

# The Red-Haired Girl

*A Wife's Story*

By S. Baring-Gould

In 1876 we took a house in one of the best streets and parts of B—. I do not give the name of the street or the number of the house, because the circumstances that occurred in that place were such as to make people nervous, and shy—unreasonably so—of taking those lodgings, after reading our experiences therein.

We were a small family—my husband, a grown-up daughter, and myself; and we had two maids—a cook, and the other was house- and parlourmaid in one. We had not been a fortnight in the house before my daughter said to me one morning. Mamma, I do not like Jane”—that was our house-parlourmaid.

“Why so?” I asked. “She seems respectable, and she does her work systematically. I have no fault to find with her, none whatever.”

“She may do her work,” said Bessie, my daughter, “but I dislike inquisitiveness.”

“Inquisitiveness!” I exclaimed. “What do you mean? Has she been looking into your drawers?”

“No, mamma, but she watches me. It is hot weather now, and when I am in my room, occasionally, I leave my door open whilst writing a letter, or doing any little bit of needlework, and then I am almost certain to hear her outside. If I turn sharply round, I see her slipping out of sight. It is most annoying. I really was unaware that I was such an interesting personage as to make it worth anyone’s while to spy out my proceedings.”

“Nonsense, my dear. You are sure it is Jane?”

“Well—I suppose so.” There was a slight hesitation in her voice. “If not Jane, who can it be?”

“Are you sure it is not cook?”

“Oh, no, it is not cook; she is busy in the kitchen. I have heard her there, when I have gone outside my room upon the landing, after having caught that girl watching me.”

“If you have caught her,” said I, “I suppose you spoke to her about the impropriety of her conduct.”

“Well, caught is the wrong word. I have not actually *caught* her at it. Only to-day I distinctly heard her at my door, and I saw her back as she turned to run away, when I went towards her.”

“But you followed her, of course?”

“Yes, but I did not find her on the landing when I got outside.”

“Where was she, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“But did you not go and see?”

“She slipped away with astonishing celerity,” said Bessie. “I can take no steps in the matter. If she does it again, speak to her and remonstrate.”

“But I never have a chance. She is gone in a moment.”

“She cannot get away so quickly as all that.”

“Somehow she does.”

“And you are sure it is Jane?” again I asked; and again she replied: “If not Jane, who else can it be? There is no one else in the house.”

So this unpleasant matter ended, for the time. The next intimation of something of the sort proceeded from another quarter—in fact, from Jane herself. She came to me some days later and

said, with some embarrassment in her tone— “If you please, ma’am, if I do not give satisfaction, I would rather leave the situation.”

“Leave!” I exclaimed. “Why, I have not given you the slightest cause. I have not found fault with you for anything as yet, have I, Jane? On the contrary, I have been much pleased with the thoroughness of your work. And you are always tidy and obliging.”

“It isn’t that, ma’am; but I don’t like being watched whatever I do.”

“Watched!” I repeated. “What do you mean? You surely do not suppose that I am running after you when you are engaged on your occupations. I assure you I have other and more important things to do.”

“No, ma’am, I don’t suppose you do.”

“Then who watches you?”

“I think it must be Miss Bessie.”

“Miss Bessie!” I could say no more, I was so astounded.

“Yes, ma’am. When I am sweeping out a room, and my back is turned, I hear her at the door; and when I turn myself about, I just catch a glimpse of her running away. I see her skirts—”

“Miss Bessie is above doing anything of the sort.”

“If it is not Miss Bessie, who is it, ma’am?”

There was a tone of indecision in her voice.

“My good Jane,” said I, “set your mind at rest. Miss Bessie could not act as you suppose. Have you seen her on these occasions and assured yourself that it is she?”

“No, ma’am, I’ve not, so to speak, seen her face; but I know it ain’t cook, and I’m sure it ain’t you, ma’am; so who else can it be?”

I considered for some moments, and the maid stood before me in dubious mood.

“You say you saw her skirts. Did you recognise the gown? What did she wear?”

“It was a light cotton print—more like a maid’s morning dress.”

“Well, set your mind at ease; Miss Bessie has not got such a frock as you describe.”

“I don’t think she has,” said Jane; “but there was someone at the door, watching me, who ran away when I turned myself about.”

