

The Great Staircase at Landover Hall

By Frank R. Stockton

I was spending a few days in the little village of Landover, simply for the purpose of enjoying the beautiful scenery of the neighborhood. I had come up from Mexico because the weather was growing too warm in that region, and I was glad of the chance to vary my interesting and sometimes exciting travels with a little rest in the midst of this rural quiet.

It was early summer, and I had started out for an afternoon walk, when, just upon the outskirts of the village, my attention was attracted by a little group at a gateway which opened upon the road. There were two women and an elderly man. The women appeared to be taking leave of the man, and one of them frequently put her handkerchief to her eyes. I walked slowly, because I did not wish to intrude upon what seemed to be an affecting leave-taking; so when I reached the gate the women had gone, but the man was still standing there, looking after them.

Glancing over the low fence, I saw a very pretty grove, apparently not well kept, and some distance back, among the trees, a large, old house. The man was looking at me with a curiosity which country people naturally betray when they see a stranger, and, as I was glad to have someone to talk to, I stopped.

“Is this one of the old family mansions of Landover?” I asked. He was a good-looking man, with the air of a head gardener.

“It is not *one* of them, sir,” he answered; “it is the only one in the village. It is called Landover Hall, and the other houses grew up around it.”

“Who owns it?” I asked.

“That is hard to say, sir,” he said, with a grim smile; “though perhaps I could tell you in the course of a couple of weeks. The family who lived there is dead and gone, and everything in it is to be sold at auction.”

I became interested, and asked some questions, which the man was very willing to answer. It was an old couple who had owned it, he said. The husband had died the previous year, and the wife about ten days ago. The heirs were a brother and sister living out in Colorado, and, as they had never seen the house, and cared nothing about it, or about anything that was in it, they had written that they wished everything to be sold, and the money sent to them as soon as possible.

“And that is the way it stands,” said the old man. “Next week there is to be a sale of the personal property—a ‘vadoo’ we call it out here—and every movable thing in the house and grounds is to be sold to the highest bidder; and mighty little the things will bring, it’s my opinion. Then the house will be sold, as soon as anybody can be found who wants it.”

“Then there is no one living in the house at present?” said I.

“Nobody but me,” he answered. “That was the cook and her daughter, the chambermaid, who just left here. There is a black man who attends to the horses and cows, but he will go when they are sold; and very soon I will go too, I suppose.”

“Have you lived here long?” I asked.

“Pretty near all my life,” said he.

I was greatly interested in old houses, and I asked the man if I might look at the place.

“I have not had any orders to show it,” he said; “but, as everything is for sale, I suppose the sooner people see the household goods the better; there’s many a bit of old furniture,

candlesticks, and all that sort of thing, which strangers might like to buy. Oh, yes; you can come in if you like.”

I shall not attempt to describe the delightful hour I spent in that old house and in the surrounding grounds. There was a great piazza in front; a wide hall stretched into the interior of the mansion, with a large fireplace on one side and a noble staircase at the further end, a single flight of stairs running up to a platform, and then branching off on each side to the second floor. On the landing stood one of the tallest clocks I have ever seen. There were portraits on the walls, and here and there a sporting picture, interspersed with antlers and foxes' heads mounted on panels, with the date of the hunt inscribed beneath. There was an air of largeness and gravity about the furniture in the hall, which was very pleasing to me, and when I entered the long drawing room I found it so filled with books and bric-à-brac of the olden days, with many quaint furnishings, that, had I been left to myself, even the long summer afternoon would not have sufficed for their examination. Upstairs was the same air of old-fashioned comfort. The grounds—the grass rather long, and the bushes untrimmed—were shaded by some grand old trees, and beyond there were gardens and some green pasture-fields.

I did not take the walk that I had proposed to myself. When I left the old house I inquired the name of the agent who had charge of the estate, and then I went back to the village inn, where I sat communing with myself for the rest of the afternoon and all the evening.

I was not yet thirty, I had a good fortune, and I had travelled until I was tired of moving about the world. Often I had had visions of a home, but they had been very vague and fanciful ones. Now, for the first time in my life, I had seen a home for which I really might care; a house to which I might bring only my wearing apparel, and then sit down surrounded by everything I needed, not even excepting books.

