to a ghost more than he could perform.

"I shall always treat them with dignified kindness."

She gave a nervous jerk of the head. An awful smile of sarcasm parted her lips, and again she lifted her bony fingers and pointed to the crucifix.

The vicar said afterwards that he felt himself as under a spell of her intense questioning, and all the outsides of life seemed to strip themselves from the objects of his mental vision.

"There is no dignity but humility." He sighed and

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added, with heaving breast, "According to their light they may be far holier men than I, and yet"—

He spoke a word here concerning the wrong of schism and the light the schismatic might have if he would, but if she heard it she did not heed.

She pointed again to the crucifix, looking at him with eyes that seemed to throw rays of black light from out their withered lids. "If you think there's a chance that *he* might have something to say to their prayers as well as to yours, have you asked them to pray for you? Have you prayed for them that they may do all the good they can in their own way? Have you asked them to pray with you that *he* would come in amidst you three—you three standing together here and hell lying all around?"

Almost before she had finished asking this in the quick, bitter tones of her far-off voice, she broke into a sarcastic laugh, as if at the impossibility of what she suggested.

The sound of the laugh, the vicar said, was such as a fiend might make who feigned mirth while he trembled because he believed. As she laughed her thin lip was drawn up above her teeth, and it seemed so dry that it would not cover them again. For the seventh time she lifted her finger and pointed at the crucifix, but he saw now that it was the finger of scorn.

The vicar's heart was filled with deepest grief. He snatched the crucifix and hid it from her mockery against his breast. He had no anger for her; he only asked in solemn pity—

"Poor, poor soul, if you are suffered to come upon

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this mission, are you thus so far lost?" He had some thought that he could have helped her. "Who are you?" he cried again.

At that, her dry lips closing with difficulty over her teeth, she turned to him with the air of a light woman who would act a fantastic part. "If you please, sir, I am one who knows just enough of him you call your master to know that you don't serve him, and just enough of such as you to make me believe that there is no God; but if I may make so bold as to say it, I believe in the hell that you believe in, an' it's lying on all the town, an' it's crawling into your heart."

Here she dropped him a curtsey, the old-fashioned curtsey that the vicar had wished to revive among the girls and women, for he thought it becoming in working women to bob when the priest went by. He said that after that night it gave him pain to see the smallest girl bend her knees to him.

As for the ghost, when she had dropped her curtsey, smiling that vicious smile, she turned, and, throwing her glance and smile behind her as she moved, she added, "I'm gone out into the cold." She shivered and moaned again as she moved down the room—"Into the cold."

But the vicar threw himself upon his knees, and, shutting his eyes upon the sight he could no longer bear, prayed for her in agony. So fervently did he find himself able to pray, that he thought that even yet he might save the lost soul.

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How long she stayed in the room he did not know; he thought he heard her moving about upon the bare floor. After a while the night wind blew upon him with a blast that seemed to have forced the window open. He saw that he was alone; he had an impression that she had been attracted by the opening of the window and had just passed out. He had no fear now. As our hearts often smooth themselves out with the relief of tears, his had grown strong and serene in the fervour of prayer. With the desire that she should not in truth go out "into the cold" without a word of love, he followed into the howling night. A high araucaria upon his lawn was casting its crooked arms wildly with hideous gestures against the glimmering sky, like a devil in glee. All the shrubs were bending and sobbing. There came a long, low shout from the trees in the Hall gardens, and the walls of the vicarage and the gardener's house creaked and strained.

Out there in the wind the vicar bethought him that it would be well to know certainly that no living woman was near. There was but one door that led from the vicar's lawn, and that was the old postern that opened into his neighbour's small garden. Thither the vicar went, and up to the gardener's back door, at which he knocked. The gardener came to the door, spectacles upon his nose, a huge book in his hand. No one, he averred, had gone out from his house that night. His servant went home by night, and his sister had long been asleep. He rubbed his head with two fingers of

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the hand that held the book as he said this, staring surprisedly at the vicar.

The vicar paced upon his lawn in the wind, and before he went in the gardener came in his turn to the postern and called him. There was that in his voice which made the vicar run.

“I went up, sir, to make sure that Miss Burke was sleeping”— The gardener was panting; the two men were hurrying up a little dark stair.

The vicar was led into an upper chamber. The gardener had hastily set his lamp upon a chair. In the bed his sister lay. Her black dress had not been removed; her face, the same face that the vicar had lately seen, was lying sideways upon the pillow, the chin raised somewhat as with a nervous gesture. But death, it seemed, had by a caress smoothed away all bitterness from the lines of the features. She lay with eyes closed, weary but comforted by sleep.

“How long—?” asked the vicar.

The gardener laid his hand upon the corpse. “She’s cold and stiff, sir. It’s been some good time since.”

The vicar was not a weak man, but he cowered before the glimpse he believed he had had of this soul issuing into the desolate, Godless vast. All that night he kept vigil, and until they laid her in the grave.

It is my business to tell stories, not to have opinions. A pious man once said to me concerning Clofield, that he thought the clash of arms between religious bodies kept effort alert, and set men seeking for truth who

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would otherwise sleep. He said that the vicar did ill to make so many modest overtures of love to the schismatic parsons.

The doctor's wife did not think so, but she had leanings towards Dissent. She always finished the story with soft triumph.

“And the word ‘opposition’ was never so much as spoken between Christians while the good vicar lived; and the Methodist and the Baptist each one grew a great deal more earnest; and Rosy lived on in her place, and was sent to church regularly till she married Tom; and Mr. Hopkins—he wept like a child when the good vicar died.”

L. Dougall.