

The Lost Ghost

By Mary Wilkins-Freeman

Mrs. John Emerson, sitting with her needlework beside the window, looked out and saw Mrs. Rhoda Meserve coming down the street, and knew at once by the trend of her steps and the cant of her head that she meditated turning in at her gate. She also knew by a certain something about her general carriage--a thrusting forward of the neck, a bustling hitch of the shoulders--that she had important news. Rhoda Meserve always had the news as soon as the news was in being, and generally Mrs. John Emerson was the first to whom she imparted it. The two women had been friends ever since Mrs. Meserve had married Simon Meserve and come to the village to live.

Mrs. Meserve was a pretty woman, moving with graceful flirts of ruffling skirts; her clear-cut, nervous face, as delicately tinted as a shell, looked brightly from the plummy brim of a black hat at Mrs. Emerson in the window. Mrs. Emerson was glad to see her coming. She returned the greeting with enthusiasm, then rose hurriedly, ran into the cold parlour 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."

"Well, I didn't have a thing on hand except my crochet work," responded Mrs. Meserve, "and I thought I'd just run over a few minutes."

"I'm real glad you did," repeated Mrs. Emerson. "Take your things right off. Here, I'll put them on my bed in the bedroom. Take the rocking-chair."

Mrs. Meserve settled herself in the parlour 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.

"That's real pretty," said Mrs. Emerson.

"Yes, I think it's pretty," replied Mrs. Meserve.

"I suppose it's for the church fair?"

"Yes. I don't suppose it'll bring enough to pay for the worsted, let alone the work, but I suppose I've got to make something."

"How much did that one you made for the fair last year bring?"

"Twenty-five cents."

"It's wicked, ain't it?"

"I rather guess it is. It takes me a week every minute I can get to make one. I wish those that bought such things for twenty-five cents had to make them. Guess they'd sing another song. Well, I suppose I oughtn't to complain as long as it is for the Lord, but sometimes it does seem as if the Lord didn't get much out of it."

"Well, it'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. They were both waiting. Mrs. Meserve waited for the other's curiosity to develop in order that her news might have, as it were, a befitting stage entrance. Mrs. Emerson waited for the news. Finally she could wait no longer.

“Well, what’s the news?” said she.

“Well, I don’t know as there’s anything very particular,” hedged the other woman, prolonging the situation.

“Yes, there is; you can’t cheat me,” replied Mrs. Emerson.

“Now, how do you know?”

“By the way you look.”

Mrs. Meserve laughed consciously and rather vainly.

“Well, Simon says my face is so expressive I can’t hide anything more than five minutes no matter how hard I try,” said she. “Well, there is some news. Simon came home with it this noon. He heard it in South Dayton. He had some business over there this morning. The old Sargent place is let.”

Mrs. Emerson dropped her sewing and stared.

“You don’t say so!”

“Yes, it is.”

“Who to?”

“Why, some folks from Boston that moved to South Dayton last year. They haven’t been satisfied with the house they had there--it wasn’t large enough. The man has got considerable property and can afford to live pretty well. He’s got a wife and his unmarried sister in the family. The sister’s got money, too. He does business in Boston and it’s just as easy to get to Boston from here as from South Dayton, and so they’re coming here. 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 ghosts rather than little tucked-up sleeping-rooms without any sun, like they’ve had in the Dayton house. Said he’d rather risk SEEING ghosts, than risk being ghosts themselves. Simon said they said he was a great hand to joke.”

“Oh, well,” said Mrs. Emerson, “it is a beautiful house, and maybe there isn’t anything in those stories. It never seemed to me they came very straight anyway. I never took much stock in them. All I thought was--if his wife was nervous.”

“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 wouldn’t go into that house if they would give me the rent. 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, I have. I don’t want any more of it.”

“Before you came here?”

“Yes; before I was married--when I was quite a girl.”

Mrs. Meserve had not married young. Mrs. Emerson had mental calculations when she heard that.

“Did you really live in a house that was--” she whispered fearfully.

Mrs. Meserve nodded solemnly.

“Did you really ever--see--anything--”

Mrs. Meserve nodded.

“You didn’t see anything that did you any harm?”

“No, I didn’t see anything that did me harm looking at it in one way, but it don’t do anybody in this world any good to see things that haven’t any business to be seen in it. You never get over it.”

There was a moment’s silence. Mrs. Emerson’s features seemed to sharpen.

