

# MRS. DISHMAN'S GHOSTS.

By ORME AGNUS.



I was from Abner Cardiman that I first heard about the strange case of the Dishman family; and it was such a remarkable story that I sought confirmation and further details from Mr. Jarman and

those of the villagers who were intimate with the family.

I sometimes amused myself by trying to get Abner to talk about his great secret; but though I approached the subject with all the subtlety of which I was capable, my efforts were fruitless, and as soon as Abner detected my purpose, he either became silent or markedly changed the subject. Once I made a frontal attack by telling him what the villagers believed, and asking if it were true. He looked at me, smiled sourly, and begged me to take no notice of their silliness. "A gentleman like you," he said, "ought to find summat better to do than listen to their foolishness. Maister Jarman hisself have told 'em 'tis all nonsense," he said.

"But is it all nonsense, Abner?" I asked. But he looked at me cunningly and repeated that the Vicar said it was.

One day, I approached the subject by asking him if he believed in ghosts. He looked at me with a contemptuous smile, as if to say that he was not to be caught that way, and then said curtly: "Some volks do, some don't. Be you a believer in 'em, zur?"

"I hardly know, Abner," I replied. "Are you?"

"I never zeed no ghost meself, zur; but there be volks in these village will tell 'ee they have. 'Tiddn' exactly a ghost, but there be thik skull over to Ower Varm they daren't take away."

"They tell some fearsome tales about it, Abner. I went over there two or three weeks ago to see it, but they would not show it to me."

"Tales enough to make your hair stand

on end," said Abner. "I zeed it once in wold Fencer's time, but 'twas just an ord'nary skull to look at. But Bill Throop, that was menden a fireplace there one day, moved it out of devilment and hid it in the stable. They had no sleep at the Varm thik night, and Bill was so scared on his way home by what he zeed and heard that he come to church reg'lar vor dree Zundays. And then, if you can take the word of a woman, there was a ghost, or a pair of 'em, in these very churchyard."

"Indeed, Abner. I should like to hear about that."

"It made some volks creepy, zur, vor wiks. 'Tis a woman's tale; but these woman believed it zo zure as death."

"Is she living now, Abner?"

"No, zur; she have been dead some time. But Jack Will's wife, he that be keeper, be her husband's sister. She was a Dishman avore she married Jack."

Thereupon Abner, with a reiteration that it was a woman's tale, told me the story. It was evident from his manner in relating it that he believed it himself, and I found when I went to others for confirmation and amplification of the narrative, and they found I had not come to laugh, that they spoke of it with the certainty they spoke of the fire at Lossell Hall, or the wreck at Lulmouth. Even Mr. Jarman acknowledged that to Mrs. Dishman it was no vision.

The story concerns Lucy Mellow, who came to the village from Dorchester. Lucy came as a domestic—part housemaid, part lady's maid—to Mrs. Basterden, at Elm Villa. She was a good-looking girl, with blonde complexion and an enviable profusion of flaxen hair. Her manner was rather reserved, she did not make friends easily, and she treated with cold dignity the young men who were soon buzzing round her. But one afternoon William Dishman overtook her on her way home from Suckton, where she had been shopping, and walked along with her. He was so greatly struck with her that he sent her a letter the next day asking if he might meet her and accompany her to church on Sunday, or take her for a walk. Lucy consented to take a walk with him after service, and Dishman made such pro-

gress in his wooing that he was able to announce his engagement to his friends that evening. He told her that he could not have believed a maid would take his fancy so quickly. "Tiddn' your looks," he said, "though you be so pretty a maid as I have ever seen, but 'tis your ways. I could think of nothen else ayter I walked home with 'ee the other day. You be uncommon, vor I tell 'ee," he added without a trace of vanity, "that I could have had my pick of maids hereabouts; but I never went ayter none since I used to walk out a maid when I was about seventeen."

Lucy was not so ready at revealing her heart; but it was not many days before she shyly confessed, in answer to his endearments, that he was the one man in the world to her.

