

THE CLOSED DOOR.  
THE MYSTERY OF WYLDERNESS MANOR.

BY J. DOUGLAS HOLMS.

*Illustrated by Phil Green.*

THAT our lives are controlled by Fate is denied by many. Perhaps so, perhaps not. I cannot say. But this much I do know, that had I some few years ago not stopped at a print shop in Piccadilly and glanced at the engravings in the windows, there can be no doubt that I should have been spared one of the most terrible episodes of my life.

That I did stop and look at these engravings is a fact. That Fate ordained that I should do so is—well, an unpleasant hypothesis, the truth of which I am well content to leave unproved.

One engraving in particular attracted my attention—that of an old house almost entirely covered with ivy, and, if one might infer from the quaint peaked gables and the small latticed windows, evidently of considerable antiquity. There was an air of mystery about the house, standing as it did amidst surroundings neglected and uncared for, and encircled by

a deep moat over which an old-fashioned drawbridge gave access to a massive door, apparently the principal entrance to the dwelling.

Acting on a sudden impulse, I entered



"WHO ARE ALL THESE?" I SAID, POINTING AT THE PORTRAITS.

the shop and asked the proprietor if he could give me any information as to the original—if original there were—of the engraving. Curiously enough he was able to do so. The house was situated a mile or two from the village of —, in Hertfordshire, bore the name of Wylderness Manor, and was the property of Sir Geoffrey —.

I there and then made up my mind to run down to —, and see the place itself.

On the following day I did so. I returned to town delighted with the result of my journey. The house was all that the engraving had represented it to be. Better still, the landlord of the little village inn had volunteered the information that it had stood empty for some years, and that the owner wished to let it, together with about a thousand acres of land on which fair sport might be obtained.

"Why has it stood empty so long?" I asked. "Is anything wrong with the house?"

"No, but Sir Geoffrey hasn't troubled much to find a tenant, and never comes to the house himself, as he has another and much finer place in Yorkshire."

The answer seemed satisfactory.

The place was just what I wanted, not too large, yet with plenty of accommodation should I wish to ask a few friends to shoot. It was also near town, and convenient to run down to from Fridays till Mondays in summer.

A few days later I called on the agent, and finally left his office the master of Wylderness Manor for the next five years, at what seemed to me a very low rent for so beautiful and conveniently situated a place.

Towards the end of September, about a week before the expected arrival of two or three men whom I had asked to shoot over the covers, I found myself settled down in my new quarters.

After dinner I strolled into the library and began to examine the family portraits with which the walls were hung. Speculating as to the probable relation which one might have to another, I was suddenly apprised by an apologetic cough that there was someone in the room besides myself. I turned round. An old woman with pure white hair, dressed in an antique fashion, stood by the door. I recognised her in an instant as the housekeeper who had shown me over the house on the occasion of my first visit. Also I remembered that I had engaged her to remain on in that capacity

when I should take possession. She apologised for intruding, but she wished to know if I found everything comfortable. I assured her everything was quite satisfactory.

"Who are all these?" I asked, pointing at the portraits.

The old woman came further into the room, nothing loth to begin the recountal.

Handsome men, ugly men, women dark and fair, but, as I noticed, nearly all good-looking, she described them in detail, till the repetition of Sir Charles, Sir John, Sir Richard, became rather wearisome, and the recountal of the beauty and virtues of the dames scarcely less so. At last we paused before the portrait of a young woman of extreme beauty.

"Who was she?" I inquired.

The old woman shook her white head mournfully.

"You are not the first as has asked me that, sir," she said. "Perhaps 'tis because she's the prettiest of them all. Well, well, beauty, sir, as they say, is only skin deep. If she was the prettiest she was also the worst of the women of this house."

Was I mistaken, or did I, as the old woman uttered the words, hear a sound that seemed half sob, half moan?

I listened again. I heard nothing but the sigh of the wind as it swept through the branches of the great trees outside. What a strange fancy! Yet I had certainly thought I heard something different from the moaning of the wind.

I turned once more to listen to the old housekeeper, who was going on with her description as though *she*, at all events, had heard nothing.

"Poor young thing, poor child; no doubt she did wrong; yet they do say that her husband"—she pointed to the portrait of a dark, handsome man—"was hard and cruel to her. But whatever he did to her, she had no right to run away from him and bring disgrace on an old and honoured name."

