

## UNEXPLAINED.

"All ghost stories may be explained," said Mrs. Marchmont, smiling rather scornfully, and addressing a large circle of friends and neighbors who, one Christmas evening, were seated round her hospitable hearth.

"Ah! you think so? Pardon me, if I cannot agree with you," said Mr. Henniker, a well-known Dublin barrister, of burly frame and jovial countenance, famed for his wit and flow of anecdote.

The ladies of the party uttered exclamations in various keys, while the men looked attentive and interested. All that Mr. Henniker pleased to say was wont to command attention, in Dublin at least.

"So you think all ghost stories may be explained? What would Mrs. Marchmont say to our old woman in the black bonnet, Angela?" And the barrister turned to his quiet little wife, who rarely opened her lips. She was eager enough now.

"I wish I could quite forget that old woman, John, dear," she said, with a shiver.

"Won't you tell us, dear Mrs. Henniker? Please—please do!" cried the ladies in chorus.

"Nay; John must tell that tale," said the wife, shrinking into herself as it were.

No one knew how it happened that the conversation had turned upon mesmerism, spiritualism and other themes trenching upon supernatural. Perhaps the season, suggesting old-fashioned tales, had something to do with it; or maybe the whistling wind, mingling with the pattering of hail and rattle of cab wheels, led the mind to brood over uncanny legends. Anyhow, all the company spoke of ghosts; some to mock, others to speculate; and here was the witty lawyer prepared to tell a grave tale of his own experience.

His jovial face grew stern. Like the Ancient Mariner, he addressed himself to one in the company but all were silent and attentive.

"You say all ghost stories may be explained, Mrs. Marchmont. So would I have said a year ago; but since we last met at your hospitable fireside, my wife and I have gone through a very astonishing experience. We can a tale unfold. No man was better inclined to laugh at ghost stories than I.

"Well, to begin my true tale. We wished for a complete change of scene last February, and Angela thought she would like to reside in the same county as her sisters and cousins and aunts—"

"Dorsetshire, I believe, Mrs. Henniker?" interrupted the lady of the house.

Angela nodded.

"I intended to take a house for my family, leave them comfortably settled in it, and run backwards and forwards between Dorsetshire and Dublin. Well, it so happened that I did leave them for a single day during the three months of my tenancy of the Hall. I had seen a wonderful advertisement of a spacious dwelling house, with offices, gardens, pleasure grounds—to be had for £50 per annum. I went to the agent to make inquiries.

"Is this flourishing advertisement correct?" asked I.

"Perfectly."

"What! so many advantages are to be had for £50 a year?"

"Most certainly. I advise you to go and see for yourself."

"I took the agent's advice, and Angela was enchanted with the description I was able to give her on my return. A charming little park, beautifully planted with rare shrubs and trees—a bowery, secluded spot, so shut in by noble elms as to seem remote from the world. The house—such a mansion as in Ireland would be called manor-house or castle—large, lofty rooms, thoroughly furnished, every modern improvement. My wife, as surprised as myself that a place of the kind should be going for a mere song, begged me to see the agent again, and close with him. It was done at once. I would have taken the Hall for a year, but Mr. Harrold advised me not to do so. 'Take it by the quarter, or at least by the half-year,' he recommended.

"I replied that it appeared such a desirable bargain that I wished to take it by the year. His answer to this was a reiteration of his first advice. I can't tell you how he influenced me, for he really said no more than I tell you; but I yielded to his evident wish without knowing why I did so, and closed with him for six months, not a year.

"We went to the Hall, and Angela was delighted with it. The snowdrops lay in snowy masses about the grounds—the garden gave promise of beauty as the season advanced. How the children ran over the house! how charmed we were with every nook and corner of it? Our own bed-room was a comfortable, large room, opening into a very roomy dressing-room, in which my wife placed two cribs for our youngest boys, Hal and Jack—"

"Don't forget to say that our bed-chamber opened from a sitting-room," interrupted Mrs. Henniker.

"Well, for three weeks we all slept the sleep of the just in our really splendid suite of apartments. Not a grumble from our servants—nothing but satisfaction with our rare bargain. I was on the eve of returning to dear, dirty Dublin and the Four Courts, when—"

"When? We are all attention, Mr. Henniker."

"Angela and I were sitting in the drawing-room under the bed-chamber I have described, when a loud cry startled us, 'Mother, mother, mother!'"

"The little boys were in bed in the dressing-room. Angela dropped her tea cup and dashed out of the room, forgetting that there was no light in the rooms above us.