“Well, of course I don’t want to urge you,” said she, “if you don’t feel like talking about it; but maybe it might do you good to tell it out, if it’s on your mind, worrying you.”

“I try to put it out of my mind,” said Mrs. Meserve.

“Well, it’s just as you feel.”

“I never told anybody but Simon,” said Mrs. Meserve. “I never felt as if it was wise perhaps. I didn’t know what folks might think. So many don’t believe in anything they can’t understand, that they might think my mind wasn’t right. Simon advised me not to talk about it. He said he didn’t believe it was anything supernatural, but he had to own up that he couldn’t give any explanation for it to save his life. He had to own up that he didn’t believe anybody could. Then he said he wouldn’t talk about it. He said lots of folks would sooner tell folks my head wasn’t right than to own up they couldn’t see through it.”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t say so,” returned Mrs. Emerson reproachfully. “You know better than that, I hope.”

“Yes, I do,” replied Mrs. Meserve. “I know you wouldn’t say so.”

“And I wouldn’t tell it to a soul if you didn’t want me to.”

“Well, I’d rather you wouldn’t.”

“I won’t speak of it even to Mr. Emerson.”

“I’d rather you wouldn’t even to him.”

“I won’t.”

Mrs. Emerson took up her dress skirt again; Mrs. Meserve hooked up another loop of blue wool. Then she began:

“Of course,” said she, “I ain’t going to say positively that I believe or disbelieve in ghosts, but all I tell you is what I saw. I can’t explain it. I don’t pretend I can, for I can’t. If you can, well and good; I shall be glad, for it will stop tormenting me as it has done and always will otherwise. There hasn’t been a day nor a night since it happened that I haven’t thought of it, and always I have felt the shivers go down my back when I did.”

“That’s an awful feeling,” Mrs. Emerson said.

“Ain’t it? Well, 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 guess they thought it would help along a little. I guess what I paid for my board about kept us all in victuals. Mrs. Bird had enough to live on if they were careful, but she had spent so much fixing up the old house that they must have been a little pinched for awhile.

“Anyhow, they took me to board, and 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. Mrs. Dennison was one of the best cooks I ever saw, and I had a little stove in my room, and there was always a nice fire there when I got home from school. I thought I hadn't been in such a nice place since I lost my own home, until I had been there about three weeks.

"I had been there about three weeks before I found it out, though I guess it had been going on ever since they had been in the house, and that was most four months. They hadn't said anything about it, and I didn't wonder, for there they had just bought the house and been to so much expense and trouble fixing it up.

"Well, 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. Mrs. Bird called after me as I went upstairs that I ought not to leave it in the front entry for fear somebody might come in and take it, but I only laughed and called back to her that I wasn't afraid. I never was much afraid of burglars.

"Well, though it was hardly the middle of September, it was a real cold night. I remember my room faced west, and the sun was getting low, and the sky was a pale yellow and purple, just as you see it sometimes in the winter when there is going to be a cold snap. I rather think that was the night the frost came the first time. I know Mrs. Dennison covered up some flowers she had in the front yard, anyhow. I remember looking out and seeing an old green plaid shawl of hers over the verbena bed. 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. Mrs. Dennison told me she had always been so. She said she had coddled her husband within an inch of his life. 'It's lucky Abby never had any children,' she said, 'for she would have spoilt them.'

"Well, that night I sat down beside my nice little fire and ate an apple. There was a plate of nice apples on my table. Mrs. Bird put them there. I was always very fond of apples. Well, I sat down and ate an apple, and 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. For a minute I thought it was a mouse. But I waited and it came again, and then I made up my mind it was a knock, but a very little scared one, so 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 wishful 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 can't find my mother.'

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

"Then the little voice said again: 'I can't find 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 made very simply. It was a nightgown, only very long, quite covering her feet, and 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.

“‘Who are you?’ says I again, looking at her.

“She looked at me with her terrible pleading eyes and did not say anything.

“‘What are you?’ says I. 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. But she looked back from the head of the stairs. ‘I can’t find my mother,’ said she, and I never heard such a voice.

“‘Who is your mother?’ says I, but she was gone.

“Well, I thought for a moment I should faint away. The room got dark and I heard a singing in my ears. Then I flung my coat onto the bed. My hands were as cold as ice from holding it, and I stood in my door, and called first Mrs. Bird and then Mrs. Dennison. I didn’t dare go down over the stairs where that had gone. 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. I didn’t dare go over those stairs. I just stood there and called, and finally I heard the entry door open and Mrs. Bird called back:

“‘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’ 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, or that they knew of what nature the happening was.

