

# THE BLIND GHOST.

By DORA GREENWELL McCHESNEY.



WHEN first I went to Stag Court, I thought the story of the ghost only one more artistic touch to complete the old-world charm of the place. It was right and fitting that such a house should have

a haunting story to harmonise with the shadows and subdued gleams of the oak panelling and tarnished Spanish leather of the walls, and the portraits which filled the long West Gallery with a sense of presence, intimate yet remote. As the days passed, however, and I grew familiar with the Jacobean mansion, I began to be troubled because the story was for ever an untold one. My friends had a trick of falling silent when I spoke of the legend, and none would even tell me in what shape or seeming the spectre appeared. One thing I did learn from a chance word: the phantom belonged to the house, not to the family. Stag Court had been owned by Royalists in the time of the Civil War, and had only passed into the hands of the Puritan Knightleys after sequestration. Somehow the fact that the ghost had an older claim on the place than had its living owners wrought strangely on my imagination, till I yielded to a fantastic, half-ashamed desire, and begged to pass a night in the "ghost's room." My friends demurred, but I was resolute. I remember that I even pleaded my nationality, confessed to a touch of that passion for ancient deeds and dreams which besets the American, that instinctive homesickness for the past known only to those in part disinherited.

It prevailed in the end, and found myself one evening sitting alone in the ghost's room, waiting, waiting for what I was sure could not happen. There was nothing gloomy or spectral about the beautiful chamber, though for so many years it had been set apart from all the warm, familiar usages of life. The walls were panelled with *intarsia* work, delicate inlaying of wood, such as I have seen often in Continental churches, but never,

I think, in a private dwelling. That must have been the whim of some "Englishman Italianate" in the time of James I. or Charles I., returning from his grand tour with his memory full of foreign fancies. The design was curious and intricate: a series of slender arches, within which, piled in deliberate disarray, were weapons, musical instruments, and drinking-vessels. All round the room were repeated these symbols of war, song, and revelry, yet no two panels were exactly alike. The wood used was in varying shades of warm brown and yellow, which responded readily to the gleam of candles on the chimney-piece and table and the glow of the great fire, so that all the room was steeped in a subdued but friendly light. There were no black and sudden shadows, no rustling folds of arras to cheat the mind into credulity and fear.

I drew my chair up beside the heavy table, which I had pushed away from its central position so that I could see the fire more easily. The seat I had chosen was a stiff, high-backed one, uncompromising in its rigidity. I did not intend to fall asleep and let a dream slip unawares among my memories of the night. Before me lay the three books I had brought—a curious assortment—a volume of Gibbon, chosen for its cool and trenchant scepticism as a sort of rebuke to superstition, "The Professor at the Breakfast Table" for companionship, and a new sensational novel of the kind to be read in breathless haste, in case the long, dark hours should weigh on me. I did not open any of them, but sat studying the elaborate *intarsia*, noting here a lute lying incongruously beside a classical lyre, there a magnificently wrought helmet such as were worn by the Italian *condottieri*, and observing the admirable perspective of the slender arches which framed the piles of spoil. It seemed grievous to abandon so interesting a room merely for sake of a legendary terror, and just as I was thinking so I turned sharply to look behind me.

There, a few paces away, stood the figure of a man, clearly revealed in the soft, even light; I could see every detail of his dress and bearing, and for a few moments I studied

him in an absorption too utter for fear. He was in the garb of King Charles's cavaliers—not buff coat and corset, but a suit of some rich, dark stuff, of a purple so deep that it was almost black. He wore no scarf nor sword, and his attire was disordered, the collar of delicate lace a little awry, and one of the long cuffs gone. All this I saw unconsciously, remembering it later, as I observed the fine lines of the figure, even though the man stood bending slightly forward, losing something of his height. At the time I was only aware of the face, a face of singular beauty, set in the stillness of desperate effort or endurance, the wide eyes, amber hued, terribly bright and fixed. They did not meet mine, nor did my strange visitant seem conscious of my nearness. He came forward, very slowly and hesitantly, yet with the tension of concentrated purpose in every faltering movement. Close beside my chair he passed, so near that by reaching out a hand I might have touched his cloak or brushed one of the long locks of chestnut hair falling disordered on his shoulders. I felt sure that I could have touched and felt them, for this form beside me was not shadowy, seemed no imponderable essence, but a spirit which mysteriously had gathered to itself something of human form and substance. Even as the thought formed itself in my mind it was grimly confirmed. The advancing figure had struck sharply against the corner of the table, winced, and drawn aside with a piteous, groping gesture. Realisation struck at my heart in a pang of indescribable compassion and terror: the ghost was blind.