“Did she run upstairs or down?”

“I don’t know. I did go out on the landing, but there was no one there. I’m sure it wasn’t cook, for I heard her clattering the dishes down in the kitchen at the time.”

“Well, Jane, there is some mystery in this. I will not accept your notice; we will let matters stand over till we can look into this complaint of yours and discover the rights of it.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I’m very comfortable, here, but it is unpleasant to suppose that one is not trusted, and is spied on wherever one goes and whatever one is about.”

A week later, after dinner one evening, when Bessie and I had quitted the table and left my husband to his smoke, Bessie said to me, when we were in the drawing-room together: “Mamma, it is not Jane.”

“What is not Jane?” I asked.

“It is not Jane who watches me.”

“Who can it be, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“And how is it that you are confident that you are not being observed by Jane?”

“Because I have seen her—that is to say, her head.”

“When? where?”

“Whilst dressing for dinner, I was before the glass doing my hair, when I saw in the mirror someone behind me. I had only the two candles lighted on the table, and the room was otherwise dark. I thought I heard someone stirring—just the sort of stealthy step I have come to recognise as having troubled me so often. I did not turn, but looked steadily before me into the glass, and I could see reflected therein someone—a woman with red hair. Then I moved from my place quickly. I heard steps of some person hurrying away, but I saw no one then.”

“The door was open?”

“No, it was shut.”

“But where did she go?”

“I do not know, mamma. I looked everywhere in the room and could find no one. I have been quite upset. I cannot tell what to think of this. I feel utterly unhinged.”

“I noticed at table that you did not appear well, but I said nothing about it. Your father gets so alarmed, and fidgets and fusses, if he thinks that there is anything the matter with you. But this is a most extraordinary story.”

“It is an extraordinary fact,” said Bessie.

“You have searched your room thoroughly?”

“I have looked into every corner.”

“And there is no one there?”

“No one. Would you mind, mamma, sleeping with me to-night? I am so frightened. Do you think it can be a ghost?”

“Ghost? Fiddlesticks!”

I made some excuse to my husband and spent the night in Bessie’s room. There was no disturbance that night of any sort, and although my daughter was excited and unable to sleep till long after midnight, she did fall into refreshing slumber at last, and in the morning said to me: “Mamma, I think I must have fancied that I saw something in the glass. I dare say my nerves were overwrought.”

I was greatly relieved to hear this, and I arrived at much the same conclusion as did Bessie, but was again bewildered, and my mind unsettled by Jane, who came to me just before lunch, when I was alone, and said—

“Please, ma’am, it’s only fair to say, but it’s not Miss Bessie.”

“What is not Miss Bessie? I mean, who is not Miss Bessie?”

“Her as is spying on me.”

“I told you it could not be she. Who is it?”

“Please, ma’am, I don’t know. It’s a red-haired girl.”

“But, Jane, be serious. There is no red-haired girl in the house.”

“I know there ain’t, ma’am. But for all that, she spies on me.”

“Be reasonable, Jane,” I said, disguising the shock her words produced on me. “If there be no red-haired girl in the house, how can you have one watching you?”

“I don’t know; but one does.”

“How do you know that she is red-haired?”

“Because I have seen her.”

“When?”

“This morning.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes, ma’am. I was going upstairs, when I heard steps coming softly after me—the backstairs, ma’am; they’re rather dark and steep, and there’s no carpet on them, as on the front stairs, and I

was sure I heard someone following me; so I twisted about, thinking it might be cook, but it wasn't. I saw a young woman in a print dress, and the light as came from the window at the side fell on her head, and it was carrots—reg'lar carrots."

"Did you see her face?"

"No, ma'am; she put her arm up and turned and ran downstairs, and I went after her, but I never found her."

"You followed her—how far?"

"To the kitchen. Cook was there. And I said to cook, says I: 'Did you see a girl come this way?' And she said, short-like: 'No.' "

"And cook saw nothing at all?"

"Nothing. She didn't seem best pleased at my axing. I suppose I frightened her, as I'd been telling her about how I was followed and spied on."