“‘What is it, dear?’ asked Mrs. Bird, and her pretty, loving voice had a strained sound. I saw her look at Mrs. Dennison and I saw Mrs. Dennison look back at her.

“‘For God’s sake,’ says I, and I never spoke so before--’for God’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 again 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 couldn’t find 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 then 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 if you do."

"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.

"I'm all over it now," says she, but she was terribly white, and her eyes looked as if they saw something outside things. Mrs. Bird wasn't much better, but she always had a sort of settled sweet, good look that nothing could disturb to any great extent. I knew I looked dreadful, for I caught a glimpse of myself in the glass, and I would hardly have known who it was.

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

"No, you wasn'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. She looked as if she might faint away again any minute. She was a real delicate-looking woman, but it turned out she was a good deal stronger than poor Mrs. Bird.

"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 any way, that it might never trouble her, and you had put so much in the house, and we needed the money, and I didn't know but she might be nervous and think she couldn't come, and I didn't want to take a man boarder."

"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 (Mrs. Dennison made beautiful knitted 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.

"'There, sister, here he is; you see it was the cat,' says Mrs. Bird. 'Poor kitty!'

"'But Mrs. Dennison she eyed the cat, and she give 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, and she said that was a great deal worse. 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 neighbour's children who had run away and was making free of their house, and was teasing their cat, and that they must be just nervous to feel so upset by it. 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 can't find 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 can't find my mother--I can't find my mother.'

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

"'I can't find my mother,' says the child.

“Well, that was the way it was. Nothing happened. Those two women stood there hanging onto each other, and the child stood in front of them, and they asked her questions, and everything she would say was: ‘I can’t find 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 neighbours 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 can’t find my mother,’ and presently that died away.

“Well, that same thing kept happening, or something very much the same. Once in awhile Mrs. Bird would be washing dishes, and all at once the child would be standing beside her with the dish-towel, wiping them. Of course, that was terrible. Mrs. Bird would wash the dishes all over. Sometimes she didn’t tell Mrs. Dennison, it made her so nervous. Sometimes when they were making cake they would find the raisins all picked over, and sometimes little sticks of kindling-wood would be found laying beside the kitchen stove. They never knew when they would come across that child, and always she kept saying over and over that she couldn’t find her mother. They never tried talking to her, except once in awhile 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 couldn’t find 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 folks 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, telling 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 of the work, what there was done; they said the house used to look like a pig-sty when she didn’t have help. They said the little thing used to stand on a chair and wash dishes, and 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.

"But that was very easy to say; it wouldn't have been so easy to find anybody who would have been willing to tell him such a thing as that, especially when they weren't any too sure. 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 a while, 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, and not to worry if he didn't get home, and not to worry if he didn't write, because he should be thinking from day to day that he might take the next train home and there would be no use in writing. So the wife waited, and she tried not to worry until it was two days over the week, then she run into a neighbour's and fainted dead away on the floor; and then they made inquiries and found out that he had skipped--with some money that didn't belong to him, too.

"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; but three or four women remembered that she had told them that she thought of taking the child and going to Boston to visit her folks, so when they hadn't seen her around, and the house shut, they jumped to the conclusion that was where she was. They were the neighbours that lived right around her, but they didn't have much to do with her, and she'd gone out of her way to tell them about her Boston plan, and they didn't make much reply when she did.

"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 Bisbees' little 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. It looked as if the mother had locked her into the house when she went away, and told her not to make any noise for fear the neighbours would hear her and find out that she herself had gone.

"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 knew folks acted queer when they asked me how I liked it when we first came here,’ says Mrs. Dennison, ‘but I never dreamed why till we saw the child that night.’

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

“‘I thought you’d say so,’” said Mrs. Meserve. “‘You don’t wonder that I ain’t disposed to speak light when I hear there is anything queer about a house, do you?’”

“‘No, I don’t, after that,’” Mrs. Emerson said.

“‘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 got so I was very careful to bring everything of mine upstairs, and not leave any little thing in my room that needed doing, for fear she would come lugging up my coat or hat or gloves or I’d find things done when there’d been no live being in the room to do them. I can’t tell you how I dreaded seeing her; and worse than the seeing her was the hearing her say, ‘I can’t find 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 to 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 heartbroken 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 looking for 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, and Mrs. Bird wasn’t there; there was nobody 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.’ It was a very cold morning.

“‘‘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 up, then 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.”