Dishman had not boasted foolishly when he told her that it was for him to pick and choose. To use Abner's phrase, "he had a taken way with the maids, who were allus maken eyes at him." He was by common consent a fine-looking young fellow, tall, well-set-up, and athletic—indeed, his reputation as a fast bowler was known over one half of the county. Men whose cricketing days are over speak of our present-day bowling with contempt and recall Dishman's great feats. He was foreman at the Ower clay-pits and was getting good wages compared with the average rate in the locality, and altogether, it was agreed, was a man who had only to glance at a maid and her heart fluttered. There were three at least who hoped to win Dishman's favour, and it was considered rather hard by some that an alien maid should capture his affections. But when the village came to know more of Lucy, its verdict was that he had not made a bad choice, neither was there any doubt that they were fond of each other, and putting aside local prejudices in favour of the home article, it must be considered a very suitable match.

The wedding was an event in the village. Mrs. Basterden, who was very fond of her maid, lent her coach and gave the bride her silk wedding-dress and all her household linen, and Lucy's sister, Polly, who was to take her place at Mrs. Basterden's, was chief bridesmaid. Even those who disputed Lucy's claim to good looks had to confess that Polly was pretty. Unlike her sister, she was a brunette, with sparkling eyes and vivacious manner, and a smile that ate its way to the heart, and even on the wedding-day she unwittingly caused trouble by turning the regard of several young fellows

from the maidens with whom they had an understanding. She was nearly twenty at the time of the wedding, and Abner, with his characteristic chuckle, told me how he had vexed many maids by telling them that no young man who had anything but pig's eyes in his head would give them a second glance if Polly were near.

William and Lucy Dishman lived together very happily—"that is, as married life do go," Abner explained. They lived in one of the two houses on the north side of the churchyard which are separated from it by a narrow roadway. The two cottages are very picturesque, with their mantle of wistaria and climbing roses, and a group of noble elms behind to break the force of the cold winds. There is a pleasing view beyond the church, but to some the situation would be intolerable with the perpetual view of the memorials of death in the foreground.

Mrs. Basterden was an old maiden lady who lived in simple fashion, and as she had three servants to attend to her wants, they had much leisure, and Polly rarely missed a day without calling on her sister and brother-in-law. Her visits generally took place in the evening, and this soon became known to the swains of the village, and there were always some of them by the churchyard wall awaiting her appearance. It was not in her nature to be discourteous, and she allowed herself to be held in conversation for a minute or two. But that was the extent of her dalliance; she bestowed no further favours on any of them, and the love-sick swains became the butt of the village humorists. Fred Drake was the boldest and most persistent of the band. He openly declared his love for her to the whole village, and vowed he would marry her or nobody. He waited hours for her at the gate of Elm Villa, till Polly forbade it, and he sent her flowers daily, till at last she refused to accept any. Lucy, who admired him, did all she could on his behalf. But all was in vain; to him and others who had the courage to propose she returned pleasant thanks for the compliment, but said she did not intend marrying.

Mrs. Dishman, who loved her sister warmly, at times got almost angry with her. "You couldn' have a nicer man than Fred," she said. "In another ten years you'll have to hunt round for a man, instead of 'em hunten for you."

Polly never lost her temper at these attacks. "I shall think the same then, Luce," she said.

"Why?" asked Mrs. Dishman.

"I'd rather be an old maid," replied Polly with a laugh.

"I can't think what be come over you, my dear," said Mrs. Dishman perplexedly.

"When you was at home, you was allus letten the young men run ayter you. There was Arthur——"

"I've got wiser now," said Polly, laughing again.

"Be it that you don't think much of married life ayter looken at Bill and me?" asked Mrs. Dishman with great seriousness.

"I think you are both lucky," replied Polly with equal seriousness.

"Then I give it up," said Lucy. "Only I feel vexed about it."

Polly was passionately attached to Lucy's children, especially the first-born, who was named after her. She was meant for an auntie, she cried laughingly. But by the time her niece was four her gaiety and laughter went; she seemed languid and weary, and her friends feared she was "going into a decline." Polly, however, maintained there was nothing at all wrong with her, and would make merry for a few minutes to convince them they were mistaken, but the effort was apparent. She had become very religious, as the village regarded it, attending church and Communion with unflinching regularity, and spending much time in reading devotional literature, and that confirmed her sister that she was about to fall a victim to consumption. "I wish you'd say 'Yes' to Fred Drake or somebody," said Lucy. "As you be, you be maken haste to your grave. It worries me."