"I caught up a candle and followed her quickly. We found the children sobbing wildly. Jack's arms were almost strangling his mother, while he cried in great excitement, 'Oh, the old woman in the black bonnet! Oh—oh—oh!'"

"I thought a little fatherly correction would be beneficial, but Angela would not suffer me to interfere. She tried to soothe the little beggars, and in a few minutes they were coherent enough in their story. A frightful old woman, wearing a black bonnet, had been in the room. She came close to them and bent over their cribs, with her dreadful face near to theirs.

"How did you see her?" we asked.

"There was no candle here."

"She had light about her, they said; at any rate, they saw her quite well. An exhaustive search was made. No trace of a human being was to be found. I refrained from speaking to the other children, who slept in the upper story, though I softly entered their rooms and examined presses and wardrobes, and peeped behind dark corners, laughing in my sleeves all the while. Of course we both believed that Hal had been frightened by a dream, and that his little brother had roared from sympathy. 'Don't breathe a word of this to the servants,' whispered Mrs. Henniker. 'I'm not such a fool, my dear,' I replied. 'But pray, search the lower regions, and see if Jane and Nancy have any visitor in the kitchen,' she continued. 'She came through your door, mother, from the sitting-room,' sobbed Hal, with eyes starting out of his head.

"Who, love?" asked his mother.

"The old woman in the black bonnet. Oh, don't go away, mother."

"So Angela had to spend the remainder of the evening between the children's cribs.

"What can we do to-morrow evening," asked she. 'I have it! Lucy shall be put to bed beside Jack.' Lucy was our youngest, aged two.

"All went well next night. There was no alarm to summon us from our papers and novels, and we went to bed at eleven, Angela remarking that the three cherubs were sleeping beautifully, and that it had been a good move to let Lucy bear the other two company. I was roused out of sound sleep by wild shrieks from the three children.

"What! More bad dreams? This sort of thing must be put a stop to," I said; and I confess I was very angry with the young rascals. My wife was fumbling for the match-box. 'Hash!' she whispered, 'there is somebody in the room.' And I, too, at that instant, felt the presence of some creature besides ourselves and the children. The candle lighted, we again reconnoitred—nothing to be seen in the dressing-room, bed-room, or the drawing-room beyond the door of which was shut. But the curious sense of a presence near us, stronger than any feeling of the kind I had ever previously experienced, was gone. You have all felt the presence of another person unseen. You may be writing, you have not heard the door open but though your back is towards the visitor, you know somehow he has entered."

"Quite true, Mr. Henniker; but there is nothing unnatural or unpleasant in that sensation."

"Nothing, of course; I merely instance it to give you an idea of what we felt on that occasion. We were astonished to find the sitting room untenanted. Meanwhile poor Hal, Jack and Lucy shrieked in chorus: 'Oh, the old woman in the black bonnet! Oh, take her away!'"

"Poor Angela, trembling, hung over the cribs, trying to soothe the children. It was a good while before they could tell what happened. 'She came again,' said Hal, 'and she came close to me, and she put her cold face down near my cheek till she touched me, and I don't like her; oh, I don't like her, mother!'"

"Did she go to Jack and Lucy, too?"

"Yes, yes; and she made them cry as well."

"Why do you not like her? Is it the black bonnet? You dreamed of a black bonnet last night, you know," said I, half puzzled, half provoked.

"She's so frightful," cried Hal.

"How could you see her? There was no candle."

"This question perplexed the little boys. They persisted that she had a light about her somewhere. I need hardly say there was no comfort for us for the rest of the night. 'If any one is trying to frighten us out of the place, I'll be even with him yet,' said I. My wife believed that a trick had been played upon the children, and she was most indignant.

"Next day the cribs were removed to the upper story, and Charlotte and Joanna our daughters of twelve and fourteen, were put to sleep in the dressing-room. We predicted an end to the annoyance we had been suffering. The nurse was a quick-tempered woman, who would not stand any nonsense, and Hal's bad dreams would be sternly driven away. We settled ourselves to our comfortable light reading by the drawing-room fire. Suddenly there was a commotion overhead;

an outcry—surprised more than terrified, it sounded to us. Angela laid her book down quickly and listened with all her ears. Fast-flying footsteps were heard above; the clapping of a door; then—scurry, scurry—the patter of bare feet down the staircase. We hurried across the hall, and saw Charlotte in her night gown returning slowly up the kitchen stairs, with a puzzled expression on her honest face.

"What on earth are you doing, child?" cried Angela.

