

The Haunted Manor-House of Paddington

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Published: 1848
in »Holden's Dollar Magazine«, New York



The old manor-house was now a gloomy ruin. It was surrounded by an old-fashioned, spacious garden, overgrown with weeds; but, in the drowsy and half-veiled light of an April dawn, looking almost as beautiful as if it had been kept in trim order. The gravel walks were green with moss and grass, and the fruit-trees, trained against the wall, shot out a plenteous overgrowth of wild branches which hung unprofitably over the borders. A rank crop of thistles, bind-weed and groundsel, choked the beds, over which the slimy trace of slugs and snails shone in the horizontal gleam of the uprising sun. The noble elms, which stood about the lawn in groups, were the only objects that did not bear the melancholy evidence of neglect. These giants of the wood thrive best when not interfered with by man.

Scarcely a single window-pane was unbroken in the old house; the roof was unroofed; the brick-work at the lower part of the building was without mortar, and seethed crumbling with damp; and many of the shutters, which in the dwellings of that date were fixed outside the windows, hung dangling upon one rusty hinge. The entrance-door, of which the lintel had either dropped from its socket or been forced away, was fastened to the side frame by a padlock.

All was silent, deserted, desolate; nor did the aspect of the tenement tend to dissipate, by any exhibition of beauty, either in outline, colour, or detached parts, the heavy, unimaginative melancholy which the view of it inspired. It was a square, red brick house, large enough indeed to contain many rooms, and were it in good repair, to accommodate even a wealthy family; but it was utterly destitute of external interest. It had no pointed roof, no fantastic gables, no grotesque projections, no pleasant porch, in the angles of which the rose and the honeysuckle could ascend, or the ivy cling, nor any twisted and spiral chimneys, like those which surmounted the truly English and picturesque homes built in the Elizabethan era, and which, together with the rich and glorious poetry of that time, gave way to the smooth neatness cultivated during the reign of William and Mary, to which epoch the Paddington Manor-House might be referred.

Two men stood, in the silence of an April morning, contemplating the deserted scene. One of them appeared to know something of its history, and, yielding to the entreaty of his companion, related the following story:

Ten years ago, said he, there dwelt in this house a man of high repute for virtue and piety. He had no wife nor children, but he lived with much liberality, and kept many servants. He was constant in his attendance at church, and gladdened the hearts of the neighbouring poor by the frequency of his almsgiving.

His fame among his neighbours was increased by his great hospitality. Scarcely a day passed without his entertaining some of them with feasts at his house, when his conversation was admired, his judgment appealed to as something more than ordinarily wise, his decisions considered final, and his jokes received with hearty laughter; according to the time-hallowed and dutiful practice of guests at the tables of rich men.

Nothing could exceed the costliness and rack of this man's wines, the lavish profusion of his plate nor the splendour of his rooms—*these very rooms!*—which were decorated with the richest furniture, the most costly specimens of the Italian and Flemish schools of painting, and resounded nightly with the harmony of dainty madrigals.

One summer evening, after a sumptuous dinner had been enjoyed by himself and a numerous party, the weather being very sultry, a proposal was made by the host that the wine and dessert should be taken to the lawn, and that the revelry should be prolonged under the shade of the leafy elms which stood about the garden in groups, as now you see them. The company accordingly adjourned thither, and great was the merriment beneath the green boughs which hung over the table in heavy masses, and loud the songs in the sweet air of evening.

Twilight came on; but still the happy revellers were loth to leave the spot, which seemed sacred to wine and music, and indolent enjoyment. The leaves which canopied them were motionless; even those which hung on the extreme point of

the tenderest sprays, quivered not. One shining star, poised in the clear ether, seemed to look down with curious gaze on the jocund scene; and the soft west wind had breathed its last drowsy evening hymn. The calm, indeed, was so perfect that the master of the house ordered lights to be brought there where they sat, that the out-of-door carouse might be still enjoyed.

„Hang care!“ exclaimed he. „This is a delicious evening; the wine has a finer relish here than in the house, and the song is more exciting and melodious under the tranquil sky than in the close room, where the sound is stifled. Come, let us have a bacchanalian chant—let us, with old Sir Toby, make the welkin dance and rouse the night-owl with a catch! I am right merry. Pass the bottle, and tune your voices—a catch, a catch! The lights will be here anon.“

Thus he spoke; but his merriment seemed forced and unnatural. A grievous change awaited him.

