



# THE LOST GHOST

BY MARY E. WILKINS-FREEMAN



RS. JOHN EMERSON, sitting with her needlework beside the window, looked out and saw Mrs. Rhoda Meserve coming down the street. She rose hurriedly,

ran into the cold parlor and brought out one of the best rocking-chairs. She was just in time, after drawing it up beside the opposite window, to greet her friend at the door.

"Good-afternoon," said she. "I declare, I'm real glad to see you. I've been alone all day. John went to the city this morning. I thought of coming over to your house this afternoon, but I couldn't bring my sewing very well. I am putting the ruffles on my new black dress skirt."

Mrs. Meserve settled herself in the parlor rocking-chair, while Mrs. Emerson carried her shawl and hat into the little adjoining bedroom. When she returned Mrs. Meserve was rocking peacefully and was already at work hooking blue wool in and out.

"Well, that's pretty work," said Mrs. Emerson, sitting down at the opposite window and taking up her dress skirt.

"Yes, it is real pretty work. I just *love* to crochet."

The two women rocked and sewed and crocheted in silence for two or three minutes.

"Well, what's the news?" said Mrs. Emerson presently.

"Well, I have got some news," said Mrs. Meserve. "Simon came home with it this noon. The old Sargent place is let."

Mrs. Emerson dropped her sewing and stared.

"Who to?"

"Why, some folks from Boston. The man has got considerable property. He's

got a wife and his unmarried sister in the family. The sister's got money, too. He does business in Boston. You know the old Sargent house is a splendid place."

"Yes, it's the handsomest house in town, but——"

"Oh, Simon said they told him about that and he just laughed. Said he wasn't afraid and neither was his wife and sister. Said he'd risk the ghosts rather than little tucked-up sleeping-rooms without any sun, like they've had in the Dayton house."

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Emerson, "it is a beautiful house, and maybe there isn't anything in those stories."

"Nothing in creation would hire me to go into a house that I'd ever heard a word against of that kind," declared Mrs. Meserve with emphasis. "I've seen enough of haunted houses to last me as long as I live."

Mrs. Emerson's face acquired the expression of a hunting hound.

"Have you?" she asked in an intense whisper.

"Yes, before I was married; when I was quite a girl."

Mrs. Meserve hooked up another loop of blue wool. Then she began:

"Of course, I ain't going to say positively that I believe or disbelieve in ghosts, but all I tell you is what I saw. It happened before I was married, when I was a girl and lived in East Wilmington. It was the first year I lived there. You know my family all died five years before that. I told you."

Mrs. Emerson nodded.

"Well, I went there to teach school, and I went to board with a Mrs. Amelia Dennison and her sister, Mrs. Bird. Abby, her name was; Abby Bird. She was a widow; she had

never had any children. She had a little money—Mrs. Dennison didn't have any—and she had come to East Wilmington and bought the house they lived in. It was a real pretty house, though it was very old and run down. It had cost Mrs. Bird a good deal to put it in order. I guess that was the reason they took me to board. I thought I was pretty lucky to get in there. I had a nice room, big and sunny and furnished pretty, the paper and paint all new, and everything as neat as wax. I had been there about three weeks before I found it out. I went there in September. I begun my school the first Monday. I remember it was a real cold fall; there was a frost the middle of September, and I had to put on my winter coat. I remember when I came home that night (let me see, I began school on a Monday, and that was two weeks from the next Thursday), I took off my coat downstairs and laid it on the table in the front entry. It was a real nice coat, heavy black broadcloth trimmed with fur; I had had it the winter before.

"Well, though it was hardly the middle of September, it was a real cold night. There was a fire in my little wood-stove. Mrs. Bird made it, I know. She was a real motherly sort of woman; she always seemed to be the happiest when she was doing something to make other folks happy and comfortable.

"Well, that night I sat down beside my nice little fire and ate an apple. There was a plate of nice early apples on my table. Mrs. Bird put them there. I was having a beautiful time, and thinking how lucky I was to have got board in such a place with such nice folks, when I heard a queer little sound at my door. It was such a little hesitating sort of sound that it sounded more like a fumble than a knock, as if some one very timid, with very little hands, was feeling along the door, not quite daring to knock. I said, 'Come in.'

