

THE STORY OF THE INVISIBLE CAT

By RENÉ BACHE

Illustrated by J. Enright

THE circumstances under which I became the occupant of Ogle House were peculiar, and I frankly confess that I would have hesitated to move in had I been aware of its unpleasant reputation; for my wife was at that time in poor health, and anything likely to disturb her nerves was to be avoided.

However, my finances at that period had arrived at such a low ebb that the unexpected inheritance of the property by my wife, from an uncle who had so far disapproved of her marriage as to declare his intention to leave her a sixpence and nothing more, immediately suggested the idea of occupying it ourselves. Indeed, we could find no other use for it, inasmuch as the old manor-house was in such a condition of disrepair as to be unrentable.

I cannot help entertaining an impression that my worthy uncle by marriage was actuated by motives of malice, rather than of generosity, in leaving the estate to my wife. It had once been very valuable, but altered conditions made it practically worthless. He never occupied it himself, and from his point of view it was simply a burden in taxes.

The first difficulty we experienced was in securing a servant. Farmers' daughters in the neighbourhood, ordinarily available as domestic "helps," showed an indisposition to accept the employment I offered, and eventually one of them, more frank than the others, said bluntly that she "wouldn't work in no haunted house." This was decidedly enlightening, and led to inquiries which made me at length aware of the ominous repute of the establish-

ment. Nevertheless, we solved the servant problem eventually by hiring, from town, a very respectable woman, somewhat elderly, who declared that she was "afraid of nothing, from spooks to mice." To tell the truth, her statement only did her justice.

For the first few weeks of our tenancy of Ogle House we observed nothing that could endorse the supernatural reputation of the mansion. We were not disturbed in any way, and I decided that the reports on the subject were merely old wives' tales. My recollection is that more than a month elapsed before anything occurred to disturb this first impression. Meanwhile, we found ourselves fairly comfortable, though our supply of furniture by no means met the requirements of so large a mansion, and as a result one-half of the establishment remained empty, while we occupied the other half.

In describing a few of the phenomena observed in the Ogle mansion, I speak first of the moving lights, merely because they were brought earliest to my attention, and not on account of their importance. Indeed, at the present moment I have no more notion of their cause or significance than when I first observed them, and accordingly I will not attempt to enlarge on the subject, beyond mentioning that they were seen to shift at night from window to window of the untenanted part of the house, when watched from outside. As I ascertained from neighbourhood stories, they had been observed to do this for many years, and while the dwelling itself was supposed to be uninhabited. With the purpose of "laying the ghost," I explored on many nights the empty

rooms, but never did I succeed in capturing a "spook" of any sort.

The ghost of the late owner of the property was accountable for the disturbances, said the neighbours. He was, it seemed, a man of violent temper, and there were many reports of his cruelty, the most dreadful being the accusation that he had murdered his own daughter on account of a dispute with her respecting her lover, of whom he did not approve.

It may seem odd, in beginning an account of occurrences apparently involving intrusion by supernormal agency, to start with so commonplace a happening as the tumbling downstairs of my elder boy, who explained the accident by saying that he had tripped over a cat—a statement which, as I remember, rather surprised me at the time, inasmuch as we did not keep such an animal on the premises. My wife has always entertained that sort of horror of cats which, while unaccountable, is none the less a torture to those who suffer from it. The incident of the tumble might easily have passed without comment if it had not been repeated twice within the next three weeks. Children, of course, are apt to fall downstairs more or less frequently, and I would have been disposed to think little of the matter had it not been that it was always on the same flight that the boy fell, and each time he declared, with sobbing vehemence, that he had tripped over a cat. Obviously a child's notion, one would say, and as such I set it down; but I confess that I thought it very odd when soon afterwards my younger boy fell down the same flight of steps, and promptly declared that a cat had tripped him.

My elderly servant, Hannah, was of a very practical turn of mind. I never knew a woman of her class who had fewer notions than she—of the sort that arise from popular ignorance and misinformation. Often I found it advisable to consult her on important domestic

matters, my wife being at the time an invalid, and she always had sensible advice to give. Therefore, I was to some extent impressed by a communication which, one morning, she had to make about voices audible on the stairs. She declared that she was not in the least frightened, but that she had heard such voices on a number of occasions while on her way to bed.

