

A Ghost Story

By Ada Trevanion

There are many incidents on record which resemble the following plain narrative, and in the books of wise men may be found attempts, more or less plausible, to account for similar facts without having recourse to anything supernatural. The reader will draw his own inferences. It is for me simply to relate the whole history, from the beginning to the end, only premising that it is true in every particular.

Some years ago my father sent me to Woodford House, a young ladies' school, of which a Mrs. Wheeler was the principal. The school had fallen off, before I went, from fifty pupils to thirty; yet the establishment was in many respects a superior one, and the teachers were very efficient.

Mrs. Wheeler and a parlor-boarder, with the two teachers, Madame Dubois and Miss Winter, and we thirty girls, composed the household. Miss Winter, the English teacher, slept in a small room adjoining ours, walked out with us, and never left us. She was about twenty-seven years of age, and had soft, thick, brown hair, and peculiar eyes, of which I find it difficult to give a description. They were of a greenish brown, and, with the least emotion, seemed to fill, as it were, with light, like the flashing brilliancy of moonshine upon water. At half past six in the morning it was her duty to call us, and about seven we came down stairs. We practiced our scales, and looked over the lessons we had prepared the evening before, till half past eight o'clock, when Mrs Wheeler and Madame Dubois made their appearance; then prayers were read, and after that we had breakfast of coffee, and solid squares of bread and butter, which was very good the first part of the week. Breakfast over, Mrs. Wheeler took her seat at the head of the table, and the business commenced.

Mrs. Wheeler was a tall, stout person, with a loud voice, and a very authoritative manner. She paid assiduous attention to our deportment, and we were often assured that she was gradually falling a victim to the task of entreating us to hold up our heads.

Madame Dubois was a little old, shriveled woman, with a very irascible temper. She wore a turban on her head, and kept cotton in her ears, and mumbled her language all to mash. At one o'clock Mrs. Wheeler shut up her desk, and sailed out of the room, while we proceeded up-stairs to dress for our walk. The dinner was ready on our return at three. This was a plain meal, soon over; and after it Miss Winter took Mrs. Wheeler's place at the long table, and presided over our studies until tea at seven. I thought this interval the pleasantest part of the day, for Miss Winter was clever, and took great pains where she saw intelligence or a desire to learn. I was less with her, however, than I many of the girls, because, as one of the elder pupils, I was expected by Mrs. Wheeler to practice on the piano for at least three hours daily. The study was a large, uncarpeted room, with a view of a spacious flower-garden. Some part of most fine spring and summer days was spent in this garden. I liked being there better than going for a walk, because we were not compelled to keep together. I used to take a book, and when the weather was not too cold I sat much near a fountain, under the shade of a laburnum-tree which hung over it. I wonder if the fountain and laburnum-tree are there still.

Woodford House was rather famous for mysterious inmates. There was Mrs. Sparkes, the parlor-boarder, who always took her breakfast in her room, and was rumored to have come by sea from a distant part of the earth, where she and the late Captain Sparkes (her husband) had

rolled in gold. It was understood that, if she had her rights, she would be worth fifty thousand a-year. I am afraid she had them not, for I suspect her annual income amounted to little more than five hundred. She was very good-natured, and we all liked her; but our vague association of her with the sea, and storms, and coral reefs, occasioned the wildest legends to be circulated as her history. Then there was a fair pale girl, with bright curling hair, who, we found out, or thought we found out, was the daughter of a father who did not like her. She was a very suggestive topic; so was a young Italian, who had in her possession a real dagger, which many of us believed she always carried about her. But I think all these were outshone, on the whole, by Miss Winter, who never talked about her relations, called at the post-office for her letters, in order that they might not be brought to the school; and, further, had a small oak wardrobe in her room, the key of which she wore around her neck. What a life she had with some of the girls! and how lonely she was, too! for she belonged neither to Mrs. Wheeler nor to us; and it was impossible to be on very friendly terms with Madame Dubois.