I mused a moment only, and then said solemnly—

"Jane, what you want is a *pill*. You are suffering from hallucinations. I know a case very much like yours; and take my word for it that, in your condition of liver or digestion, a pill is a sovereign remedy. Set your mind at rest; this is a mere delusion, caused by pressure on the optic nerve. I will give you a pill to-night when you go to bed, another to-morrow, a third on the day after, and that will settle the red-haired girl. You will see no more of her."

"You think so, ma'am?"

"I am sure of it."

On consideration, I thought it as well to mention the matter to the cook, a strange, reserved woman, not given to talking, who did her work admirably, but whom, for some inexplicable reason, I did not like. If I had considered a little further as to how to broach the subject, I should perhaps have proved more successful; but by not doing so I rushed the question and obtained no satisfaction.

I had gone down to the kitchen to order dinner, and the difficult question had arisen how to dispose of the scraps from yesterday's joint.

"Rissoles, ma'am?"

"No," said I, "not rissoles. Your master objects to them."

"Then perhaps croquettes?"

"They are only rissoles in disguise."

"Perhaps cottage pie?"

"No; that is inorganic rissole, a sort of protoplasm out of which rissoles are developed."

"Then, ma'am, I might make a hash."

"Not an ordinary, barefaced, rudimentary hash?"

"No, ma'am, with French mushrooms, or truffles, or tomatoes."

"Well—yes—perhaps. By the way, talking of tomatoes, who is that red-haired girl who has been about the house?"

"Can't say, ma'am."

I noticed at once that the eyes of the cook contracted, her lips tightened, and her face assumed a half-defiant, half-terrified look.

"You have not many friends in this place, have you, cook?"

"No, ma'am, none."

"Then who can she be?"

"Can't say, ma'am."

“You can throw no light on the matter? It is very unsatisfactory having a person about the house—and she has been seen upstairs—of whom one knows nothing.”

“No doubt, ma’am.”

“And you cannot enlighten me?”

“She is no friend of mine.

“Nor is she of Jane’s. Jane spoke to me about her. Has she remarked concerning this girl to you?”

“Can’t say, ma’am, as I notice all Jane says. She talks a good deal.”

“You see, there must be someone who is a stranger and who has access to this house. It is most awkward.”

“Very so, ma’am”

I could get nothing more from the cook. I might as well have talked to a log; and, indeed, her face assumed a wooden look as I continued to speak to her on the matter. So I sighed, and said—

“Very well, hash with tomato,” and went upstairs.

A few days later the house-parlourmaid said to me, “Please, ma’am, may I have another pill?”

“Pill!” I exclaimed. “Why?”

“Because I have seen her again. She was behind the curtains, and I caught her putting out her red head to look at me.”

“Did you see her face?”

“No; she up with her arm over it and scuttled away.”

“This is strange. I do not think I have more than two podophyllin pills left in the box, but to those you are welcome. Only I should recommend a different treatment. Instead of taking them yourself, the moment you see, or fancy that you see, the red-haired girl, go at her with the box and threaten to administer the pills to her. That will rout her, if anything will.”

“But she will not stop for the pills.”

“The threat of having them forced on her every time she shows herself will disconcert her. Conceive, I am supposing, that on each occasion Miss Bessie, or I, were to meet you on the stairs, in a room, on the landing, in the ball, we were to rush on you and force, let us say, castor-oil globules between your lips. You would give notice at once.”

“Yes; so I should, ma’am.”

“Well, try this upon the red-haired girl. It will prove infallible.”

“Thank you, ma’am; what you say seems reasonable.”

Whether Bessie saw more of the puzzling apparition, I cannot say. She spoke no further on the matter to me; but that may have been so as to cause me no further uneasiness. I was unable to resolve the question to my own satisfaction—whether what had been seen was a real person, who obtained access to the house in some unaccountable manner, or whether it was, what I have called an apparition.

As far as I could ascertain, nothing had been taken away. The movements of the red-haired girl were not those of one who sought to pilfer. They seemed to me rather those of one not in her right mind; and on this supposition I made inquiries in the neighbourhood as to the existence in our street, in any of the adjoining houses, of a person wanting in her wits, who was suffered to run about at will. But I could obtain no information that at all threw light on a point to me so perplexing.

