

A PART OF A GHOST

A MYSTERY

Now I do not believe in 'ghosts'—*i.e.* generally—I do not credit all the stories I have read or heard concerning the appearances visible, if not tangible, of the departed, nor, indeed, the great majority of those tales I have listened to in times gone by; but I do not feel called upon to affirm that all such exhibitions of *revenants* are impossible, nor do I take it upon myself to declare that I have no faith in 'fairies,' and to deny that they can be and have been seen on occasion in suitable places. The accounts in works of high authority of the doings of warlocks and witches are received by me with a respect the nature and depth of which I do not care to analyse. The web of that stuff of 'which dreams are made' furnishes abundant material for the poet, the dramatist, and the novelist to this day. In the literature of every people there is evidence of the belief, universal in the early ages of the world, in the existence of spirits, good and bad, in supernatural visitations and influences, and in the agencies of elves, goblins, djins, afreets, and the like on the every day—and night—affairs of men's lives and fortunes. These agents cannot be called 'beings;' if they be 'creatures,' it would be difficult to determine how or why they were created. Some of them were powers of the air, of the water—Ariels or Undines, who could use physical force to effect their ends when they pleased. Who can draw the frontier lines of the kingdom of the lemures—the inhabitants of the land of nightmares—or determine the borders of the shadowy realms whence came the ghosts who 'squeaked and gibbered in the Roman streets' ere Cæsar fell, the visions which spoke most audibly as they passed in dreadful procession before the agonised Richard in his tent on Bosworth field? At all events I shall not attempt to do so; I only mention some of them to point out that when they did appear it was in their *entirety*. They did not throw off fragments! or dislocate their limbs—like the skeletons in the '*danse Macabre*' at Maskelyne and Cook's.

Now my story relates to a part of a spirit or of a ghost, if there be a difference between the two, and I shall at once proceed to tell it, and to leave it to you, my readers, to form your own opinion concerning the mystery. Some thirty years ago a friend of mine, still

alive and pretty hale and hearty, was paying a round of visits on the east coast far north in the Highlands. It so happened that he was detained on his way to the house of one of his friends by an accident to his carriage, which compelled him to leave his servant and luggage behind him, and to continue his journey in the 'machine' of the country inn over a very bad road, so that he arrived at his destination late at night, to the discomfiture of his host, who, not expecting him when dinner time had passed, had invited a neighbouring squire to occupy the room that had been reserved for the visitor, 'and he turned in before you arrived to-night, so I must ask you, my dear fellow, to put up with a makeshift in a spare room, which we are making as comfortable as we can. It is a little high up, though for a man who has been up Mont Blanc that does not matter I hope, eh? But there are some other little drawbacks. The clock in the turret above makes a confounded clicking! There is no bell in the room; but if your man does not turn up I will send my valet to you early, and we will rig you up for the deer drive all right in the morning.'

After supper, and a short adjournment to the billiard room for a pipe, my friend gladly accepted the proposal of his host to show him his room. It was, indeed, very high up—for the castle was one of the old keep-like buildings, dating from the fifteenth century, which are not uncommon in the Highlands and on the Borders. The laird led the way. Corridor and staircase were traversed and mounted till a corkscrew flight led to a narrow landing, which was lighted up by the blazing fire in the bedroom, of which the door stood open to give a warm welcome to the stranger.

'Here we are! You will find everything ready for you—papers and letters that arrived by last post this evening. Pleasant dreams and good night!' And now I will let my friend tell what happened.

When my host left me, he said, I had a look all round. 'Decidedly better than camping out in any tent I know of.' It was a square low room, tapestried all round. One side was occupied by a grand old four-poster with heavy curtains; a large chest of drawers and dressing table were opposite; two old-fashioned arm-chairs, and the letters and papers of which the laird spoke were spread out on the table; night dress and slippers before the fire—all very snug and bright. The tapestry on the walls was faded and stained, but it was entire, and it had evidently been transferred from some other room to cover the nakedness of the stone walls, which it had been cut to fit. I could make nothing of the subjects—naked mostly—Diana and Actæon perhaps—or Bacchus and Ariadne—or it might be Adam and Eve. A horrible croaking and grating noise up the chimney was, it seemed, the preliminary of the beat of the clock, which in a querulous, wheezy fashion struck twelve o'clock. I looked over my letters—nothing important—undressed and tumbled into bed. It was delightfully soft, and the sheets were cool and sweet. I was tired and I was