As one of the servants was proceeding from the house with a flambeau in his hand, to light the tapers already placed on the table, he saw in the walk leading from the outer gate, a matron of lofty bearing, in widow's weeds, whose skin, as the rays of the torch fell on it, looked white as the monumental effigy, and made a ghastly contrast with her black robe. Her face was like that of the grisly phantom, Death-in-life; it was rigid and sunken; but her eyes glanced about from their hollow sockets with a restless motion, and her brow was knit as if in anger. A corpse-like infant was in her arms; and she paced with proud and stately tread towards the spot where the master of the house, apparently

Merry in heart and filled with swelling wine,
was sitting among his jovial friends.

The servant shuddered as he beheld the strange intruder; but he, too, had partaken of the good cheer, and felt bolder than usual. Mustering up his courage, he faced the awful woman, and demanded her errand.

„I seek your master,“ said she.

„He is engaged, and cannot be interrupted,“ replied the man. „Ugh ! turn your face from me—I like not your locks. You are enough to freeze one's very blood.“

„Fool!“ returned the woman. „Your master must see me.“ And she pushed the servant aside.

The menial shivered at the touch of her hand, which was heavy and cold, like marble. He felt as if rooted to the spot; he could not move to follow her as she walked on to the scene of the banquet.

On arriving at the spot, she drew herself up beside the host, and stood there without uttering a word! He saw her, and shook in every joint. The song ceased; the guests were speechless with amazement, and sat like petrifications, bending their gaze one way towards the strange and solemn figure which confronted them.

„Why comest thou here?“ at length demanded the rich man, in low and gasping accents. „Vanish! Who opened the vault to let thee forth? Thou shouldst be a hundred miles away. Sink again into the earth! Hence, horrible thing! Delusion of hell! Dead creature! Ghost! Hence! What seekest thou? What can I do to keep thee in the grave? I will resign thy lands: to whom shall they be given? Thy child is dead. Who is now thy heir? Speak, and be invisible!“

The pale woman stooped with unseemly effort, as if an image of stone were to bend, and whispered something in the ear of her questioner, which made him

tremble still more violently. Then beckoning him, she passed through the deepening twilight towards the house, while he, with bristling hair and faltering gait, followed her. The terror-stricken man, the gaunt woman, and white child, looked like three corpses moving in the heavy and uncertain shades of evening, against the order of nature.

After waiting an hour for their friend's return, the guests, who had now recovered from their first panic, became impatient to solve the mystery, and determined to seek the owner of the house, and offer such comfort as his evident trepidation required. They accordingly directed their steps towards the room into which they were informed the woman and child, and their host, had entered.

On approaching the door, piteous groans, and incoherent exclamations were heard; above which these words were plainly audible in a female voice: „Remember what I have said! Think of my slaughtered husband! A more terrible intruder will some night come to thy house! Thou shalt perish here and hereafter!“

Hearing these groans and these menaces, the party instantly burst into the room, followed by a servant with a light. The man, whose face was buried in his hands, was standing alone. But, as his friends gazed around in amazement, a shadow of the woman with the infant in her arms was seen to flicker on the wall, as if moved about uncouthly by a faint wind. By degrees it faded entirely away. No one knew how the stately widow herself had disappeared, nor by what means she had obtained admittance through the outer gate.

To the earnest inquiries of his friends the host would give no answer; and the party left the place perplexed with fearful thoughts. From that time no feasts were given in the Manor House. The apartment where the secret interview took place, and which is, to this day, called *THE ROOM OF THE SHADOW*, was closed, and, it is said, has never since been opened. It is the chamber immediately above this, and is now the haunt of bats, and other night-birds.

After having lived here several years in comparative solitude, a mortal sickness came upon the owner of the house. But, if his bodily sufferings were grievous to behold, the agony of his mind seemed tenfold greater, so that the friends who called to cheer him in his malady were amazed to see one of so pure a life (as they thought) given over to remorse. He felt that he must shortly appear before the Supreme Judge; and the anticipated terrors of the judgment were already upon his spirit. His countenance underwent many ghastly changes, and the sweat of dismal suffering poured in heavy beads from his face and breast.

The throes of his conscience were too strong to be any longer endured and hidden; and, summoning one or two of his neighbours to his bedside, he confessed many sins of which he had been guilty in another part of England; he had, he said, enriched himself by the ruin of widows and orphans; and, he added, that the accursed lust for gold had made him a murderer.