Again, and surely not fancy this time, I heard that curious moaning sob, so clearly that I could not be mistaken.

"What was that? Did you hear it?" I asked hurriedly.

"What, sir?"

"That cry! Didn't you hear it?"

The old woman smiled. "Cry, sir? No, 'tis but the wind. Sure 'tis a rough night."

Yes, she was right. It must have been the wind; nevertheless I felt depressed in

the presence of the portraits of those who, years and years ago, had lived out their lives much as we live out ours, and who were now, without one solitary exception, all folded in the last and most terrible of all sleeps. So, bidding the housekeeper a rather unceremonious good night, I went upstairs to my bedroom.

Poking the fire into a cheerful blaze, I lit my pipe and threw myself into one of the large easy chairs standing on either side of the fireplace.

Somehow I felt restless and unsettled. As I sat looking into the glowing embers, the face of the child-wife whose sad history I had just listened to kept rising up before me. So young, so innocent-looking! Surely she could not have been as bad as was said!

I began in my own mind to weave a romance of a cruel husband, a much-oppressed wife, and a lover in all respects different from the husband; and I began to make excuses for the frailty of that young creature in running away from such a tyrant as I was by that time quite certain her husband must have been. Then I woke up to the conviction that I was taking a somewhat sentimental interest in people with whom and whose doings I was not, or need not to be, in any way concerned; also to the realisation that I was growing sleepy, and had better go to bed.

That night I dreamed a dream.

In my dream I found myself in a room which I knew I had never seen before. In that room I saw stretched on the floor the body of a woman, from a wound in whose

breast blood was flowing and forming a ghastly pool on the uncarpeted floor. Bending over her was a man. The cold, clear light of the moon, striking through the window, fell on his face.

Even in sleep I recognised that face. It was that of the man who had been pointed out to me as the dishonoured husband of a faithless wife. I saw him raise the fallen head of his victim. I looked at her face and I saw—the face of the wanton wife for



"ON THE FLOOR LAY THE BODY OF A WOMAN. BENDING OVER HER WAS A MAN WITH A DAGGER IN HIS HAND."

whom, for the sake of her young, bright beauty, I had felt pity and striven to make palliation.

Then, in my dream, I witnessed the last act in that ghastly tragedy. I have no words to describe it: silence is best.

With a shudder of terror, I awoke.

The warm rays of sunshine were playing on my bed. It was morning.

Rising, I dressed hurriedly, and went down to the dining-room.

It was, of course, ridiculous; but so

affected was I by the events of the preceding night, that my attempt at a breakfast was a miserable failure. I could only marvel



"I TRIED TO OPEN THE DOOR, BUT IT WAS FAST CLOSED."

at my own weakness in being thus shaken by what was, after all, only a dream. True, only a dream; but what a dream!

As the day wore on I became more myself again, and what with the interest of viewing my new domain, and arranging with the keeper as to the plan of campaign for the 1st, I all but forgot the horrifying vision that had so strangely unnerved me, and returned home fully prepared to make amends at lunch for my shortcomings at breakfast.

Luncheon over, I went to the smoking-room, where, tired out with my morning tramp, I fell fast asleep.

It what had happened to me in a dream

was horrifying, how much more dreadful the reality of my waking in that smoking-room! Opening my eyes on the fast darkening room, I had just realised that I must have been asleep for some time, when I heard a slight noise, as though the handle of the door was being turned. Then the door slowly opened, and footsteps—*footsteps, but no visible being*—crossed the room, paused for an instant beside me, then went as they came. The door closed noiselessly behind them!

Rigid with horror, I remained seated. Suddenly a spasm of apprehension seized me. Once more the door opened, but this time to admit nothing more terrifying than the old house-keeper. I suppose she must have read the horror in my face.

"Whatever is it, sir?" she cried. Then a paler shade crept over her already white face. "He has heard them," she said, in an undertone; "they come to everyone who dwells in this accursed house!"

As she spoke, and just as I was about to ask the meaning of her words, I heard light, firm footsteps swiftly descend the stairs, cross the hall, pass over the threshold of the open doorway, and come straight towards us.

By a strong effort of will I contrived to speak.