"But nobody came in, and then presently I heard the knock again. Then I got up and opened the door, thinking it was very queer, and I had a frightened feeling without knowing why.

"Well, I opened the door, and the first thing I noticed was a draught of cold air, as if the front door downstairs was open, but there was a strange close smell about the cold draught. It smelled more like a cellar that had been shut up for years, than out-of-doors. Then I saw something. I saw

my coat first; the thing that held it was so small that I couldn't see much of anything else. Then I saw a little white face with eyes so scared and wistful that they seemed as if they might eat a hole in anybody's heart. It was a dreadful little face, with something about it which made it different from any other face on earth, but it was so pitiful that somehow it did away a good deal with the dreadfulness. And there were two little hands, spotted purple with the cold, holding up my winter coat, and a strange little far-away voice said, 'I want my mother.'

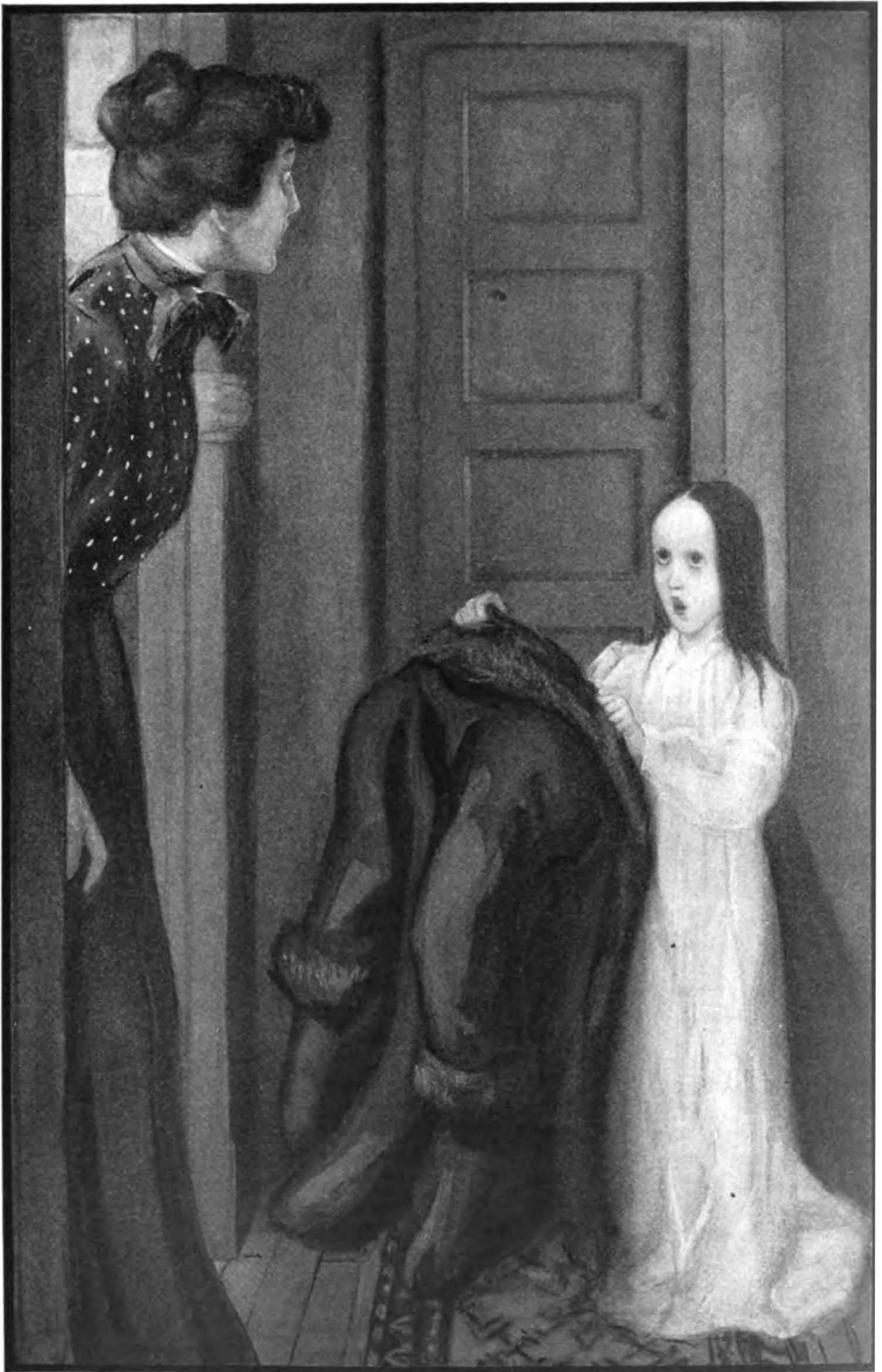
"'For Heaven's sake,' I said, 'who are you?'