"Don't let it," said Polly; "and I wish you wouldn't say any more about it. I've nothen against Fred or any of them, except I don't want to be a wife."

"You'll go off into a decline, then, so sure as fate," said Lucy gloomily. "Will you go and see Dr. Tetley?"

"What for?" asked Polly. "He'd tell me I'm more well than you, Luce."

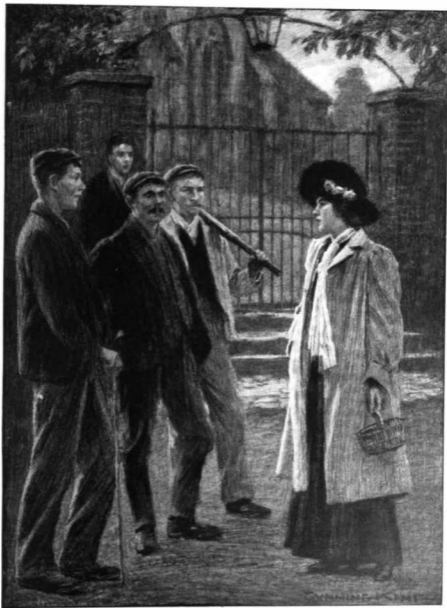
But she did not go off into a decline. One morning the village was stirred through its length and breadth by the news that Polly had been found dead in her bed. She had been suffering from toothache for some days, and had been using chlorodyne to induce sleep. By misadventure she must have taken too large a dose when wild with pain, and the coroner's jury returned a verdict of "Death by Misadventure," and expressed their sympathy with the relatives.

Will and Lucy Dishman felt the bereavement keenly, and the poor girl's death also deeply affected Mrs. Basterden, who claimed it as her privilege to bear all the funeral expenses. Polly and Lucy had no relatives near at hand, their father and stepmother having recently gone to Canada, and it was arranged that Polly should be buried in our churchyard, in a new grave with a granite headstone which Mrs. Basterden had provided near the site she had chosen for her own grave. It was in plain view from the Dishmans' front door, and Mrs. Dishman expressed her satisfaction. She could feel, she said, that Polly was not far away, and instead of aggravating her grief it would assuage it. Abner told me he well remembered digging the grave, for the air that day was close and thundery, and the ground was terribly stony. "It made I sweat, just about," said Abner. "Volks ought to pay double for a grave in thik part, 'tis zo stony."

Lucy Dishman had loved her sister deeply, and was greatly affected at her sudden and untimely end, but, according to her own account, her husband was almost prostrate under the blow. "He'll sit," she told her friends, "thinken about it without spoken, and I see the tears come into his eyes, and then he'll pretend the smoke from his pipe got into 'em. He was very fond of poor Polly in his way, and often asked I to let the poor maid please herself when I wanted her to pick out a man. She was so good a maid as one ever met, and everybody thought so, but she'd taken some fancy in her head against the nat'l state of women, or she'd have been alive at this minit. Somebody lost a good wife."

Eleven months after her sister's death, Lucy Dishman was struck another and a heavier blow. Her husband got wet through at his work one day when a chill east wind was bringing a heavy rain with it. He made light of it, a wetting being a mere incident in his work, but a day or two later he was confined to his bed seriously ill. "New-monny, Dr. Tetley called it," explained Abner with fine scorn. "'Twas just to show everybody how clever he thinks he be, and vrighten volks with long words, but 'twas just plain inflammation of the lungs, and Bill Dishman had got it bad."

Just when the crisis seemed over, heart weakness supervened, and Mrs. Dishman was left a widow with three young children, one a baby a few months old, to provide for. Even regarding her Abner did not express



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much sympathy in telling me the story. "T'waddn' zo bad vor she as vor soune," he said. "She waddn' more than thirty, and not ill-favoured, and she could pretty well make her choice vor another husband. Of course, there was the kids, but many a man could swaller them to have she."