"Do you hear, Mrs. Matthews? Do you hear these footsteps?"

"Ay, sir," she answered, without a tremble in her voice. "I hear them. I have heard them this many a day."

As we spoke the footsteps moved again towards the door. A sudden impulse seized me. I would follow and see where these footsteps went.

So swiftly moved the unseen feet, that I had to run across the hall, up the staircase, through a long corridor, then up a narrow corkscrew stairway leading to the top of the house, till finally the footsteps seemed to pass through a door which interposed an effectual barrier to my further progress. I tried the door, but it was fast closed. No effort of mine could open it.

I went down again to the smoking-room. The housekeeper was standing just where I had left her.

Of information regarding the mysterious footsteps she could give me little, save that—I quote her words—“To all who ever live in this house they come sooner or later. To you they have come sooner than I have ever before known them; it was not till he had lived here for many a day that they came to Sir Geoffrey. Then he left the house, and has never come near it since.”

The door by which I had been stopped was, she told me, the entrance to a room in which lumber of all descriptions was stored. Into that room I determined I would go. But the door must first be broken open. To do this the services of a locksmith were necessary. Nothing could be done that night.

Early the following morning I got the village locksmith to come to the manor.

He looked not a little astonished when I led him to the door and bade him force it open. That was quickly done (more quickly than legally I have sometimes since thought), and on entering we found ourselves confronted with piles of boxes and lumber that it would take a considerable time to remove. Determined, however, that this must be done, I got some of the men from the stables, and set them to work.

It was just midday when they finished and sent word to me that all was ready.

Then I went upstairs, and, passing through the little knot of men standing round the door, entered the room.

The light of the outer world struggled

feebly through the dust with which the window panes were thickly coated. For a little time I could scarcely see anything. Then I began to make out the conformation of the room.

As I mechanically noticed the position of the mantelpiece, and the quaint oriel window that directly fronted the doorway, a curious sense of familiarity with my surroundings came over me.

“Was it—could it be? Yes, it was!”

With a sickening thrill of horror it was borne in upon me that I had in a dream seen that ghastly tragedy played out in that very room! Instinctively I looked at the floor. Covered though it was with the dust of years, I clearly saw a dark stain on the oaken boards upon the very spot where in that dream I had seen the murdered woman lying.

All in a moment explained itself to me. A murder had in truth been committed in



“I LOOKED UP THE CHIMNEY, BUT IMPENETRABLE DARKNESS MET MY GAZE.”

this room. That murder had been revealed to me in a vision.

Suddenly the termination of my dream

flashed on me. I stepped hastily across the room to the huge fireplace, and looked up the chimney, at the top of which, if there was no obstruction, I should see the sky overhead. It was as I had expected. Nothing but impenetrable darkness met my gaze!

What need to go into detail as to how we got the ghastly thing down. Suffice it to say that in the chimney, stuck fast midway, we found a leather sack, the contents of which when thrown on the floor emitted a rattling sound, the meaning of which I alone comprehended.

In the middle of that gloomy chamber, with the as yet unopened sack lying at our feet, I told the horror-stricken men of my dream and of the ghostly footsteps of the previous day. Then we opened the sack, and found but a few whitened bones as all that was mortal of the woman who, radiant and beautiful, had been accounted among the fairest of her day and generation.

Guilty she may have been, but not as was said, for thus, years after her death, it has been proved that she did not leave her home and husband, but fell by her husband's hand, urged thereto by madness and jealousy.

And lest some sceptic should say, "How do you know that these bones did not belong to someone else?" I would add that we found a ring in the sack which in massiveness and quaintness of design and setting is the very facsimile of the ring which flashes on the finger of the Lady Gwendoline as she is depicted in her portrait.

In conclusion, I would say that I believe my dream to have been something more than a dream—to have been, in fact, a revelation from the dead to the living. I advance this theory because I feel certain that the footsteps came to me thus quickly because the spirit of the murdered woman knew that I felt pity and compassion for her mournful story, and was willing that I should know that the stories of the living wronged the dead.

My story is finished. It is, perhaps, needless to say that I put off my guests and left Wylderness Manor never to return.

And I would that as easily as I left behind me its ivy-clad walls, I could leave behind me the memory of the ghastly vision that I there beheld, and of the dreadful reality that I there discovered.