Poor Miss Winter! I never troubled her with impertinent questions; and perhaps she felt grateful to me for my forbearance; for my companions, one and all, declared that she "favored Ruth Irvine." I was not popular among them, because I studied on half-holidays, and in the hour before bed-time, when we were left to our own devices. They tried to laugh me out of this; but they couldn't; so they hated me as school-girls only can hate, and revenged themselves by saying that "my father was poor, and I was, for this reason, anxious to make the most of my time while at Woodford House." This taunt was intended to inflict severe mortification, as a profound respect for wealth pervaded the school, which was, of course, derived from its head.

I suspect I over-studied at this period, for I became a martyr to excruciating headache, which prevented me from sleeping at night; and I had, besides, all kinds of awkward habits and nervous affections. O! Mrs. Wheeler's earnest endeavors to make me graceful; her despair of my elbows; her hopelessness in my shoulders, and her glare of indignation at my manner of entering a room!

I spent the summer vacation this year at Woodford House, for my father was abroad, and I had no relation kind enough to take pity on my homeless state. I was very dispirited: and my depression so much increased the low, nervous fever which was hanging about me, that I was compelled for some days to keep my bed. Miss Winter nursed me of her own accord, and was like a sister to me. Now that the other girls were gone she was quite communicative. I learned that she was an orphan, and had a brother and three sisters, all younger than herself, who were used to consult her on every occasion of importance. I liked to hear about them much; I believed them to be wonders of talent and kindness. The brother was a clerk in some mercantile house in the city; the sisters were being educated at a private school. The affection which united her to this brother and these sisters seemed to me to be stronger than either death or life.

The teachers' holidays never began until long after ours; but in the long vacation they were allowed to take pedestrian excursions; and Miss Winter would return from these to my sick chamber, laden with mosses and wild flowers. I used to feel it a great consolation, amid the neglect and contempt of others, that she was attached to me. When the day for her departure came she gave me Coleridge's "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner;" and I was to keep it always, and never to forget her if I never saw her again. I do not think she spoke thus because she felt any foreboding of ill, for she was very happy in her quiet way; but she never allowed herself to look forward with much hope to the future. I got a letter from her to say that she had arrived safely at her brother's in the city, and begging me not to fret for her sake. I tried to be cheerful, but time passed wearily without her. Every morning, at breakfast, I heard for the twentieth time of Miss Nash, who so appreciated the advantage of spending the vacation with such a person as Mrs.

Wheeler that she could scarcely be induced to leave Woodford House. *She* never complained that the piano in the back parlor had several dumb notes, or that Rollin's "Ancient History" was not the most cheerful specimen of polite literature. It was uncharitable; but I couldn't help it; I hated Miss Nash. The latter part of the day was more agreeable; I was usually invited to tea and supper by Mrs. Sparkes, and was regaled in the front parlor with seed-cake and rolls, likewise with currant wine. I should have enjoyed these entertainments exceedingly, but I had written a poem in four cantos, in which the late Captain Sparkes figured as a pirate, and was shot for a voluminous catalogue of atrocities; and this secret lay like a load of lead on my mind, and prevented me from feeling at my ease with Mrs. Sparkes. It was after an evening spent with this lady, and in the absence of Mrs. Wheeler, who had gone to the city to arrange about receiving a new pupil, that—*that it first happened*.