A staircase, appropriately constructed, will serve the purpose of a whispering gallery, and I found no great difficulty in persuading the woman that what she had heard was merely an echo of voices in the occupied rooms. She appeared to accept this explanation, and two months passed before the matter was again brought to my attention. I was sitting one evening in my study writing, when at about eleven o'clock I heard Hannah's slippared footfall coming slowly up the stairs. It did not pass my door as usual, but paused, and presently she entered. I noticed that there was a peculiar expression on her face as she came in and put her candle on a chair, wiping her hands on her apron as was her wont when she had something of importance to say on any subject.

"Mr. Richards," she said, "there's something wrong."

"Something wrong, Hannah?" I queried, putting down my pen. "What is it, pray?"

"It's the voices on the stairs," she said. "I haven't wanted to bother you about them, and that's why I haven't spoken—barring what I said a few weeks back. But every night, coming up, I've heard the voices, and I'm sure there's something wrong."

I knocked the ashes out of my pipe, filled it again, lighted it, and gazed at Hannah with a profound attention. My conviction was that hers was a delusion of a mild type, to be treated with gentleness and consideration.

"Ghosts, eh, Hannah?" I inquired, soothingly.

THE IDLER

"It's almost the time," she went on, taking no notice whatever of my remark, "and I want to ask you to come and listen."

"Come and listen where?"

"On the stairs," said Hannah.

I took a reflective whiff or two at my pipe, and then, laying it down, I rose and followed.

It is the pride of the reasonable man that he is open to conviction, and so I made a point of waiving argument with Hannah. She offered me evidence, and I was bound to listen to it. Accordingly I placed myself in her hands, though I had a very indistinct notion of what she would be at.

My study was on the third floor, in the rear of the house, and inasmuch as gas, in common with most of the other "modern improvements," as they are termed in the newspaper advertisements, was lacking in this "elegant country residence," I took with me one of the two small oil lamps which had been employed to shed light upon my literary pursuits, while Hannah carried her candle. We descended one flight of stairs, and paused at the landing. It was one of those huge, old-fashioned hall-ways, commonly found in country mansions, which seem to have been designed for the reception of guests rather than as a mere accommodation for the household ladder.

Hannah indicated that we were to stop there at the top of the first flight, and I acquiesced without remark. Argumentatively speaking, my position was purely passive; if the good woman had any evidence to offer, I was there to accept it and judge of its value. There was little doubt in my mind that she was labouring under a delusion, however, and this impression was strengthened after we had waited fully ten minutes in vain for something to happen. It seemed such utter nonsense that, eager to get back to my writing and my pipe, I was on the point of declaring my unwillingness to

pursue the matter further, when suddenly Hannah grasped my arm forcibly.

Her action was unnecessary, for as she did so I distinctly heard a sound as of whispering, which seemed to come from the stairs just below us. It was unmistakably a whisper by human voices;—I could swear to that—and apparently two persons were speaking together, one hoarsely and angrily, and the other in terms of petition and deprecation. Some moments elapsed before I was able to make this out in detail, but I was sure there was no mistake; I could even perceive that one of the voices was that of a woman, while the harsh one was a man's. I have spoken of them as whispering, but it would be more correct to say that they were pitched in a very low tone, so as to be scarcely audible. Presently there was a dull and smothered sound, as if of something falling, and the voices ceased.

"That is the end," said Hannah to me, coolly. "Let us go back to your study, if you please, sir."

"I'm a poor sleeper, sir," Hannah explained, when we were once more in my den, "and that is why I go to bed so late. The whispering you've been listening to on the stairs goes on every night; it begins exactly at a quarter to twelve and lasts just so long. Then there is the fall—you know what I mean—and all is quiet afterwards. There's something wrong somehow, sir, and I believe it's a murder."

"A murder, Hannah!" I said, filling my pipe with fingers which I confess shook a little as I packed the tobacco into the bowl. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, sir, that there's been a murder done in this house, and the whispering on the stairs has something to do with it. Those were no living voices that we heard to-night."

I confess that I was upset. Indeed, I may frankly own that I felt a bit frightened. But I did not wish to



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acknowledge my weakness to Hannah, and so I said, "It seems to me you are letting your fancy run away with you. Why should you suppose that the voices have to do with a murder?"

"You have heard the story, sir?"

"About the killing of the girl by her father?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have heard of it, as the local rumour, presumably unfounded. But what of that? It has no necessary connection with the matter of which we are talking."