Immediately after breakfast I repaired to the office of Mr. Marchmay, the lawyer who had charge of the property. I stayed there a long time. Mr. Marchmay took dinner with me at the inn, and in the evening we sent a telegram to Colorado. I made a proposition to buy everything for cash, and the price agreed upon between Mr. Marchmay and myself was considerably higher than could have been expected had the property been sold at auction. It is needless to say that my offer was quickly accepted, and in less than a week from the day I had first seen the old house I became its owner. The cook and the housemaid, who had retired in tears from its gateway, were sent for, and reinstated in their offices; the black man who had charge of the horses and cows continued to take care of them, and old Robert Flake was retained in the position of head gardener and general caretaker, which he had held for so many years.

That summer was a season of delight to me, and even when autumn arrived, and there was a fire in the great hall, I could not say that I had fully explored and examined my home and its contents. I had had a few bachelor friends to visit me, but for the greater part of the time I had lived alone. I liked company, and expected to have people about me, but so long as the novelty of my new possessions and my new position continued I was company enough for myself.

At last the holiday season came around, and I was still alone. I had invited a family of old friends to come and make the house lively and joyous, but they had been prevented from doing so. I afterward thought of asking some of my neighbors to eat their Christmas dinner in the old house, but I found that they all had ties and obligations of their own with which I should not seek to interfere. And thus it happened that late on Christmas eve I sat by myself before a blazing fire in the hall, quietly smoking my pipe. The servants were all in bed, and the house was as quiet as if it contained no living being.

For the first time since I lived in that house I began to feel lonely, and I could not help smiling when I thought that there was no need of my feeling lonely if I wished it otherwise. For several years I had known that there were mothers in this country, and even in other countries, who had the welfare of their daughters at heart, and who had not failed to let me know the fact; I had also known that there were young women, without mothers, who had their own welfare at heart, and to whom a young man of fortune was an object of interest; but there was nothing in these recollections which interested me in these lonely moments.

The great clock on the landing-place began to strike, and I counted stroke after stroke; when there were twelve I turned to see whether I had made a mistake, and if it were now really Christmas day. But before my eyes had reached the face of the clock I saw that I was mistaken in supposing myself alone. At the top of the broad flight of stairs there stood a lady.

I pushed back my chair and started to my feet. I know my mouth was open and my eyes staring. I could not speak; I doubt if I breathed.

Slowly the lady descended the stairs. There were two tall lamps on the newel-posts, so that I could see her distinctly. She was young, and she moved with the grace of perfect health. Her gown was of an olden fashion, and her hair was dressed in the style of our ancestors. Her attire was simple and elegant, but it was evident that she was dressed for a festive occasion.

Down she came, step by step, and I stood gazing, not only with my eyes, but, I may say, with my whole heart. I had never seen such grace; I had never seen such beauty.

She reached the floor, and advanced a few steps toward me; then she stopped. She fixed her large eyes upon me for a moment, and then turned them away. She gazed at the fire, the walls, the ceiling, and the floor. There came upon her lovely features an almost imperceptible smile, as though it gave her pleasure thus to stand and look about her.

As for me, I was simply entranced. Vision or no vision, spirit from another world or simply a mist of fancy, it mattered not.

She approached a few steps nearer, and fixed her eyes upon mine. I trembled as I stood. Involuntarily the wish of my heart came to my lips. "If—" I exclaimed.

"If what?" she asked, quickly.

I was startled by the voice. It was rich, it was sweet, but there was something in its intonation which suggested the olden time. I cannot explain it. It was like the perfume from an ancient wardrobe opened a hundred years after a great-grandmother had closed and locked it, when even the scent of rose and lavender was only the spirit of something gone.

"Oh, if you were but real!" I said.

She smiled, but made no reply. Slowly she passed around the great hall, coming so near me at one time that I could almost have touched her. She looked up at the portraits, stopping before some old candlesticks upon a bracket, apparently examining everything with as much pleasure as I had looked upon them when first they became mine.

When she had made the circuit of the hall, she stood as if reflecting. Fearful that she might disappear, and knowing that a spirit must be addressed if one would hear it speak, I stepped toward her. I had intended to ask her if she were, or rather ever had been, the lady of this house, why she came, and if she bore a message, but in my excitement and infatuation I forgot my purpose; I simply repeated my former words—"Oh, if you were but real!"

"Why do you say that?" she asked, with a little gentle petulance. "I am not real, as you must know. Shall I tell you who I was, and why I am here?"

I implored her to do so. She drew a little nearer the fire. "It is so bright and cheerful," she said. "It is many, many years since I have seen a fire in this hall. The old people who lived in this house so long never built a fire here—at least on Christmas eve."

I felt inclined to draw up a chair and ask her to sit down, but why need a ghost sit? I was afraid of making some mistake. I stood as near her as I dared, eagerly ready to listen.