Hitherto I had not mentioned the topic to my husband. I knew so well that I should obtain no help from him, that I made no effort to seek it. He would “Pish!” and “Pshaw!” and make some slighting reference to women’s intellects, and not further trouble himself about the matter.

But one day, to my great astonishment, he referred to himself.

“Julia,” said he, “do you observe how I have cut myself in shaving?”

“Yes, dear,” I replied. “You have cotton-wool sticking to your jaw, as if you were growing a white whisker on one side.”

“It bled a great deal,” said he.

“I am sorry to hear it.”

“And I mopped up the blood with the new toilet-cover.”

“Never!” I exclaimed. “You haven’t been so foolish as to do that?”

“Yes. And that is just like you. You are much more concerned about your toilet-cover being stained than about my poor cheek which is gashed.”

“You were very clumsy to do it,” was all I could say. Married people are not always careful to preserve the amenities in private life. It is a pity, but it is so.

“It was due to no clumsiness on my part,” said he; “though I do allow my nerves have been so shaken, broken, by married life, that I cannot always command my hand, as was the case when I was a bachelor. But this time it was due to that new, stupid, red-haired servant you have introduced into the house without consulting me or my pocket.”

“Red-haired servant!” I echoed.

“Yes, that red-haired girl I have seen about. She thrusts herself into my study in a most offensive and objectionable way. But the climax of all was this morning, when I was shaving. I stood in my shirt before the glass, and had lathered my face, and was engaged on my right jaw, when that red-haired girl rushed between me and the mirror with both her elbows up, screening her face with her arms, and her head bowed. I started back, and in so doing cut myself.”

“Where did she come from?”

“How can I tell? I did not expect to see anyone.”

“Then where did she go?”

“I do not know; I was too concerned about my bleeding jaw to look about me. That girl must be dismissed.”

“I wish she could be dismissed,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

I did not answer my husband, for I really did not know what answer to make.

I was now the only person in the house who had not seen the red-haired girl, except possibly the cook, from whom I could gather nothing, but whom I suspected of knowing more concerning this mysterious apparition than she chose to admit. That what had been seen by Bessie and Jane was a supernatural visitant, I now felt convinced, seeing that it had appeared to that least imaginative and most commonplace of all individuals, my husband. By no mental process could he have been got to imagine anything. He certainly did see this red-haired girl, and that no living, corporeal maid had been in his dressing-room at the time I was perfectly certain.

I was soon, however, myself to be included in the number of those before whose eyes she appeared. It was in this wise.

Cook had gone out to do some marketing. I was in the breakfast-room, when, wanting a funnel to fill a little phial of brandy I always keep on the washstand in case of emergencies, I went to the head of the kitchen stairs, to descend and fetch what I required. Then I was aware of a great clattering of the fire-irons below, and a banging about of the boiler and grate. I went down the steps very hastily and entered the kitchen.

There I saw a figure of a short, set girl in a shabby cotton gown, not over clean, and slipshod, stooping before the stove, and striking the fender with the iron poker. She had fiery red hair, very untidy.

I uttered an exclamation.

Instantly she dropped the poker, and covering her face her arms, uttering a strange, low cry, she dashed round the kitchen table, making nearly the complete circuit, and then swept past me, and I heard her clattering up the kitchen stairs.

I was too much taken aback to follow. I stood as one petrified. I felt dazed and unable to trust either my eyes or my ears.

Something like a minute must have elapsed before I had sufficiently recovered to turn and leave the kitchen. Then I ascended slowly and, I confess, nervously. I was fearful lest I should find the red-haired girl cowering against the wall, and that I should have to pass her.

But nothing was to be seen. I reached the hall, and saw that no door was open from it except that of the breakfast-room. I entered and thoroughly examined every recess, corner, and conceivable hiding-place, but could find no one there. Then I ascended the staircase, with my hand on the balustrade, and searched all the rooms on the first floor, without the least success. Above were the servants' apartments, and I now resolved on mounting to them. Here the staircase was uncarpeted. As I was ascending, I heard Jane at work in her room. I then heard her come out hastily upon the landing. At the same moment, with a rush past me, uttering the same moan, went the red-haired girl. I am sure I felt her skirts sweep my dress. I did not notice her till she was close upon me, but I did distinctly see her as she passed. I turned, and saw no more.