Hannah eyed me shrewdly, as if suspecting that I was not speaking with entire frankness.

"Did you understand anything of what the voices said on the stairs?" she asked, abruptly.

"I thought I caught a couple of words," I admitted, "but probably I was mistaken."

"The words were, 'Oh, papa,' weren't they?"

I confess that this question startled me. While listening at the stairs, I had understood nothing of what the voices said except this very exclamation, which, as it seemed to me, was uttered just before the ominous sound that closed the whispered colloquy. Hannah evidently perceived that she had made her point.

"Good night, sir," she said, picking up her candle, and there our conversation ended.

I was inclined to scoff at the ghosts when I awoke the next morning. It was only about 6 a.m., but the summer sun was bright outside, and the birds in the neglected garden twittered merrily, seeming to invite an early ramble; so I made a hasty toilet, and in five minutes was ready to start. My wife slept in an adjoining room, and for fear of disturbing her, I walked on tip-toe. On the landing at the top of the lower flight of stairs I noticed two or three spots of tallow that had dropped from Hannah's candle when we stood there a few hours

earlier, and I smiled to think of my own fears, while determining mentally that I would find out what freak of acoustics was accountable for the voices of the night.

I was, I say, in the midst of these reflections, and had got about half-way down the flight of stairs, when my foot struck something and I fell headlong. I could have sworn it was a cat—the contact was of a sort hardly to be mistaken—and the first thing I did on landing at the bottom was to curse the beast in no measured terms. Luckily, I was only bruised, and the always-useful Hannah was presently at hand with various "first aid" applications. Being sound sleepers, the other members of my family were not aroused by the noise.

"Perhaps you'll believe it now," said Hannah, as she prepared a bandage for my injured ankle.

"Believe what?" I replied, with a grunt of pain.

"About the cat."

"What about the cat? I fell over a cat, and if I catch the brute, I'll wring its neck."

"You'll never catch it, sir," said Hannah. "It's not the kind of a cat that can be caught."

"Another of your ghosts, perhaps," I suggested. "A spectral kitchen pet, eh?"

The old woman disdained to answer my question. Looking me in the eye, she said, "Did you see it, sir?"

"See the cat? No, I didn't, but I felt it. I struck it with my foot."

"Half-way up the flight?"

"Yes, just about, I should think."

"That's where it always sits," said Hannah, calmly. "You were coming down close by the wall, and not holding on to the banisters."

"How do you know that?"

"Because the cat sits near the wall on the eleventh step below the landing and never anywhere else."

"Hannah!" I exclaimed, fairly losing patience, "what is all this nonsense you are talking? If there is anything

mysterious, explain yourself, and I will listen to what you have to say. I warn you in advance, however, that I have no sympathy with your superstitions."

She took no notice of the sneer, but finished tying the bandage about my ankle. Then, helping me to a chair in the dining-room, which was just off the stairs, she sat herself down and began her story.

"You can't depend for truth," she said, "upon everything that's said in a neighbourhood. But if you pick up a bit here and there, and sift out the idle gossip, you can get at some facts after a while. Now that's what I've been doing ever since I came here first. You told me yourself that the place was supposed to be haunted, and I wanted to find out what was at the bottom of the stories.

"The first fact I got hold of was that Ogle House years ago belonged to an old gentleman called Colonel Dee, who had one child, a very pretty girl, named Mildred. He was extremely fond of her, but didn't approve of the young man she wanted to marry. There was a bitter quarrel, and it is said that the young lady threatened to run away, but it so happened that she was killed by falling downstairs, and that was the end. The gossips said that her father knocked her downstairs in a fit of anger and killed her. Maybe it was a lie, but her own maid, who still lives in the village, has told me that it was the truth.

"The Colonel was a man of great influence, and nobody ever ventured to speak openly of the suspicion against him. But people avoided him, and by-and-by he became a sort of hermit.

"For years and years the Colonel lived in this great house alone, with no companion except a very large grey cat, which had belonged to his daughter. When, on rare occasions, he was noticed walking in his garden, the animal was always with him. The gossips said it was an imp of Satan in disguise, and declared that at night it carried the lights which moved about from window

to window of the mansion. Maybe the Colonel wandered from room to room, being unable to sleep; but he's long dead, and the cat, too, I suppose, and yet the lights are still seen."