"I was mistress of this house," she said. "That was a long, long time ago. You can see my portrait hanging there."

I bowed. I could not say that it was her portrait. An hour before, I had looked upon it as a fine picture; now it seemed to be the travesty of a woman beyond the reach of pigments and canvas.

"I died," she continued, "when I was but twenty-five, and but four years married. I had a little girl three years old, and the very day before I left this world I led her around this hall and tried to make her understand the pictures. That is her portrait on this other wall."

I turned, and following the direction of her graceful hand my eyes fell upon the picture of an elderly lady with silvered hair and benignant countenance.

"Your daughter?" I gasped.

"Yes," she answered; "she lived many years after my death. Over there, nearer the door, you may see the picture of her daughter—the plump young girl with the plumed hat."

Now, to my great surprise, she asked me to take a seat. "It seems ungracious," she remarked, "that in my own house I should be so inhospitable as to keep you standing. And yet it is not my house; it is yours."

Obedient to her command, for such I felt it to be, I resumed my seat, and to my delight she took a chair not far from me. Seated, she seemed more graceful and lovely than when she stood. Her shapely hands lay in her lap; soft lace fell over them, like tender mist upon a cloud. As she looked at me her eyes were raised.

"Does it distress you that this house should now be mine?" I asked.

"Oh, no, no," she answered, with animation; "I am very glad of it. The elderly couple who lived here before you were not to my liking. Once a year, on Christmas eve, I am privileged to spend one hour in this house, and, although I have never failed to be here at the appointed time, it has been years, as I told you, since I saw a fire on that hearth and a living being in this hall. I knew you were here, and I am very glad of it. It pleases me greatly that one is living here who prizes this old place as I once prized it. This mansion was built for me by my husband, upon the site of a smaller house, which he removed. The grounds about it, which I thought so lovely, are far more lovely now. For four years I lived here in perfect happiness, and now one hour each year something of that happiness is renewed."

Ordinarily I have good control of my actions and of my emotions, but at this moment I seemed to have lost all power over myself; my thoughts ran wild. To my amazement, I became conscious that I was falling in love—in love with something which did not exist; in love with a woman who once had been. It was absurd; it was ridiculous, but there was no power within me which could prevent it.

After all, this rapidly growing passion was not altogether absurd. She was an ideal which far surpassed any ideal I had ever formed for the mistress of my home. More than that, she had really been the mistress of this house, which was now my home. Here was a vision of the past, fully revealed to my eyes. As the sweet voice fell upon my ears, how could I help looking upon it as something real, listening to it as something real, and loving it as something real.

I think she perceived my agitation; she looked upon me wonderingly.

"I hoped very much," she said, "that you would be in this hail when I should come down tonight, but I feared that I should disturb you, that perhaps I might startle or—"

I could not restrain myself. I rose and interrupted her with passionate earnestness.

"Startle or trouble me!" I exclaimed. "Oh, gracious lady, you have done but one thing to me tonight—you have made me love you! Pardon me; I cannot help it. Do not speak of impossibilities, of passionate ravings, of unmeaning words. Lady, I love you; I may not love you as you are, but I love you as you were. No happiness on earth could equal that of seeing you real—the mistress of this house, and myself the master."

She rose, drew back a little, and stood looking at me. If she had been true flesh and blood she could not have acted more naturally.

For some moments there was silence, and then a terrible thought came into my head. Had I a right to speak to her thus, even if she were but the vision of something that had been? She had told me of her husband; she had spoken of her daughter; but she had said no word which would give me reason to believe that little girl was fatherless when her mother led her around the hall and explained to her the family portraits. Had I been addressing my wild words of passion to one whose beauty and grace, when they were real and true, belonged to another? Had I spoken as I should not have spoken, even to the vision of a well-loved wife? I trembled with apprehension.

"Pardon me," I said, "if I have been imprudent. Remember that I know so little about you, even as you were."

When she answered there was nothing of anger in her tone, but she spoke softly, and with, I thought, a shade of pity.

"You have said nothing to offend me, but every word you have spoken has been so wild and so far removed from sense and reason that I am unable to comprehend your feelings."

"They are easy to understand!" I exclaimed. "I have seen my ideal of the woman I could love. I love you; that is all! Again I say it, and I say it with all my heart: Would you were real! Would you were real!"

She smiled. I am sure *now* she understood my passion. I am sure she expected it. I am sure that she pitied me.