"Then the little voice said again, 'I want my mother.'

"All the time I could smell the cold and I saw that it was about the child; that cold was clinging to her as if she had come out of some deadly cold place. Well, I took my coat, I did not know what else to do, and the cold was clinging to that. It was as cold as if it had come off ice. When I had the coat I could see the child more plainly. She was dressed in one little white garment. I could see dimly through it her little thin body mottled purple with the cold. Her face did not look so cold; that was a clear waxen white. Her hair was dark, but it looked as if it might be dark only because it was so damp, almost wet, and might really be light hair. It clung very close to her forehead, which was round and white. She would have been very beautiful if she had not been so dreadful.

"Then she went away. She did not seem to run or walk like other children. She flitted, like one of those little filmy white butterflies, that don't seem like real ones they are so light, and move as if they had no weight.

"Well, I thought for a moment I should faint away. The room got dark and I heard a singing in my ears. Then I stood in my door, and called first Mrs. Bird and then Mrs. Dennison. It seemed to me I should go mad if I didn't see somebody or something like other folks on the face of the earth. I thought I should never make anybody hear, but I could hear them stepping about downstairs, and I could smell biscuits baking for supper. Somehow the smell of those biscuits seemed the only natural thing left to keep me in my right mind. Finally I heard the entry door open and Mrs. Bird called back:



"A STRANGE LITTLE FAR-AWAY VOICE SAID, 'I WANT MY MOTHER.'"

"What is it? Did you call, Miss Arms?"

"Come up here; come up here as quick as you can, both of you," I screamed out; "quick, quick, quick!"

"I heard Mrs. Bird tell Mrs. Dennison: 'Come quick, Amelia, something is the matter in Miss Arms's room.' It struck me even then that she expressed herself rather queerly, and it struck me as very queer, indeed, when they both got upstairs and I saw that they knew what had happened.

"What is it, dear?" asked Mrs. Bird, and her pretty, loving voice had a strained sound.

"For Heaven's sake," says I, and I never spoke so before—"for Heaven's sake, what was it brought my coat upstairs?"

"What was it like?" asked Mrs. Dennison in a sort of failing voice, and she looked at her sister and her sister looked back at her.

"It was a child I have never seen here before. It looked like a child," says I, "but I never saw a child so dreadful, and it had on a nightgown, and said she wanted her mother. Who was it? What was it?"

"I thought for a minute Mrs. Dennison was going to faint, but Mrs. Bird hung onto her and rubbed her hands, and whispered in her ear (she had the cooingest kind of voice), and I ran and got her a glass of cold water. I tell you it took considerable courage to go downstairs alone, but they had set a lamp on the entry table so I could see. I don't believe I could have spunked up enough to have gone downstairs in the dark, thinking every second that child might be close to me. The lamp and the smell of the biscuits baking seemed to sort of keep my courage up, but I tell you I didn't waste much time going down those stairs, and out into the kitchen for a glass of water. I pumped as if the house was afire, and I grabbed the first thing I came across in the shape of a tumbler: it was a painted one that Mrs. Dennison's Sunday-school class gave her, and it was meant for a flower vase.

"Well, I filled it, and I ran upstairs. I felt every minute as if something would catch my feet, and I held the glass to Mrs. Dennison's lips, while Mrs. Bird held her head up, and she took a good long swallow; then she looked hard at the tumbler.

"Yes," says I, "I know I got this one, but I took the first I came across, and it isn't hurt a mite."

"Don't get the painted flowers wet," says Mrs. Dennison very feebly, "they'll wash off."

"I'll be real careful," says I. I knew she set a sight by that painted tumbler.

"The water seemed to do Mrs. Dennison good, for presently she pushed Mrs. Bird away and sat up. She had been laying down on my bed.

"She slid off the bed, and walked sort of tottery to a chair. 'I was silly to give way so,' says she.