"I was giving chase to a hideous old woman in a black bonnet, who chose to intrude upon us," panted Charlotte. 'I saw her in our room; I jumped out of bed, pursued her through your room and the sitting-room. Then I saw her before me going down stairs, and I ran after her, but the door at the foot of the kitchen staircase was shut. She certainly could not have had time to open it, and I really don't know where she can have gone to.'

"This was Charlotte's explanation of her mad scurry downstairs. Her downright sensible face was puzzled and angry. "So you see the little ones must have been tormented by the old wretch, whoever she is. They didn't dream it, father, as you thought. Wouldn't I like to punish her?"

"What a brave girl!" cried Mrs. Marchmont.

"Brave? Oh, Charlotte's as bold as a lion! She went back to bed; and when we followed her, in a couple of hours, she was sleeping soundly. But I can't say either of us slept so well. If a trick was being played upon us it was carried out in so clever a manner as to baffle me completely. I need not say that I made a careful search of every cranny about the handsome house and offices; if there was a secret passage or a door in the wall, anywhere, it escaped me. We had peace for a fortnight and then the annoyance recommenced.

"Angela's nerve was shaken at last, and she began to whisper, 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio—'"

"John, you are making a story," interrupted Mrs. Henniker.

"It is every word true. I am coming to an end. Angela, in spite of her disclaimer, did believe in a ghost in a black bonnet. Charlotte believed in her, but did not care about her ghostship. The nurse and cook and housemaid declared they were meeting the horrible appearance constantly; and they were all three in a mortal funk. As to the children, they would not leave off clinging to their mother and fretting and trembling when evening came. The milkman, the baker and the butcher all told the servants that we would not be long at the Hall, as nobody ever remained more than a month or two. This was cheerful and encouraging for me."

"But you had never seen the charming old woman at this time?"

"No; but I saw her in the broad daylight. I had a good long look at her, and a more diabolical face I never saw—no, not even in the dock. I was writing a letter in the study about twelve o'clock one morning, when I suddenly looked up, to see the appearance that had excited such a turmoil in my family standing near the table. A frightful face—a short-set woman dressed in black—gown, shawl, bonnet—this was the impression I received. But she looked quite human—quite everyday—there was nothing ghostly in her air—only the evil face curdled one's blood. I stared at her, and then I took up a folded newspaper and threw it at her. My motive in so doing was to frighten her who had frightened my wife so much. Courtesy such a creature need not expect from me, being as her villainous countenance proved, one of the criminal class. The newspaper fell upon the floor, and apparently going through the figure, and there was a vacuum where it had been. I was not much shaken, however, although my theory of a human trickster dressed like a woman seemed overturned."

"Did you tell Mrs. Henniker what you had seen?"

"Naturally I did. At that period we talked of nothing else. She saw the apparition twice herself. Once she entered our dressing-room and saw the figure bending over the sleeping child (it faded as she looked); another time she was with me in the drawing-room, when she laid down her book and whispered, 'See, see, near the door!' There, sure enough, was the apparition that had visited me in the study in clear daylight. I did not make her out quite as distinctly now, because our candles did not light up that end of the long room, or my older eyes were not as good as Angela's."

"What did Mrs. Henniker do?"

"She started up and ran to catch the old woman in the black bonnet."

"And did she catch her?"

"She caught a shiver—nothing more!"

"After this I resolved to give up the Hall at once, sacrificing four months rent for the sake of my wife and children, whose nerves would have soon become shattered had we remained. I went to Mr. Harrold and told him how disagreeable the place was to us. He was grave and very guarded in manner, confessing that no tenant stayed more than a couple of months at the Hall—that his client certainly made considerable in consequence—that he had done his utmost to find out what was wrong with the house, but all in vain. Mr. J— would not speak

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Greeting—

Whereas, John Stevenson of Richibucto in the County of Kent, Crown Land Surveyor, and William Hudson of the same place, merchant, executors of the last will and testament of John Stevenson, late of Richibucto, aforesaid, deceased, have prayed that their accounts of the administration of the estate of the said John Stevenson, deceased, should be proved and allowed and that all parties interested in said estate should be cited to appear to attend the passing and allowing thereof.

You are therefore required to cite the heirs and all parties interested in the estate of the said John Stevenson, deceased, to appear before me at a Court of Probate to be held at Richibucto, in and for said county on Tuesday, the 30th day of June next at 11 o'clock in the forenoon at the office of the Registrar of Probate for said county for the purpose of passing and allowing the said accounts.

Given under my hand and the seal of the said Court this 23rd day of May, A.D. 1891.  
HENRY H. JAMES,  
Judge of Probate of Kent Co.

C. RICHARDSON,  
Registrar of Probates County of Kent.  
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