My own eyes grew dim for a moment, and when I could see clearly again, he stood beside the chimney-piece, his face turned from me, passing his hands slowly along the smooth surface of the wall. He appeared to follow a straight line, his seeking fingers keeping always a little above the level of his shoulder, moving backwards and forwards, tirelessly yet wearily, from the chimney-piece to the angle of the wall. As I watched, it came home to me that the same blind, futile search had been made night after night, through all the slowly circling years, since that cavalier who stood there in so gallant yet so forlorn a guise had stood in living flesh, a man among men; that it would still be made without truce or rest till the groping hands had achieved their impossible work. It was not only pity for the darkened spirit which moved me, but a sense of the irrevocable and irremediable which concerned

my own soul no less intimately. For one instant of unendurable agony I looked, as he looked, into a black abyss, and saw there, as it were by an inner sight less tolerable than outer blindness, every sin and error of my life laid bare without hope of retrieval or atonement. In that heart-beat I knew what hell might be: the endless, hopeless effort to undo in the darkness evil wrought in the light.

Time is not in such an experience. It might have been moments or hours that I stared at the figure by the panelling. Then sharp on the stillness sounded the crack of a musket. The cavalier flung up his hands like a man mortally stricken, and—I was alone.

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No one asked me questions the next morning, and for a time I asked questions of none. The impression of the night's horror was too vivid, and I understood why those who had undergone the same ordeal took refuge in silence. But as the gloaming drew on, I found that I could not rest. I was sitting in the library, and Alicia, my friend's youngest daughter, a grave, reticent girl, was in the deep window-seat, bending to catch the last fading light on her book.

"Is nothing known of its story?" I asked abruptly, and did not need to explain of what I spoke.

Alicia turned where she sat, her face in shadow, a twilight glimmer making a halo of her fair hair, and in a low, troubled voice told me all that was recorded or divined. Not many people saw the ghost, and of those who did none had faced a second night in the haunted room. Nothing had ever been found in that room to account for the apparition: the walls had been vainly searched, by daylight, for traces of a hidden treasure or a secret door. It was believed that the phantom was that of a certain Sir Basil——, who had been a Royalist officer in the Civil War. Tradition had much to say of Sir Basil and of his deadly enmity with a lieutenant in his troop, a certain James Howe. Their hostility culminated when a Royalist garrison was betrayed to the Parliamentary soldiers under one Major Sandys, and the suspicion lay most darkly on the two fellow-officers. In the end Howe was convicted of treason, his life spared only that he might be publicly degraded and dismissed from the army. He enlisted again as a common soldier under a feigned name, and, a year later, so the story ran, brought out his enemy,

sorely hurt and unconscious, from the thick of a *mêlée*. Rescuer and rescued were made prisoners, and confined for a time in Sir Basil's own house of Stag Court, which had been seized and garrisoned for the Parliament. There the tale grew vague and confused; but one thing was certain: when Sir Basil came back to life, he was stone blind from the injury he had received in the fight.

Listening, I had to guess at what must have passed between those two men, fellow-soldiers, fellow-prisoners, mortal enemies, both in their different ways maimed beyond recovery. After a time Howe was released or taken to another prison, while Sir Basil remained, a blind captive in his own house. How, helpless as he was, he escaped from his guarded room was never known, but escape he did, and made his way to the panelled chamber which had been his own. There he was found, and, whether by deliberate intention or in the excitement of pursuit, was shot through the heart.

The gleam of the long English twilight had faded from the library before the story was ended, and I sat silent for a while in the gloom.

"Howe was my mother's name," I said then irrelevantly. "May I spend another night in the ghost's room?"