It was a still, sultry night; the moon very bright. I was lying in my narrow, white bed, with my hair disordered all over the pillow; not just falling asleep, by any means, but most persistently and obstinately broad awake, and with every sense so sharpened that I could distinctly hear the flow of the fountain without, and the ticking of the clock in the hail far down below. I had left the door of my chamber open, on account of the heat. Suddenly, at midnight, when the house was profoundly silent, a draught of cold air seemed to blow right into the room; and almost immediately after I heard the sound of a footfall upon the stairs. Sleep seemed many thousand miles farther off than ever, or I should have thought I was dreaming; for I could have declared the step was Miss Winter's; and yet I knew that she was not expected back for at least a fortnight. What could it mean? While I listened and wondered the footsteps drew nearer and nearer, and then suddenly halted. I looked around, and beheld at the foot of the bed the form of my friend! She was attired in the plain dark dress she usually wore; and I could see on the third finger of her left hand the sparkle of a ring, which was also familiar to me. Her face was very pale, and had, I thought, a strange, wistful expression. I noticed, too, that the bands of hair which shaded her forehead looked dark and dank, as if they had been immersed in water. I started up in my bed, extending my arms, and exclaiming, "You here! When did you come? What has brought you back so soon?" But there was no answer, and she was gone the next moment. I was startled, almost terrified, by what I have described. I felt an indefinite fear that something was wrong with my friend. I arose, and passing through her chamber, which was unoccupied, went above and below, looking for her, and softly calling her by name; but every room I entered was empty and silent; and I presently returned to bed, bewildered and disappointed.

Toward morning I grew drowsy, and a little before my usual hour for rising I fell asleep. When I awoke the bright sunlight was shining in through the window. I heard the servants at their work below, and was sure that it was very late. I was dressing hurriedly, when the door was softly opened. It was Mrs. Sparkes.

"I would not have you disturbed," she said; "for I heard you walking about last night. I thought, as it was holiday-time, that you should sleep when you could."

"O, thank you," I replied, scarcely able to restrain my impatience. "Where is Miss Winter, Mrs. Sparkes?"

She looked surprised at the question, but answered, without hesitation,

"With her friends, no doubt. We need not expect her for this fort-night yet, you know."

"You are jesting," I said, half offended. "I know that she is returned. I saw her last night."

"You saw Miss Winter last night!"

"Yes," I answered; "she came into my bed-room."

“Impossible!” and Mrs. Sparkes burst out laughing, “unless she have the power of being in two places at once. You have been dreaming.”

“I could not dream,” I said; “for I was broad awake. I am sure I saw Miss Winter. She stood at the foot of my bed, and looked at me; but she would not tell me when she came, or what had brought her back so soon.”

Mrs. Sparkes still laughed. I said no more on the subject, for I thought there was some mystery, and she was trying to deceive me.

That day passed. I was little inclined to sleep, though I was very tired when night came. I kept thinking about Miss Winter, and wondered if she would come again. After I had been in bed a few hours I became terribly nervous; the slightest sound made my heart leap. Then the thought came into my head that I would get up and go down stairs. I slipped on a few things, and softly left my room. The house was so silent, and everything looked so dusky that I felt frightened, and went on trembling more than before. There was a long passage in a line with the school-room, and there was a glass door at one end of it, which opened upon the garden. I stood at this door for several minutes, dreamily watching the silvery light which the moon threw upon the dark trees and the sleeping flowers without. While thus engaged I grew contented and serene. I had turned, to creep back to bed, when I heard, as I thought, some person trying the handle of the door behind me. The sound soon ceased; yet I almost believed the door was opened, for a rift of wind blew through the passage which made me shudder. I stopped, and looked hurriedly back. The door was closely shut, and the bolt still fast; but standing in the moonlight, where I had lately stood, was the slight figure of Miss Winter! She was as white, and still, and speechless as she had been on the preceding night; it almost seemed as if some dreadful misfortune had struck her dumb. I wished to speak to her, but there was something in her face which daunted me; and besides the fever of anxiety I was in began to dry up my lips, as if they would never be able to shape any words again. But I moved quickly toward her, and bent forward to kiss her. To my surprise and terror her form vanished. A cry escaped me, which must have alarmed Mrs. Sparkes, for she came running down stairs in her nightdress, looking pale and frightened. I told her what had happened, and very much in the same way that I have just been telling it now. There was an expression of uneasiness on her face as she listened. She said kindly, “Ruth, you are not well to-night; you are very feverish and excited. Go back to bed, and before tomorrow morning you will forget all about it.”