Sympathy was universal, and on a Friday afternoon there was a big funeral, for William Dishman was the leading Oddfellow in the village, and his brethren attended officially. But it was not the funeral, but what took place that night in the churchyard, according to the bereaved widow, that filled all minds for many a day. "'Tis a queer tale as p'raps you'll laugh at, zur," said Abner, "and you med put it down to the fancies of women, but she allus stuck to it, and 'twas plain she was tellen no lies. She did zay her eyes was never opened till thik night, and it nigh drove her mad with thinken about it."

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She was so full of trouble, Mrs. Dishman said, in telling the story, that she could not get to sleep that night. Some of her friends had stayed with her in the house until bedtime, and Mrs. Maypole, her particular friend, had offered to remain all night, but she had declined, feeling she would rather be alone with her grief. Her children were in the same room with her, and when she had undressed, she lay down but could not sleep; and though she tried not to give way, she wept for a long time, though her tears did not bring her any relief. She heard the church clock strike twelve, and some time after she got up and sat in the broad window-sill in her nightdress. The sky was clear, and the air still and cool, and the moon, which was past the full, was shining brightly. She sat there, trying to realise that her husband was really gone, that never more would she see him, and she would have to face the world with her children, and without his strength and tenderness to lean on. But it was not the difficulties she was called upon to meet, but the loss of the man she loved that affected her. It was cruel, cruel, she muttered to herself again and again, while the tears flowed, and she looked away across the churchyard towards the south-west, where her husband had been placed that afternoon. And as she sat and looked, her tears suddenly dried and her heart beat so loud and fast that it shook her, she said, like being in a

train. *For she saw her husband had risen from his grave.* She had not seen him rise, but there he was standing beside his grave. She rubbed her eyes and shook herself to be sure she was awake; but it was no illusion; he was indeed standing there by his grave! She had no doubts that it was he—even at that distance she could mark his beard, his curly hair, and his broad shoulders. She could not see his face, which was in profile to her; but that beard, that curly hair she had loved as marks of his magnificent manhood, she would have known anywhere. He had on his shroud, and it seemed to her he was holding it up with one hand, so that it would not trip him. And then he turned slowly and looked at his own house, and it seemed to her that his eyes met hers, and gladness thrilled her through and through. She said: "Oh, my dear!" with a glad sob, and unlatched the window and flung it wide open and leaned out to call to him; but she found she was too agitated to call loudly, and she saw him turn round and walk across the grass towards the west. Mrs. Dishman declared when she saw him go in that direction, something told her where he was going. It was there Polly's grave was.

The graves, as Abner pointed out to me, are not fifty yards apart.

Mrs. Dishman declared that she was not in the least frightened, but she was extremely agitated, and her heart was still throbbing violently. She was now leaning out of the open window, and her sister's grave was nearer to her than her husband's, and she could see more distinctly. Her husband walked straight to Polly's grave and stood beside it, and she was sure in her own mind, although she could not hear, that he said something. And then a strange thing happened—Polly rose out of her grave to greet him. How it was, she did not know, Mrs. Dishman explained; she did not see her rise, but she saw nothing of her, and the next moment she was standing face to face with her brother-in-law, and of course she must have risen from her grave. It was too far off in that light to see plainly, but the living woman had no doubts. She had such a vivid recollection of her sister's appearance, she explained, that she would know her by her shape and size among a thousand. Polly also was in her shroud, and decay did not seem to have touched her. The looker-on was so amazed and agitated that she could not move, although the sleeves of her bedgown were becoming wet with the dew. The thought passed



“Who be they, mother?” asked the child in an awed whisper.”

through her mind, without seeming to her at the time at all ridiculous, that her two beloved ones out there must be cold on the wet grass. She was too agitated just then to question herself as to the meaning of this strange portent, and she could only watch helplessly and silently, save for her heart, which throbbed so violently that it seemed to her in the stillness of the night the two must hear it.