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If I felt no terror in the actual presence of the phantom on its first coming, I endured a sickness of dread as I waited for its return. I braced myself as if for the assault of bodily pain or peril, sitting stiffly in the big carved chair, gripping its arms with both hands. I made no pretence of reading, though a pile of books lay before me. Everything looked as it had done on my earlier vigil, except that I had pushed the table back to its former place, leaving the way to the chimney-piece free for the passing of that unguided seeker.

Suddenly, in a moment, he was there, moving forward stealthily, one hand outstretched, the beautiful, blind face set and straining. Once again a wave of darkness and horror swept over me, but it ebbed more quickly than before, leaving me forgetful of myself, lost in the sense of another's pain. Perhaps the story I had heard was working in my mind, but it seemed to me rather as though I read by some secret sympathy the thoughts of the tormented spirit beside me, felt the throb of its love and remorse and despair. I knew, though when the intense moment was past I could not explain my knowledge, that

between these two enemies, Sir Basil and his one-time officer, a great and strange friendship had grown in captivity, that for friendship's sake was carried on the desperate, darkling search—for what? Be it what it might, I could no longer endure to watch those delicate hands—such hands as Van Dyck painted—grope patiently along the unrevealing wood. With a girding up of my courage, a pang of passionate sympathy, I rose from my place, lifted a candle, and walked straight towards the wall by which the Royalist's figure yet stood. Shoulder to shoulder with that which was not of earth, I took up the quest which he had made in vain for three hundred years and more. My flesh shrank and cringed, but stronger than my dread was the compulsion of that other's need. Standing there, his anguish entered into me, his love, his remorse—for a sin of which I knew not—his sense of shame and helplessness, and his unswerving resolve to fight down even helplessness and shame. Always his hands moved along the surface of the wall at one level, and where he felt I looked. And there, at the apex of one of the inlaid arches, I saw, under the light of my candle, a tiny disc of slightly darker wood. So small it was as to be scarce visible, while to the touch it was wholly imperceptible. At the sight of it I forgot the terror and mystery which environed me in the sense of discovery. Setting my candle on the chimney-piece, I opened my knife, and pressed the blade hard on the marked spot. No sign at first, then a reluctant groan, and the panel slid a crack aside. I slipped my hand into the aperture, and pressed till the crack widened and a little hidden cabinet lay revealed, holding a handful of papers grey with the dust of generations. With a swimming brain and shaking hand, I drew them out. The dust flew up and blinded me, and the passing dimness of my sight sickened me with a panic. Then the yellowed ink and darkened paper grew clear to me, and I read. First a list of names, then a warrant for taking horses, then one or two documents which seemed to be concerned with lands and revenues. At last a letter, seal and severed silken cord still in place, the few lines of writing damningly plain: final instructions for carrying out the secret surrender already agreed on, addressed to Sir Basil—and signed Ferdinando Sandys.

Sudden loathing of the long-past treachery shook me. Sir Basil, then, had been the traitor and had laid the burden of his guilt on his private enemy. And then, in the revealing darkness and in the spiritual enfranchisement



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of captivity, he had come to know and love the man he had undone. What fire of torment must that guilt and that love together have kindled! Small wonder that it had urged him in life, had urged him after death, to that blind, baffled quest for the proof of his own shame and the honour of the foe that had grown a friend.

Now the proof lay clear in my hand, and I turned to confront the seeking spirit. Close to me he stood, every line of his face distinct, stamped with the agony of his long endurance, his ceaseless, frustrate endeavour. I knew that he felt my presence, heard my movement as one still in the flesh might have done, but could not see what I had found nor whether I understood. The blind eyes were straining towards me in a question, a fear, a desperate incredulous hope, the hope that after generations and centuries there should be laid bare—his own dishonour.

I could find no words at first, could find no voice nor breath; then—

"I have found it!" I cried. "Be at peace!" and I saw light break across the darkened face—but of that light I cannot speak.

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Only a student here and there took any interest in the brief note that appeared in two or three antiquarian journals righting a forgotten wrong and establishing the honour of an obscure soldier dead centuries ago. Even I, who know now that I have the blood of that disgraced Royalist in my veins, cannot care passionately for his late acquittal. It is more to me that an ancient enmity and ancient friendship are summed up in peace, that the panelled room at Stag Court is free of its ghostly visitant, and the blind eyes seek no more.