I returned to bed; but I did not next morning forget what I had seen on the previous night; on the contrary, I was more positive than before. Mrs. Sparkes was disposed to think that I had seen Miss Winter in a dream on the first night, and that on the second, when broad awake, I had been unable to divest myself of the idea previously entertained. However, at my earnest and often repeated request, she promised she would pass the coming night with me in the girl’s sleeping-room. All that day she was most kind and attentive. She could not have been more so if I had been seriously unwell. She put all exciting books out of my way, and asked me from time to time if my head ached. In the evening, after supper, she showed me some engravings which had belonged to her husband. I was very fond of pictures. We remained looking at them till a late hour, and then we went to bed. Tired as I was, I could not sleep. Mrs. Sparkes said she should stay awake also; but she soon became silent, and I knew by her breathing that she was sound asleep. She did not rest long. At midnight the room, which had been oppressively warm, grew suddenly cold and draughty; and again I heard Miss Winter’s known step on the stairs. I laid hold of Mrs. Sparkes’s arm, and shook her gently. She was sleeping heavily, and awoke slowly, as it seemed to me; but she sat up in bed, and listened to the approaching steps. I shall never forget

her face at that moment. She seemed to be beside herself with terror, which she tried to hide, and uncertain what it would be the best for her to do; she caught my hand at last, and held it so tightly that she quite hurt me. The steps drew nigh, and halted, as they had done before. Mrs. Sparkes's gaze followed mine to the foot of the bed. The form of my friend was there. I can scarcely expect to be credited. I can only state on my honor what followed.

A night-lamp was burning in the room, for Mrs. Sparkes never slept in the dark. Its light showed me the pale still face of Miss Winter more clearly than I had seen it on the previous nights. The features were like those of a corpse. The eyes fixed direct on me, the long-familiar, grave, shining eyes. I see them now; I shall see them till I die! O how sad and earnest they looked! A full minute, or it seemed so, did she gaze in silence; then she said, in a low, urgent tone, still looking through me with her eyes, "Ruth, the oak wardrobe in the room which was mine, contains papers of importance, papers which will be wanted. Will you remember this?"

"I promise that I will," I replied. My voice was steady, though the cold drops stood on my brow. The restless, wistful look in her eyes changed, as I spoke, to a peaceful and happy expression. So, with a smile upon her face, she passed away. No sooner had Miss Winter's form disappeared than Mrs. Sparkes, who had been silent only because she was paralyzed with terror, began to scream aloud. She did more: she sprang out of bed, and rushed round the foot of it, out on the landing. When she could make the servants attend her she told them that somebody was in the house; and all the women, a cook and two housemaids, went armed with pokers and shovels, and examined every room from cellar to attic. They found nothing, neither in the chimneys nor under the beds, nor in any closet or cupboard. And as the servants went back to bed I heard them agree what a tiresome and wearying thing it was when ladies took fancies. Mrs. Sparkes wanted to leave the house the next day; but the thought of the ridicule to which she should expose herself, if the matter oozed out, induced her to summon up her courage, and remain where she was.

The morning after Mrs. Wheeler returned. She and Mrs. Sparkes were talking together in the study for a long while. I could not help wondering what they were talking about, and so anxious did I feel that I could not settle to anything. At last the door opened, and Mrs. Sparkes came out. I heard her say distinctly: "It is the most shocking thing I have ever heard. She was a painstaking young person, and you will miss her sadly." At the sound of the opening door, with a sudden determination, I had rushed down-stairs, and was within a few steps of the study as Mrs. Sparkes came out.

Mrs. Wheeler was sitting at the table, with an open newspaper before her. She looked grave and shocked. After making some inquiries about my health, she said, "You will be sorry to hear Miss Winter will not return—an able teacher, and I believe you were much attached to her." She was going on; but I interrupted her with a wild cry—"Miss Winter is dead!" said I, and I swooned away.