"No, you warn't silly, sister," says Mrs. Bird. "I don't know what this means any more than you do, but whatever it is, no one ought to be called silly for being overcome by anything so different from other things which we have known all our lives."

"Mrs. Dennison looked at her sister, then she looked at me, then back at her sister again, and Mrs. Bird spoke as if she had been asked a question.

"Yes," says she, "I do think Miss Arms ought to be told—that is, I think she ought to be told all we know ourselves."

"That isn't much," said Mrs. Dennison with a dying away sort of sigh.

"No, there isn't much we do know," says Mrs. Bird, "but what little there is she ought to know. I felt as if she ought to when she first came here."

"Well, I didn't feel quite right about it," said Mrs. Dennison, "but I kept hoping it might stop, and anyway, that it might never trouble her, and you had put so much in the house, and we needed the money."

"And aside from the money, we were very anxious to have you come, my dear," says Mrs. Bird.

"Yes," says Mrs. Dennison, "we wanted the young company in the house; we were lonesome, and we both of us took a great liking to you the minute we set eyes on you."

"And I guess they meant what they said, both of them. They were beautiful women, and nobody could be any kinder to me than they were, and I never blamed them for not telling me before, and as they said, there wasn't really much to tell.

"They hadn't any sooner fairly bought the house, and moved into it, than they began to see and hear things. Mrs. Bird said they were sitting together in the sitting-room one evening when they heard it the first time. She said her sister was knitting lace and she was reading the *Missionary Herald* (Mrs. Bird was very much interested in mission work), when all of a sudden they heard something. She heard it first and she laid down her *Missionary Herald* and listened,

and then Mrs. Dennison she saw her listening and she drops her lace. 'What is it you are listening to, Abby?' says she. Then it came again and they both heard, and the cold shivers went down their backs to hear it, though they didn't know why. 'It's the cat, isn't it?' says Mrs. Bird.

"'It isn't any cat,' says Mrs. Dennison.

"'Oh, I guess it *must* be the cat; maybe she's got a mouse,' says Mrs. Bird, real cheerful, to calm down Mrs. Dennison, for she saw she was 'most scared to death, and she was always afraid of her fainting away. Then she opens the door, and calls, 'Kitty kitty, kitty.' They had brought their cat with them in a basket when they came to East Wilmington to live. It was a real handsome tiger cat, a tommy, and he knew a lot.

"'Well, she called 'Kitty, kitty, kitty,' and sure enough the kitty came, and when he came in the door he gave a big yawl that didn't sound unlike what they had heard.

"'But Mrs. Dennison, she eyed the cat, and she gave a great screech.

"'What's that? What's that?' says she.

"'What's what?' says Mrs. Bird, pretending to herself that she didn't see what her sister meant.

"'Somethin's got hold of that cat's tail,' says Mrs. Dennison—'somethin's got hold of his tail. It's pulled straight out, an' he can't get away. Just hear him yawl!'

"'It isn't anything,' says Mrs. Bird, but even as she said that she could see a little hand holding fast to that cat's tail, and then the child seemed to sort of clear out of the dimness behind the hand, and the child was sort of laughing then, instead of looking sad. She said that laugh was the most awful and the saddest thing she ever heard.

"'Well, she was so dumfounded that she didn't know what to do, and she couldn't sense at first that it was anything supernatural. She thought it must be one of the neighbor's children who had run away and was making free of their house, and was teasing their cat. So she speaks up sort of sharp.

"'Don't you know that you mustn't pull the kitty's tail?' says she. 'Don't you know you hurt the poor kitty, and she'll scratch you if you don't take care. Poor kitty, you mustn't hurt her.'

"'And with that she said the child stopped pulling that cat's tail and went to stroking her just as soft and pitiful, and the cat put

his back up and rubbed and purred as if he liked it. The cat never seemed a mite afraid, and that seemed queer, for I had always heard that animals were dreadfully afraid of ghosts; but then, that was a pretty harmless little sort of ghost.

"'Well, Mrs. Bird said the child stroked that cat, while she and Mrs. Dennison stood watching it, and holding onto each other; for, no matter how hard they tried to think it was all right, it didn't look right. Finally Mrs. Dennison she spoke.

"'What's your name, little girl?' says she.