The dead stood facing each other for a minute or two, and Mrs. Dishman always solemnly affirmed that they had clasped each other's hands and were talking to each other, and she could tell by their ways that they were exceeding glad to be together. She was not near enough to see clearly, but she knew, she said, as well as a mortal woman could know anything, that they were smiling pleasantly at each other. It seemed to her

that now both were dead they could talk together and tell each other what had occurred to them, as two friends might who had been sundered, and she gave a sob as she wished she also were dead and could go and join in their pleasant converse. It felt to her at that moment the cruellest stroke of all that the two beings she loved could hold speech with each other, and she was debarred. It was as though she were dead and they were living.

She could take no account of time as she sat there watching them, but after a while they walked away together over the grass, hand in hand, as if they were going round to the church door, intensely glad, her heart told her, to be together. And then not feeling certain whether or not she was in her senses, she roused herself with an effort that caused her to sob again, and awakened her eldest child, who was nearly seven. The child cried a little at being awakened so abruptly, but she carried her to the window. "Look quick, my dear," she said, "look out yonder and tell mother what you can see. Don't be frightened; 'tiddn' dark."

Another few steps and the pair would have been hidden from view by a buttress, but the child could see them. "Who be they, mother?" asked the child in an awed whisper. "Be they robbers?"

"No, my dear," Lucy said, "'tis a man and woman walken about in the churchyard."

"How funny to be walken about in their nightdress!" said the child.

"'Tis white clothes they have on," said Lucy, in order not to frighten the child. "Come, I'll put you back in bed again. I thought you'd like to see 'em."

"Can daddy see 'em in his grave?" asked the girl.

"No; come back to bed, my pet," said Mrs. Dishman, feeling she could hear none of the child's questions about her father just then.

When the child was snug again, she went softly downstairs in her nightdress, put on her shoes, unlocked the door, and went quietly and quickly into the churchyard and up to the church door. A thought had crossed her mind as she was putting on her shoes that increased her agitation. She tried the church door, but found it locked, as she had expected, and she hurried round the church to the eastern end, and mounted on Sir Roger Davy's great square tombstone to look through the window. She affirmed that, though the tombstone was quite six

feet from the window, she could see the two white forms standing at the chancel-rails. She could not see distinctly, but there was no mistaking their white forms in the dark church, with the moonbeams shining faintly through the windows, she explained.

It seemed to her a long time that she waited there, and she pulled her nightdress closer to her shivering body. And then she wondered if she could lift herself up to the window, and essayed it, but had to give up the attempt. She climbed on the tomb again, but the two were no longer there. Fearing she had missed them, she held up her nightdress and ran round the church. There was no sign of her sister, but she was in time to see her husband standing by his grave and giving, she could take her oath, one last look at his home. The next moment he had disappeared. He went back to his coffin as easy as a stone drops into a pond, was her phrase.

In her state of mind the supernatural had no terrors for her, and she went up to both graves, but could see nothing. She called her husband softly, and waited a little while for a response. But the dead could hold no converse with the living, and with one or two dry sobs she went with reluctant feet back to her house, changed her sopping nightdress, and lay shivering in bed and almost weeping from excitement. And then suddenly, she said, the meaning of it all flashed into her mind. The strange happenings of that night had convinced her that the fondness of Polly for her husband and his for Polly was not common fondness, but "man-and-wife fondness"—that they had loved each other. Neither jealousy nor hatred of the dead entered into her thought, but only sorrow for them. She knew, she declared, that they had never actually made love to each other behind her back, she was convinced that no word nor overt act of love had ever taken place between them, but that they had closely guarded from each other and from everyone the love that burned deep in their hearts. But to the dead nothing is hidden, and on that night, when they both lay near each other, they knew of the passion that had been kindled in each other's breast. In the light of what had happened that night, Mrs. Dishman felt she could plainly read the past. She could understand now why Polly would not listen to the young men who tried to win her, and it was her secret love that loosened her hold on life and sent her into a decline, and she was convinced now that the poor girl did not take

an overdose of the narcotic by mistake. It made clear to her also why her husband was so cut up at Polly's death, and why ever

understand how he, the man of superb health and strength, had succumbed. His heart had not been in the struggle for life—nay, in all probability the illness would not have attacked him if the desire for life had been strong in him.