It was noon when I awoke, and saw Mrs. Sparkes bending over me, as I lay on my bed, and trying to restore me. I begged her to tell me everything, and she did so. My dear friend was indeed no more. The story of her death was, like all the sad stories I have ever heard told in real life, very—very short. She had left the house where her sisters were lodging, late one evening; that was the last time they saw her alive. She had been found dead, lying along the rocks under the cliff. This was all that there really was to tell. There was nobody near her when she was found, and no evidence to show how she came there.

I cannot remember what happened for some days afterward, for I was seriously ill, and kept my bed; and often in the long nights I would lie awake, thinking about my friend, and fancying she would appear again. But she came no more.

Time passed on, and brought the last day of the vacation. I was sitting by myself in the study, Mrs. Wheeler and Mrs. Sparkes having both gone out, when a servant ushered in a strange gentleman, who, when I told him that Mrs. Wheeler was from home, immediately asked for Miss Irvine. On hearing that I was the person inquired for, he requested five minutes' conversation with me. I showed him into the back parlor, and waited, rather surprised and nervous, to hear what he had to say. He was a young man, not more than twenty-one or twenty-two years of age, and had a very grave manner; and though I was certain that he was a stranger, yet there was something in his face which seemed not altogether unfamiliar to me. He began by saying:

"You were very fond of a teacher who was here, of the name of Winter. In her name and for her sake, I thank you for the love and kindness you showed her."

"You knew Miss Winter, sir?" I asked, as calmly as I could.

"I am her brother," he replied.

There was silence between us, for the tears had sprung to my eyes at the mention of my dear lost friend's name; and, I believe, at heart he was crying too. At last he mastered his feelings, and by an effort resumed his former calm manner. "I have been for this last week seeking for some papers which my poor sister must have left behind her, and always seeking them in vain," he said. "If you could give me any clew to where they may be, you would do a great kindness to my remaining sisters and myself."

He still spoke calmly; but there was a look in his eyes which showed me that he was suffering terrible anxiety. I hastened to relieve it by saying: "I have reason to think that you will find the papers you are in want of in a small oak wardrobe which belonged to dear Miss Winter. If you please, I will show you where it stands."

How his face lighted as he rose to follow me! his lips moving evidently with voiceless but thankful words on them.

We went up-stairs to the room that had been his sister's, where I pointed out the piece of furniture to which she had referred me on that dreadful night. And after using some considerable force, the lock yielded to his determined hand; and there, concealed under a false bottom, in one of the drawers, were the papers he sought for. When he had taken them from the secret ledge, he turned to me, and said, "How much do you think these papers are worth to me?"

"Indeed, I can't tell," I replied; "but thank God you came hither to seek them, for I am so glad they are found."

"I thank you," he said; "I thank you, with all my heart."

We went down-stairs again into the parlor; and then he told me how a kinsman of theirs, who was very rich, but nevertheless a great miser, had borrowed a large sum of money from their dead father, which he now refused to repay, and was even wicked enough to deny he had ever received; how they had gone to law about the matter; and how, if the papers he had just found could not have been produced, he and his sisters would have been penniless; but as it was, they would recover the sum to which they were justly entitled, with interest for five years.

After this he begged my acceptance of a locket containing some of my dear Miss Winter's hair, and with her Christian name and the date of her death inscribed upon it; and bade me remember, if I should ever be friendless or in distress (which he prayed God I might never be) that he felt toward me as a brother. I was quite overcome, and hid my face on the table. When I looked up again he was gone.

A fresh surprise awaited me. The next day I met Mrs. Wheeler as she was coming to bid me go into the parlor; and her manner was so gracious that I obeyed her without fear. My dear father was there. He was so shocked at my ill looks that he resolved to remove me home without loss of time. I sought out my poor friend's grave, and made it as beautiful as I could with grass and flowers. There was no tombstone there then, but there is one now.