soon asleep—at least I think I was—when I felt something touch me. The impression was distinctly like a small hand, very cold, drawn slowly across my face. It awoke me, if I was asleep, instantly. I sat up in bed and called out, 'Hallo! who is there?' No answer. The room was lighted up clearly by the fire. I could see nothing. What could it have been? The silk tassel of a bell-pull pendent from the top of the four-poster caught my eye. Perhaps it was that? I lay down and flopped about on my pillow, and the bell-rope swayed and the tassel bobbed and swung to and fro, but it was far above my face. Besides it was not cold. 'Could it have been a rat walking across my face? Ugh! But no! the thing was cold and damp.'

Then it occurred to me that there were some very frolicsome young gentlemen among the smart people staying in the castle—I had left three or four in the billiard room—and it was just possible that they might end off their evening by playing a practical joke on the late arrival, a species of amusement then very much in vogue, in common with 'sells' and other atrocities. The thought made me furious. I got up, lighted a candle, looked under the bed first, and proceeded to make an examination of everything in the room. The tapestry was continuous, as I have said, round the room; but it was detached at one place, and raising it up there, I perceived a door in the wall opposite that which led to my room from the landing at the top of the staircase. I tried to open the door, but it was locked from the outside. I thought I heard whispers and something like a laugh, which confirmed my notion, and I addressed the imaginary culprits in very strong language: 'If you don't let me go to sleep, I swear I will keep you there for the night whoever you are! Do you hear?' No answer. I pulled over the table and placed it against the door; to it I added the arm-chairs, the dressing table, washhand stand, &c., and then, having barred the exit to my satisfaction, I returned to bed and awaited events. I listened intently. Half an hour passed, not a whisper. Not a sound save the click clack of the clock. It was half-past one. Perhaps it was that tassel after all? I may have jumped up in my sleep! It *was* the tassel! I *fancied* it was cold. And so cogitating I passed at last into dreamland, where I abode for a brief moment. In my old campaigning days I was roused by the slightest touch. No noise would awake me save 'réveille,' 'boot and saddle,' or the like. But, indeed, no human hand, death cold as it was, could have been more definite than that which I felt now—four fingers and thumb passed lightly across my face from right to left. The fire still burned brightly. 'This is disgraceful! You are paltry cads to play these tricks; but by Heavens you shall account to me for it all, be sure.'

I jumped out of bed in a towering rage. I was not in the least

terrified, but I was very angry, for I still believed I was being subjected to a stupid practical joke. It was past three o'clock, and it seemed inconceivable that people, young or old, would be wasting the hours so foolishly. But they must be somewhere about. I listened once more outside the barricaded door; then I bethought me that there might be some communication from the balcony. Raising the window I looked out, and perceived that the door I had been closing up so carefully opened out on a flight of stone steps which terminated in the courtyard. Equipping myself in dressing-gown and slippers, I opened my bedroom door, and descended the corkscrew staircase to the first corridor—it was the bachelor quarter. A long vista of boots and shoes outside the bedroom doors suggested that their owners were in bed; the *spiritus asper* from inside indicated that they were asleep. There was no other sound. I retraced my steps to my room and securely locked my door. I examined my face in the glass well. Savage and serious, that was all. Excited certainly, but no fever, no wildness in the eye. I replaced the table before the fire, on which I piled fresh peat and wood, drew one of the arm-chairs alongside it, and *pour me distraire*—for I really was what Americans call 'a little wild'—I opened my letters, tried to read, made memoranda, and listened to the iron tongue of the clock—Sam Ward's 'deadly auctioneer,' who 'counts the moments one by one!'—till, at what time I know not, being in a heavy slumber, I knew *the* hand had been across my face! No room for doubt! The touch lingered there! '*Something*,' whatever it was, had resolved I should not sleep—or sleeping, that I should soon be awakened—in that room. I would abandon the field! It is cowardly to fly if there is an enemy to encounter, but here I had no chance. Pulling on shoes, stockings, and nether garments, I wrapped myself in the dressing-gown, unlocked my door, gave a look around, and with a pious wish for the welfare of my persecutors I stole forth, candle in hand, descended the staircase flight after flight till I reached the billiard room. The white cover on the table would be an excellent quilt. I took it off, and with the cushions made myself a comfortable couch on one of the sofas. Worn out by a long journey and by these constant alarms, I ceased to trouble myself with angry speculations and sank at last into a profound sleep. It was a short one! I was awakened this time by a piercing scream. As I started up in mortal horror I saw a figure in white vanishing from the room! It was broad daylight! The sun was streaming brightly in on my couch through the window. The early housemaid had come in to open the shutters, perceived a prostrate form in shroud-like white on the sofa, screamed, and vanished!