It was in vain that the pastor of the parish, who saw his bitter agony, strove to absolve him of his manifold crimes. He could not be comforted. His works, and alms, and all the good endeavours of the latter years of his life were of no avail. They were as chaff, and flew off from the weight of his transgressions. The vengeance of eternal fire haunted him while living, and he did not dare even to pray. „Alas! my friends,” said he, to those who besought him to lift up his voice in supplication to the Most High, „have no heart to pray, for I am already

condemned! Hell is even now in my soul, there to burn for ever. Resign me, I pray you, to my lost condition, and to the fiends hovering around to seize me.“

The menace of the strange woman was now about to be fulfilled.

On the last night of this person's miserable life, one of his neighbours, a benevolent and pious man, sat up with the expiring wretch by his bed-side. He had for some time fallen into a state of stupor, being afraid to look any human being in the face, or even to open his eyes. He slept, or seemed to sleep for a while; then suddenly arousing himself, he appeared to be in intolerable agitation of body and mind, and with an indescribable expression of countenance, shrieked out, „Oh the intolerable horrors of damnation!”

Midnight had now arrived. The servants were in bed, and no one was stirring in the house but the old nurse, and the friend who watched the last moments of the sufferer. All was in quiet profound as that of the sepulchre; when suddenly the sound of loud and impatient footsteps was heard in the room adjoining the forlorn man's bed-chamber.

„What can that be?” said the nurse under her breath, and with an expression of ghastly alarm. „Hark! the noise continues!”

„Is any one up in the house?” inquired the friend.

„No: besides, would a servant dare to tramp with such violence about the next room to that of his dying master?”

The gentleman snatched up a lamp, and went forth into the next chamber. It was empty! but still the footsteps sounded loudly as those of a person waiting in angry impatience.

Bewildered and aghast, the friend returned to the bedside of the wretch, and could not find utterance to tell the nurse what had been the result of his examination of the adjoining room.

„For the love of heaven!” exclaimed the woman, „speak! tell me what you have seen in the next chamber. Who is there? Why do you look so pale? What has made you dumb? Hark! The noise of the footsteps grows louder and louder. Oh! how I wish I had never entered this accursed house—this house abhorred of God and man!”

Meanwhile, the sound of the horrid footsteps grew not only louder, but quicker and more impatient.

The scene of their trampling was, after a time, changed. They approached the sick man's room, and were heard—plainly heard—lose by the bedside of the dying wretch, whose nurse and friend stared with speechless terror upon the floor, which sounded and shook as the invisible foot-falls passed over it.

„Something is here—something terrible—in this very room, and close to us, though we cannot see it!” whispered the gentleman in panting accents to his companion. „Go up stairs and call the servants, and let all in the house assemble here.”

„I dare not move,” exclaimed the trembling woman. „My brain—my brain! I am faint—I shall go mad! Let us fly from this place—the fiend is here. Help! Help! in the name of the Almighty.“

„Be composed, I beseech you,” said the gentleman, in a voice scarcely audible. „Recall your scattered senses. I too should be scared to death, did I not with a strong effort keep down the mad throbbing that torment me. Recollect our duty.

We are Christians, and must not abandon the expiring man. God will protect us. Merciful Heaven!" he continued, with a frenzied glance into the shadowy recesses of the chamber. „Listen! the noise is stronger than ever—those iron footsteps!—and still we cannot discern the cause! Go and bring some companions—some human faces—our own are transformed!“

The nurse, thus adjured, left the demon-haunted apartment with a visage white as snow; and the benevolent friend, whose spirits had been subdued by long watching in the chamber of death, and by witnessing the sick man's agony and remorse, became, now that he was left alone, wild and frantic. Assuming a courage from the very intensity of fear, he shrieked out in a voice which scarcely sounded like his own, „What art thou, execrable thing! that comest at this dead hour? Speak, if thou canst; show thyself, if thou darest!“

These cries roused the dying man from the miserable slumber into which he had fallen. He opened his glassy eyes—gaspd for utterance, and seemed as though he would now have prayed—prayed in mortal anguish; but the words died in his throat. His lips quivered and seemed parched, as if by fire; they stood apart, and his clenched teeth grinned horribly. It was evident that he heard the footsteps; for an agony, fearful to behold, came over him. He arose in his bed—held out his arms, as if to keep off the approach of some hateful thing; and, having sat thus for a few moments, fell back, and with a dismal groan expired!

From that very instant the sound of the footsteps was heard no more! Silence fell upon the room: when the nurse re-entered, followed by the servants, they found the sick man dead, with a face of horrible contortion—and his friend stretched on the floor in a swoon.

The mortal part of the wretch was soon buried; and, after that time (the dismal story becoming generally known) no one would dare to inhabit the house, which gradually fell into decay, and got the fatal reputation of being haunted.