She did not sleep at all the rest of the night, and she cried again and again—not at her own sorrows, but in bewailing the fate of her two dear ones. She rose at her usual hour and said no word of the happenings of the night, when her friends expressed their sympathy as they noted how pale and weary she was. In the afternoon she lay down and slept for a couple of hours, for it was her intention to sit up again that night and keep watch on the churchyard. Not that she really expected to see them again, she explained afterwards, for they had met and been wed, and there was now no need for them to greet each other.

She kept up her vigil till dawn, and in the course of the following day told the story to the most intimate of her neighbours. Of course they would not believe it, and told her that in her grief she had dreamt it. But when she called her child to say what she had seen, they could maintain no longer that it was a dream. They had never heard such a tale, they said. What did she think was the meaning of it? It was sent as a sign, for certain. But for what? They wondered she had lived through the awful experience.

"Nonsense!" replied Mrs. Dishman. "Look zee, they was in love with one another in secret, and becoss they had to keep it secret it killed 'em both. They never done



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afterwards there was so little of his gay humour and cheerful laughter. As she looked back on the past fortnight, she could

not then wrong nor said not then wrong nor looked not then wrong, I be sure as I be a liven woman, or their spirits could never have



risen. "Twaddn' wickedness made 'em rise. They couldn' marry here on earth, but the first night they was together in the churchyard, Bill's spirit called to her spirit, and they met in church together and stood at the Communion-rails and was man and wife. I be Bill's wife here on earth and in the law, but in the next world Polly will be his wife, and if I don't marry agen, I shall be nobody's wife. 'Tis Poll he belongs to, pore maid. Nobody could ha' been more straightforward than they two, but it ate their hearts out in secret, and they was only happy people when they was dead. Innocent as little Arthur here, they was," caressing the baby, "and I'd 'low what happened Friday night was to make it up to them. If they'd done anything wrong, they'd never have been allowed to meet one another."

Mrs. Dishman's attitude was as amazing to her friends as her story, and they shook their heads and wondered if she would have to be sent to the asylum. What she had seen had turned her brain, it was plain. Mr. Jarman went to hear her story, and reproved her sharply for her views. He pointed out to her that the Scripture explicitly states that in the next world there is no marrying nor giving in marriage. Mrs. Dishman heard him in silence, but she was not shaken. "In spite of what the good man did say," she told her neighbours, "I don't believe it, else why did they two pore dears rise from their graves the first night and go to the altar-rails, which be the prapper place, and have their spirits married 'cos they couldn' on earth?" None of her neighbours could answer her.

Her friends could not understand how she could feel no bitterness against the dead, but

spoke of them with sympathy, tenderness, and regret. "I loved Bill," she said, "as a woman ought to love a good husband, and there never was a better; but I wish with all my heart that Polly had known him first, and then they both would have been liven. He wouldn' have fallen in love with me if he had known Polly first, and I med have been some other man's wife and had a sister and a brother-in-law."

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"Volks was quite excited about it, zur, vor wiks," said Abner, "and some were scared just about. Mat Kelway and Bob Jameson, and two or dree as allowed they waddn' afraid of no ghosts, kept a look out two or dree nights here, but they didn' see nothen. But then 'twaddn' meant vor them; and, besides, Lucy said they were at peace now. Some folks wouldn' pass by here vor months ayter dark. Nobody could help believe that Lucy zeed they two out of their graves. But 'tis a woman's tale, zur, and you can please yourself whether you believes it."

"And what became of her?" I asked.

"In six months or zo, zur, she married John Bilson, the dairyman at Crossland's varm. But she made him promise solemn that if she died vust, he wouldn' bury her in thease churchyard. She said thease was Bill's and Polly's ground, and she wouldn' make 'em uneasy. She died seven or eight years ago, and her husband had her buried at Buller."

"A remarkable story, Abner."

"'Tis true enough, zur. It made I feel quivery vor a bit when I was about alone at nights, but I never zeed nothen. 'Twas only meant vor Lucy to zee, I'd 'low."