It was seven o'clock; I walked to the open window and looked out. There was a strip of garden a few feet below, through which a path led down to the river, which I saw sparkling in the

sunshine; the air was fresh and the morning fair, and so I stepped out on the lawn, and taking the path which led temptingly through the garden I came to a boat-house on the bank. Inside were stored punts, canoes, cobs, and a roomy launch, which I proceeded to make my headquarters, piling up the cushions in the lockers so as to form a luxurious couch, on which I lay awake pondering on the situation. 'Here at all events I shall escape the persecution, whatever it was.' And what could it be but a shameful device of some malignant night-walker? I reasoned out the whole question with myself till nature asserted herself despite my awful warnings, and once more my heavy eyelids closed in slumber.

I was awakened by and by, but it was not by a cold hand. The laird was shaking me by the shoulder with all his vigorous might: 'You have given us all such a fright! What has happened? My servant found your room in the greatest disorder when he went up to you this morning. However, I thought you might have gone out for an early stroll, though you were badly provided for it. Your servant arrived at eight o'clock, and I sent one of the men with him to look for you. At breakfast time my daughter told the housekeeper one of the maids had been frightened out of her wits by a white figure in the billiard room this morning; presently comes in a report that one of the gardener's boys had seen a wild-looking man in a strange dress making for the river as he was going to his work. So we all turned out to look for you. What the deuce does it all mean? It is near ten o'clock—just time to get back, dress, breakfast, and start for our shoot. We drive the woods at eleven o'clock.'

Clothed, if not altogether in my right mind, I went to the breakfast room, where the daughter of the house was waiting for me alone at the tea table.

'A thousand pardons for keeping you! I really am ashamed of all the trouble I have given you.'

'It is we who should be ashamed of putting you into that wretched room where you could not sleep. Was it the clock kept you awake?'

'Well, no! I don't think it was the clock.'

'What, then, do you think it was—the strange bed?'

'It is hard to say—a stupid joke that must have kept some one busy all night.'

'A joke? I don't understand you.'

'Some one thought it good fun and worth his while to draw something like a glove stuffed with ice across my face whenever I went to sleep, and——'

She dropped the cup and sat staring at me with a strange expression. 'Like a hand? How dreadful! Pray have you told my father about it? I am so sorry for it.' She paused and looked at me earnestly.

'No, not yet! I am more grieved than I can say to be the cause of all this trouble, but I shall find out all about it by and by.'

'Have you ever heard any story about this place before you came here? Perhaps——' she stopped, and then with great earnestness exclaimed, 'I am sure it was not done to annoy you! not done by any one in the castle! Long ago there were odd noises heard there, it is said; but the steward before the present one lived in the room, and indeed it was often used for a visitor when the house was full for the night. Oh! I am very sorry you had to sleep—try to sleep there, I mean—last night.'

Her agitation was extreme. I was glad when I was told the guns were ready. But it set me thinking. It was very curious. Why was she so sure that none of the guests had plagued me—that it was not a joke? Why was her father embarrassed, and indeed displeased, when I told him as we were returning from the day's shooting that I intended to find out if any of the party in the castle were engaged in the joke?

'No! I must beg of you as a great favour not to speak to any of them, or to allude to the matter at present. They are my guests, and I am responsible for them. I can assure you not one of them had anything whatever to say to the "joke," as you call it. You will have no further visitations, I promise you, and I hope you will make up, by a good night's rest in another room, for the owls or bats that molested you in the turret.' That icy hand! Owls or bats!

When I was dressing for dinner that night my old soldier servant, who was as arrant coward in the case of ghostly enemies as he was gallant in the field, observed, 'It's well, sir, they've changed the room on you! I would have been afeared to have took up your hot water in the dark! I heard all about it from the butler in saycret, but it's as much as their places is worth to say a word in the servants' hall.'