"That's a very interesting story, Hannah," I said, as she paused. "As a raconteur you have developed a skill which surprises me; but I confess that I do not quite catch your drift. The Colonel killed his daughter on the stairs—I wish they had been the back stairs, and not the front stairs—and hence, I suppose, the voices we imagined we heard last night. But how about the cat? Are we to infer that the Colonel's cat has anything to do with my cat—with the cat over which I have just tumbled so disastrously, which, as I suspect, you have been entertaining in the kitchen, notwithstanding the strict orders I gave you that all such animals were to be rigidly excluded?"

Hannah's eye met mine, and I felt that she knew I was "bluffing." The fact is, that I was trying, with rather poor success, to conceal my own apprehensions. I was nervous about the cat business, and I had not forgotten the mysterious voices of the previous night.

"Well, Hannah," I said, at length, in desperation, "you know more about ghosts than I do, and I leave the investigation entirely in your hands. You may conduct it as you please."

"Thank you for the permission, sir," replied Hannah. "I shall send for the carpenter, then, at once."

"For the carpenter! What for?"

"I want him to do a little job of work, sir," said Hannah.

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At about eleven o'clock that morning, while busy in my study, I was disturbed by noises below, and went to see what the matter was. To my surprise I discovered a carpenter in the act of tearing up a portion of the lower flight of stairs, while Hannah and my two boys gazed interestedly at the performance. I would have put a stop to it, but remem-

bered that I had given *carte blanche* for an investigation, which evidently was now proceeding. I noticed presently that only a single step was being taken up—the eleventh from the top of the flight—but owing to the unusual width of the staircase and to the weight of the oaken slabs composing it, some time was consumed in the operation.

My first impression, when the step was lifted, was that there was nothing but a mass of dirt beneath. Hannah, however, pushed the carpenter rudely aside, and brushed away with her hands what proved to be a quantity of *débris* covering something more substantial, namely, a box, which was presently revealed as a carefully made case of hard wood, two feet in length by a foot in width. It looked curiously like a child's coffin, being painted brown and provided with metal handles.

By this time I had begun to take an acute interest in what was going on, and I remember that I was much surprised when the box proved to have no fastening whatever, a fact I am unable to account for in view of the valuable nature of its contents. The latter—I will say, to avoid raising the reader's expectation too high—consisted of eighteen hundred pounds in gold, done up in three small canvas bags, and a few small bones, which we overlooked at first among the dust that had crept into the little chest and partly filled it. In one of the bags of gold coin, however, was a letter, much yellowed and in parts almost illegible. It read as follows:—

“Contained in this box are certain moneys in gold coin, which I hide away with the idea that, at a future time, affairs may so arrange themselves, perhaps, as to render such a hoard extremely useful to me, my landed estate having become almost worthless. If I put these savings to no employment before my own demise, however, it is my wish that the sum shall become the property of any future owner of Ogle House who may

chance to discover it. This I say in order that there may be no dispute over it in case it is found. I wish here to state—and, being a dead man at the time when this testimony is read, I can have no object in speaking falsely—that the cruel reports which have been circulated, to the effect that I murdered my dear daughter, are without foundation, save to the extent that I did threaten her with upraised hand, for which may God forgive me; and, being alarmed, she started backward on the stairs, falling over her pet cat, which was clinging to her skirts, and breaking her neck. Being guilty in so far, and pride forbidding explanations, I have preferred to accept popular odium rather than condescend to defend myself against so abominable a charge. My feeling has always been that I cared not for the friendship or regard of anybody who would for a moment deem me capable of such a deed. As for the cat of which I have spoken, its body is buried in this box, beneath the eleventh step.

“ANDREW DEE.”

The signature was that of Colonel Dee, the former owner of the property, from whose heirs my late lamented uncle bought the estate, probably with the notion that it would again become valuable. This, however, proved to be a mistake, and so it came about that he left Ogle House to my wife. I was glad to sell the old place for a price very little above the amount of the mortgage. But the eighteen hundred pounds in gold was “lucky money,” as it proved, and I managed so to multiply it by a series of fortunate investments that the wolf has never barked at my door since I moved out of the haunted mansion, which was shortly after the occurrences I have related. I always thought that Hannah was entitled to at least a part of the treasure, but she never could be persuaded to take any of it. She died, fifteen years later, in my service.