"'Then the child looks up and stops stroking the cat, and says she wants her mother, just the way she said it to me. Then Mrs. Dennison she gave such a gasp that Mrs. Bird thought she was going to faint away, but she didn't. 'Well, who is your mother?' says she. But the child just says again 'I want my mother—I want my mother.'

"'Where do you live, dear?' says Mrs. Bird.

"'I want my mother,' says the child.

"'Everything she would say was, 'I want my mother.'

"'Then Mrs. Bird tried to catch hold of the child, for she thought in spite of what she saw that perhaps she was nervous and it was a real child, only perhaps not quite right in its head, that had run away in her little nightgown after she had been put to bed.

"'She tried to catch the child; she had an idea of putting a shawl around it and going out—she was such a little thing she could have carried her easy enough—and trying to find out to which of the neighbors she belonged. But the minute she moved toward the child there wasn't any child there; there was only that little voice seeming to come from nothing, saying, 'I want my mother,' and presently that died away.

"'Well, that same thing kept happening, or something very much the same. They never knew when they should come across that child, and always she kept saying over and over that she wanted her mother. They never tried talking to her, except once in a while Mrs. Bird would get desperate and ask her something, but the child never seemed to hear it; she always kept right on saying that she wanted her mother.

"'After they had told me all they had to tell about their experience with the child,

they told me about the house and the people that had lived there before they did. It seemed something dreadful had happened in that house. And the land agent had never let on to them. I don't think they would have bought it if he had, no matter how cheap it was, for even if folks aren't really afraid of anything, they don't want to live in houses where such dreadful things have happened that you keep thinking about them. I know after they told me I should never have stayed there another night if I hadn't thought so much of them, no matter how comfortable I was made, and I never was nervous either. But I stayed. Of course, it didn't happen in my room. If it had I could not have stayed."

"What was it?" asked Mrs. Emerson in an awed voice.

"It was an awful thing. That child had lived in the house with her father and mother two years before. They had come, or the father had, from a real good family. He had a good situation, he was a drummer for a big leather house in the city, and they lived real pretty, with plenty to do with. But the mother was a real wicked woman. She was as handsome as a picture, and they said she came from good sort of people enough in Boston, but she was bad clean through, though she was real pretty spoken, and 'most everybody liked her. She used to dress out and make a great show, and she never seemed to take much interest in the child, and folk began to say she wasn't treated right.

"The woman had a hard time keeping a girl. For some reason one wouldn't stay. They would leave and then talk about her awfully—tell all kinds of things. People didn't believe it at first; then they began to. They said that the woman made that little thing, though she wasn't much over five years old, and small and babyish for her age, do most all of the work. They said they'd seen her carrying in sticks of wood 'most as big as she was many a time, and they'd heard her mother scolding her. The woman was a fine singer, and had a voice like a screech-owl when she scolded.

"The father was away most of the time, and when that happened he had been away out West for some weeks. There had been a married man hanging about the mother for some time, and folks had talked some; but they weren't sure there was anything wrong, and he was a man very high up,

with money, so they kept pretty still for fear he would hear of it and make trouble for them; and of course nobody was sure, though folks did say afterward that the father of the child had ought to have been told.

"He set his eyes by his wife, too. They said all he seemed to think of was to earn money to buy things to deck her out in. And he about worshiped the child, too. They said he was a real nice man. The men that are treated so bad mostly are real nice men. I've always noticed that.

"Well, one morning that man that there had been whispers about was missing. He had been gone quite awhile, though, before they really knew that he was missing, because he had gone away and told his wife that he had to go to New York on business and might be gone a week.

"Then folks began to ask where was that woman, and they found out by comparing notes that nobody had seen her since the man went away.

"Well, there was this house shut up, and the man and woman missing, and the child. Then all of a sudden one of the women that lived the nearest remembered something. She remembered that she had waked up three nights running, thinking she heard a child crying somewhere, and once she waked up her husband, but he said it must be the Bisbee's girl, and she thought it must be. The child wasn't well and was always crying. It used to have colic spells, especially at night. So she didn't think any more about it until this came up, then all of a sudden she did think of it. She told what she had heard, and finally folks began to think they had better enter that house and see if there was anything wrong.

"Well, they did enter it, and they found that child dead, locked in one of the rooms. (Mrs. Dennison and Mrs. Bird never used that room; it was a back bedroom on the second floor.)