Suddenly a change of expression came over her face; a beaming interest shone from her eyes; she took some steps toward me.

"I told you," said she, speaking quickly, "that what you have said seems to be without sense or reason, and yet it may mean something. I assure you that your words have been appreciated. I know that each one of them is true and comes from your heart. And now listen to me while I tell you—" At that moment the infernal clock upon the landing-place struck one. It was like the crash of doom. I stood alone in the great hall.

The domestics in that old house supposed that I spent Christmas day alone; but they were mistaken, for wherever I went my fancy pictured near me the beautiful vision of the night before. She walked with me in the crisp morning air; I led her through the quiet old rooms, and together we went up the great staircase and stood before the clock—the clock that I had blessed for striking twelve and cursed for striking one. At dinner she sat opposite me in a great chair which I had had placed there—"for the sake of symmetry," as I told my servants. After what had happened, it was impossible for me to be alone.

The day after Christmas old Mr. Marchmay came to call upon me. He was so sorry that I had been obliged to spend Christmas day all by myself. I fairly laughed as I listened to him.

There were things I wanted him to tell me if he could, and I plied him with questions. I pointed to the portrait of the lady near the chimney-piece, and asked him who she was.

“That is Mrs. Evelyn Heatherton, first mistress of this house; I have heard a good deal about her. She was very unfortunate. She lost her life here in this hall on Christmas eve. She was young and beautiful, and must have looked a good deal like that picture.”

I forgot myself. “I don’t believe it,” I said. “It does not seem to me that that portrait could have been a good likeness of the real woman.”

“You may know more about art than I do, sir,” said he. “It has always been considered a fine picture; but of course she lived before my time. As I was saying, she died here in this hall. She was coming downstairs on Christmas eve; there were a lot of people here in the hall waiting to meet her. She stepped on something on one of the top steps—a child’s toy, perhaps—and lost her footing. She fell to the bottom and was instantly killed—killed in the midst of youth, health, and beauty.”

“And her husband,” I remarked, “was he—”

“Oh, he was dead!” interrupted Mr. Marchmay. “He died when his daughter was but a mere baby. By the way,” said the old gentleman, “it seems rather funny that the painting over there—that old lady with the gray hair—is the portrait of that child. It is the only one there is, I suppose.”

I did not attend to these last words. My face must have glowed with delight as I thought that I had not spoken to her as I should not. If I had known her to be real, I might have said everything which I had said to the vision of what she had been.

The old man went on talking about the family. That sort of thing interested him very much, and he said that, as I owned the house, I ought to know everything about the people who formerly lived there. The Heathertons had not been fortunate. They had lost a great deal of money, and, some thirty years before, the estate had passed out of their hands and had been bought by a Mr. Kennard, a distant connection of the family, who, with his wife, had lived there until very recently. It was to a nephew and niece of old Mr. Kennard that the property had descended. The Heathertons had nothing more to do with it.

“Are there any members of the family left?” I asked.

“Oh yes!” said Mr. Marchmay. “Do you see that portrait of a girl with a feather in her hat? She is a granddaughter of that Evelyn Heatherton up there. She is an old woman now and a widow, and she it was who sold the place to the Kennards. When the mortgages were paid she did not have much left, but she manages to live on it. But I tell you what you ought to do, sir: you ought to go to see her. She can tell you lots of stories of this place, for she knows more about the Heathertons than anyone living. She married a distant cousin, who had the family name; but he was a poor sort of a fellow, and he died some fifteen years ago. She has talked to me about your having the old house, and she said that she hoped you would not make changes and tear down things. But of course she would not say anything like that to you; she is a lady who attends to her own business.”

“Where does she live?” I asked. “I should like, above all things, to go and talk to her.”

“It is the third house beyond the church,” said Mr. Marchmay. “I am sure she will be glad to see you. If you can make up your mind to listen to long stories about the Heathertons you will give her pleasure.”

The next day I made the call. The house was neat, but small and unpretentious—a great drop from the fine hall I now possessed.

The servant informed me that Mrs. Heatherton was at home, and I was shown into the little parlor—light, warm, and pleasantly furnished. In a few minutes the door opened, and I rose, but no old lady entered.

Struck dumb by breathless amazement, I beheld Evelyn Heatherton coming into the room!

I could not understand; my thoughts ran wild. Had someone been masquerading? Had I dreamed on Christmas eve, or was I dreaming now? Had my passionate desire been granted? Had that vision become real? I was instantly convinced that what I saw before me was true and real, for the lady advanced toward me and held out her hand. I took it, and it was the hand of an actual woman.