'Of what, Pat?'

'Oh, then, and it's your honour knows! I'd rather not spake till we're out of the castle.'

I felt bound by the wishes of my host and his fair daughter not to allude to the subject whilst I was an inmate of the castle then, and when years afterwards I was told the story connected with the place I listened to it under a promise that I would refrain from giving any account of my experiences in the turret till a period of time, which has now elapsed, should have passed over my head.

Some 300 years ago there was enacted in that turret room a cruel deed. The Earl of Strathfillan, who had just come of age, had been summoned home from Sweden by his mother, who had arranged a marriage for him with an heiress, who would bring to the decaying house much-needed wealth. He had been sent by her two years before to her brother, who held a high position in the Court of Gustavus, from the evil influences which convulsed Scotland and filled the land with

violence and bloodshed during the reign of unfortunate Mary; and it was with infinite impatience she awaited his arrival to present him to the bride who was to restore the fortunes of Strathfillan; delighted too at the impatience her son manifested, in the letter which announced his departure, to see her dear face and the old place again. But in those days posts and packets were slow, or at all events uncertain. There were long delays, and the Countess presently began to notice that Helen Stewart, the lovely and penniless girl whom she had sheltered under her roof when her father, Lord Auchintyre, fell at the battle of Pinkie, seemed to know a great deal, in some mysterious way, about the movements of Lord Strathfillan, her cousin. Helen Stewart knew when the young lord had seen King Eric, when he was to meet his uncle, and how he was to journey from the camp to the Court at Helsingfors, while she, his loving, anxious mother, had most meagre tidings. So the Countess watched, and one fine day, when a carrier from Inverness brought a mail to the castle, she had the packets and letters brought to her room, and came upon most tender, loving epistles addressed to 'My only sweetheart and dearest love, Helen,' signed 'Your ever loving Angus.' She rushed to the girl's room, the tapestried turret, blind with rage. 'You false, scheming hussy! Beggar that you are! how dare you? You to be the wife of Strathfillan! But I will spoil your game. Off you go this instant to your aunt's charge at Montpelier. In an hour, do you hear?'

Helen Stewart—pale, proud, and defiant—stood with folded arms.

'Never!' she exclaimed. 'I swore to Angus that I would never leave this castle of his till he returned to make me its mistress. In the eye of Heaven we are man and wife!'

The old woman's fury knew no bounds.

'You shall go this instant, hussy! See if you do not!'

At her summons half a score of gillies entered the room.

'Take Mistress Helen Stewart down to the court, and let her be brought at once, when her pack is ready, to the convent at Beaulieu. You had better, Helen, obey at once.'

'No, aunt, I'll keep my vow!'

The gillies advanced to seize her. Helen rushed to the door which opened on the steps to the court, seized the bolt, and sought to force it back. The savage old châtelaine, drawing a poniard from her belt, chopped at the wrist of the girl as she grasped the handle of the door with such force that the keen blade nearly severed the wrist. The servants bore the poor victim, bleeding to death, to the court; in moving her the hand dropped on the floor! Helen Stewart never left the castle alive. Then came remorse—too late. Angus of Strathfillan was lost at sea in the great storm in which so many vessels were wrecked on the coast of Caithness in the same year.

The Countess of Strathfillan was tried and found guilty of wounding 'to the effusion of blood,' but a great lady had little to fear from the sentence of a court of law at a time when Scotland was convulsed with the bloody feuds between the partisans of Mary and her ferocious nobles, and justice was not done.

She was allowed to escape to France, and was finally pardoned by the Regent Murray. But the story of the death of her niece was handed down, and the castle was regarded with superstitious fear among the people, who believed the falling fortunes of the house were associated with Helen Stewart's fate. The castle was deserted for several generations by the family, but on the suppression of the rising of 1745 the representative of the line made it his residence. The room in the tower was occupied occasionally; now and then it was said that those who were quartered there were subjected to unpleasant visitations, but these were by no means invariable. I cannot solve the mystery of my own experience. I received afterwards, from each of the gentlemen at the castle, his assurance, on his word of honour, that he had not left his room on the night when I was subjected to the ordeal. I shall certainly never forget 'the Dead Hand.'

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