"Yes, they found that poor child there, starved to death, and frozen, though they weren't sure she had frozen to death, for she was in bed with clothes enough to keep her pretty warm when she was alive. But she had been there a week, and she was nothing but skin and bone.

"Mrs. Dennison said she couldn't really believe that the woman had meant to have her own child starved to death. Probably she thought the little thing would raise

somebody, or folks would try to get in the house and find her. Well, whatever she thought, there the child was dead.

"But that wasn't all. The father came home, right in the midst of it, the child was just buried, and he was beside himself. And—he went on the track of his wife, and he found her, and he shot her dead; it was in all the papers at the time; then he disappeared. Nothing had been seen of him since. Mrs. Dennison said that she thought he had either made 'way with himself or got out of the country, nobody knew, but they did know there was something wrong with the house."

"I never heard anything like it in my life," said Mrs. Emerson, staring at the other woman with awestruck eyes.

"But that ain't all," said Mrs. Meserve.

"Did you see it again?" Mrs. Emerson asked.

"Yes, I saw it a number of times before the last time. It was lucky I wasn't nervous or I never could have stayed there, much as I liked the place and much as I thought of those two women; they were beautiful women, and no mistake. I loved those women. I hope Mrs. Dennison will come and see me sometime.

"Well, I stayed, and I never knew when I'd see that child. I can't tell you how I dreaded seeing her, and worse than the seeing her was the hearing her say, 'I want my mother.' It was enough to make your blood run cold. I never heard a living child cry for its mother that was anything so pitiful as that dead one. It was enough to break your heart.

"She used to come and say that to Mrs. Bird oftener than any one else. Once I heard Mrs. Bird say she wondered if it was possible that the poor little thing couldn't really find her mother in the other world, she had been such a wicked woman.

"But Mrs. Dennison told her she didn't think she ought to speak so, nor even think so, and Mrs. Bird said she shouldn't wonder if she was right. Mrs. Bird was always very easy to put in the wrong. She was a good woman, and one that couldn't do things enough for other folks. It seemed as if that was what she lived on. I don't think she was ever so scared by that poor little ghost, as much as she pitied it, and she was 'most heart-broken because she couldn't do anything for it, as she could have done for a live child.

"It seems to me sometimes as if I should die, if I can't get that awful little white robe off that child and get her in some clothes and feed her and stop her wanting her mother,' I heard her say once, and she was in earnest. She cried when she said it. That wasn't long before she died.

"Now I am coming to the strangest part of it all. Mrs. Bird died very sudden. One morning—it was Saturday and there wasn't any school—I went downstairs to breakfast; there was nobody there but Mrs. Dennison. She was pouring out the coffee when I came in.

"Why, where's Mrs. Bird?" says I.

"Abby ain't feeling very well this morning," says she; 'there isn't much the matter, I guess, but she didn't sleep very well, and her head aches, and she's sort of chilly, and I told her I thought she'd better stay in bed till the house gets warm.'

"Maybe she's got cold," says I.

"Yes, I guess she has," says Mrs. Dennison. 'I guess she's got cold. She'll be up before long. Abby ain't one to stay in bed a minute longer than she can help.'

"Well, we went on eating our breakfast, and all at once a shadow flickered across one wall of the room and over the ceiling, the way a shadow will sometimes when somebody passes the window outside. Mrs. Dennison and I both looked out of the window; then Mrs. Dennison she gives a scream.

"Why, Abby's crazy," says she. 'There she is out this bitter cold morning, and—and——' She didn't finish, but she meant the child. For we were both looking out, and we saw, as plain as we ever saw anything in our lives, Mrs. Abby Bird walking off over the white snow-path with that child holding fast to her hand, nestling close to her as if she had found her own mother.

"She's dead," says Mrs. Dennison, clutching hold of me hard. 'She's dead; my sister is dead!'

"She was. We hurried upstairs as fast as we could go, and she was dead in her bed, and smiling as if she was dreaming, and one arm and hand was stretched out as if something had hold of it; and it couldn't be straightened even at the last—it lay out over her casket at the funeral."

"Was the child ever seen again?" asked Mrs. Emerson in a shaking voice.

"No," replied Mrs. Meserve, "that child was never seen again after she went out of the yard with Mrs. Bird."