Her mother, she said, begged that I would excuse her; she was not well and was lying down. Mr. Marchmay had told them that I was coming, and that I wanted to know something about the old house; perhaps she might be able to give me a little information.

Almost speechless, I sat down, and she took a chair not far from me. Her position was exactly that which had been taken by the vision of her great-grandmother on Christmas eve. Her hands were crossed in her lap, and her large blue eyes were slightly upraised to mine. She was not dressed in a robe of olden days, nor was her hair piled up high on her head in bygone fashion, but she was Evelyn Heatherton, in form and feature and in quiet grace. She was some years younger, and she lacked the dignity of a woman who had been married, but she was no stranger to me; I had seen her before.

Encouraged by my rapt attention, she told me stories of the old house where her mother had been born, and all that she knew of her great-grandmother she related with an interest that was almost akin to mine. "People tell me," she said, "that I am growing to look like her, and I am glad of it, for my mother gave me her name."

I sat and listened to the voice of this beautiful girl, as I had listened to the words which had been spoken to me by the vision of her ancestress. If I had not known that she was real, and that there was no reason why she should vanish when the clock should strike, I might have spoken as I spoke to her great-grandmother. I remained entranced, enraptured, and it was only when the room began to grow dark that I was reminded that it was incumbent upon me to go.

But I went again, again, and again, and after a time it so happened that I was in that cottage at least once every day. The old lady was very gracious; it was plain enough that her soul was greatly gratified to know that the present owner of her old home—the house in which she had been born—was one who delighted to hear the family stories, and who respected all their traditions.

I need not tell the story of Evelyn and myself. My heart had been filled with a vision of her personality before I had seen her. At the first moment of our meeting my love for her sprung into existence as the flame bursts from a match. And she could not help but love me. Few women, certainly not Evelyn Heatherton, could resist the passionate affection I offered her. She did not tell me this in words, but it was not long before I came to believe it.

It was one afternoon in spring that old Mrs. Heatherton and her daughter came to visit me in my house—the home of their ancestors. As I walked with them through the halls and rooms I felt as if they were the ladies of the manor, and that I was the recipient of their kind hospitality.

Mrs. Heatherton was in the dining room, earnestly examining some of the ancestral china and glass, and Evelyn and I stood together in the hall, almost under the portrait which hung near the chimney-piece. She had been talking of the love and reverence she felt for this old house. "Evelyn," said I, "if you love this house and all that is in it, will you not take it, and have it for your own? And will you not take me and love me, and have me for your own?"

I had my answer before the old lady came out of the dining-room. She was reading the inscription on an old silver loving-cup when we went in to her and told her that again Evelyn Heatherton was to be the mistress of the old mansion.

We were married in the early winter, and after a journey in the South we came back to the old house, for I had a great desire that we should spend the holidays under its roof.

It was Christmas eve, and we stood together in the great hall, with a fire burning upon the hearth as it had glowed and crackled a year before. It was some minutes before twelve, and, purposely, I threw my arms around my dear wife and turned her so that she stood with her back to the great staircase. I had never told her of the vision I had seen; I feared to do so; I did not know what effect it might have upon her. I cared for her so earnestly and tenderly that I would risk nothing, but I felt that I must stand with her in that hall on that Christmas eve, and I believed that I could do so without fear or self-reproach.

The clock struck twelve. "Look up at your great-grandmother, Evelyn," I said; "it is fit that you should do so at this time." In obedience to my wishes her eyes were fixed upon the old portrait, and, at the same time, looking over her shoulder, my eyes fell upon the vision of the first Evelyn Heatherton descending the stairs. Upon her features was a gentle smile of welcome and of pleasure. So she must have looked when she went out of this world in health and strength and womanly bloom.

The vision reached the bottom of the stairs and came toward us. I stood expectant, my eyes fixed upon her noble countenance.

"It seems to me," said my Evelyn, "as if my great-grandmother really looked down upon us; as if it made her happy to think that—"

"Is this what you meant?" said I, speaking to the lovely vision, now so near us.

"Yes," was the answer; "it is what I meant, and I am rejoiced. I bless you and I love you both," and as she spoke two fair and shadowy hands were extended over our heads. No one can hear the voice of a spirit except those to whom it speaks, and my wife thought that my words had been addressed to her.

"Yes," said my Evelyn; "I mean that we should be standing here in her old home, and that your arm should be around me."

I looked again. There was no one in the hall, except my Evelyn and myself.