I at once mounted to the landing where was Jane.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Please, ma'am, I've seen the red-haired girl again, and I did as you recommended. I went at her rattling the pill-box, and she turned and ran downstairs. Did you see her, ma'am, as you came up?"

"How inexplicable!" I said. I would not admit to Jane that I had seen the apparition.

The situation remained unaltered for a week. The mystery was unsolved. No fresh light had been thrown on it. I did not again see or hear anything out of the way; nor did my husband, I presume, for he made no further remarks relative to the extra servant who had caused him so much annoyance. I presume he supposed that I had summarily dismissed her. This I conjectured from a smugness assumed by his face, such as it always acquired when he had carried a point against me—which was not often.

However, one evening, abruptly, we had a new sensation. My husband, Bessie, and I were at dinner, and we were partaking of the soup, Jane standing by, waiting to change our plates and to remove the tureen, when we dropped our spoons, alarmed by fearful screams issuing from the kitchen. By the way, characteristically, my husband finished his soup before he laid down the spoon and said—

"Good gracious! What is that?"

Bessie, Jane, and I were by this time at the door, and we rushed together to the kitchen stairs, and one after the other ran down them. I was the first to enter, and I saw cook wrapped in flames, and a paraffin lamp on the floor broken, and the blazing oil flowing over it.

I had sufficient presence of mind to catch up the cocoa-nut matting which was not impregnated with the oil, and to throw it round cook, wrap her tightly in it, and force her down on the floor where not overflowed by the oil. I held her thus, and Bessie succoured me. Jane was too

frightened to do other than scream. The cries of the burnt woman were terrible. Presently my husband appeared.

“Dear me! Bless me! Good gracious!” he said.

“You go away and fetch a doctor,” I called to him; you can be of no possible service here—you only get in our way.”

“But the dinner?”

“Bother the dinner! Run for a surgeon.”

In a little while we had removed the poor woman to her room, she shrieking the whole way upstairs; and, when there, we laid her on the bed, and kept her folded in the cocoanut matting till a medical man arrived, in spite of her struggles to be free. My husband, on this occasion, acted with commendable promptness; but whether because he was impatient for the completion of his meal, or whether his sluggish nature was for once touched with human sympathy, it is not for me to say.

All I know is that, so soon as the surgeon was there, I dismissed Jane with “There, go and get your master the rest of his dinner, and leave us with cook.”

The poor creature was frightfully burnt. She was attended to devotedly by Bessie and myself, till a nurse was obtained from the hospital. For hours she was as one mad with terror as much as with pain.

Next day she was quieter and sent for me. I hastened to her, and she begged the nurse to leave the room. I took a chair and seated myself by her bedside, and expressed my profound commiseration, and told her that I should like to know how the accident had taken place.

“Ma’am, it was the red-haired girl did it.”

“The red-haired girl!”

“Yes, ma’am. I took a lamp to look how the fish was getting on, and all at once I saw her rush straight at me, and I—I backed, thinking she would knock me down, and the lamp fell over and smashed, and my clothes caught, and—”

“Oh, cook! you should not have taken the lamp.”

“It’s done. And she would never leave me alone till she had burnt or scalded me. You needn’t be afraid—she don’t haunt the house. It is *me* she has haunted, because of what I did to her.”

“Then you know her?”

“She was in service with me, as kitchen maid, at my last place, near Cambridge. I took a sort of hate against her, she was such a slattern and so inquisitive. She peeped into my letters, and turned out my box and drawers, she was ever prying; and when I spoke to her, she was that saucy! I reg’lar hated her. And one day she was kneeling by the stove, and I was there, too, and I suppose the devil possessed me, for I upset the boiler as was on the hot-plate right upon her, just as she looked up, and it poured over her face and bosom, and arms, and scalded her that dreadful, she died. And since then she has haunted me. But she’ll do so no more. She won’t trouble you further. She has done for me, as she has always minded to do, since I scalded her to death.”

The unhappy woman did not recover.

“Dear me! no hope?” said my husband, when informed that the surgeon despaired of her. “And good cooks are so scarce. By the way, that red-haired girl?”

“Gone—gone for ever,” I said.