

On the Leads

By S. Baring-Gould

Having realised a competence in Australia, and having a hankering after country life for the remainder of my days in the old home, on my return to England I went to an agent with the object of renting a house with shooting attached, over at least three thousand acres, with the option of a purchase should the place suit me. I was no more intending to buy a country seat without having tried what it was like, than is a king disposed to go to war without knowing something of the force that can be brought against him. I was rather taken with photographs of a manor called Fernwood, and I was still further engaged when I saw the place itself on a beautiful October day, when St. Luke's summer was turning the country into a world of rainbow tints under a warm sun, and a soft vaporous blue haze tinted all shadows cobalt, and gave to the hills a stateliness that made them look like mountains. Fernwood was an old house, built in the shape of the letter H, and therefore, presumably, dating from the time of the early Tudor monarchs. The porch opened into the hall which was on the left of the cross-stroke, and the drawing-room was on the right. There was one inconvenience about the house; it had a staircase at each extremity of the cross-stroke, and there was no upstairs communication between the two wings of the mansion. But, as a practical man, I saw how this might be remedied. The front door faced the south, and the hall was windowless on the north. Nothing easier than to run a corridor along at the back, giving communication both upstairs and downstairs, without passing through the hall. The whole thing could be done for, at the outside, two hundred pounds, and would be no disfigurement to the place. I agreed to become tenant of Fernwood for a twelve-month, in which time I should be able to judge whether the place would suit me, the neighbours be pleasant, and the climate agree with my wife. We went down to Fern wood at once, and settled ourselves comfortably in by the first week in November.

The house was furnished; it was the property of an elderly gentleman, a bachelor named Framett, who lived in rooms in town, and spent most of his time at the club. He was supposed to have been jilted by his intended after which he eschewed female society, and remained unmarried.

I called on him before taking up our residence at Fern-wood, and found him a somewhat blasé, languid, cold-blooded creature, not at all proud of having a noble manor-house that had belonged to his family for four centuries; very willing to sell it, so as to spite a cousin who calculated on coming in for the estate, and whom Mr. Framett, with the malignity that is sometimes found in old people, was particularly desirous of disappointing.

"The house has been let before, I suppose?" said I.

"Oh, yes," he replied indifferently, "I believe so, several times."

"For long?"

"No—o. I believe, not for long."

"Have the tenants had any particular reasons for not remaining on there—if I may be so bold as to inquire?"

"All, people have reasons to offer, but what they offer you are not supposed to receive as genuine.

I could get no more from him than this. "I think, sir, if I were you I would not go down to Fernwood till after November was out."

“But,” said I, “I want the shooting.”

“Ah, to be sure—the shooting, ah! I should have preferred if you could have waited till December began.”

“That would not suit me,” I said, and so the matter ended. When we were settled in, we occupied the right wing of the house. The left or west wing was but scantily furnished and looked cheerless, as though rarely tenanted. We were not a large family, my wife and myself alone; there was consequently ample accommodation in the east wing for us. The servants were placed above the kitchen, in a portion of the house I have not yet described. It was a half-wing, if I may so describe it, built on the north side parallel with the upper arm of the western limb of the hail and the H. This block had a gable to the north like the wings, and a broad lead valley was between them, that, as I learned from the agent, had to be attended to after the fall of the leaf, and in times of snow, to clear it.

Access to this valley could be had from within by means of a little window in the roof, formed as a dormer. A short ladder allowed anyone to ascend from the passage to this window and open or shut it. The western staircase gave access to this passage, from which the servants’ rooms in the new block were reached, as also the untenanted apartments in the old wing. And as there were no windows in the extremities of this passage that ran due north and south, it derived all its light from the aforementioned dormer window.

One night, after we had been in the house about a week, I was sitting up smoking, with a little whisky-and-water at my elbow, reading a review of an absurd, ignorantly written book on New South Wales, when I heard a tap at the door, and the parlourmaid came in, and said in a nervous tone of voice: “Beg your pardon, sir, but cook nor I, nor none of us dare go to bed.”

“Why not?” I asked, looking up in surprise.

“Please, sir, we dursn’t go into the passage to get to our rooms.”

“Whatever is the matter with the passage?”

“Oh, nothing, sir, with the passage. Would you mind, sir, just coming to see? We don’t know what to make of it.”

I put down my review with a grunt of dissatisfaction, laid my pipe aside, and followed the maid.

She led me through the hall, and up the staircase at the western extremity.

On reaching the upper landing I saw all the maids there in a cluster, and all evidently much scared.

“Whatever is all this nonsense about?” I asked. “Please, sir, will you look? We can’t say.” The parlourmaid pointed to an oblong patch of moonlight on the wall of the passage. The night was cloudless, and the full moon shone slanting in through the dormer and painted a brilliant silver strip on the wall opposite. The window being on the side of the roof to the east, we could not see that, but did see the light thrown through it against the wall. This patch of reflected light was about seven feet above the floor.

The window itself was some ten feet up, and the passage was but four feet wide. I enter into these particulars for reasons that will presently appear.

The window was divided into three parts by wooden mullions, and was composed of four panes of glass in each compartment.

Now I could distinctly see the reflection of the moon through the window with the black bars up and down, and the division of the panes. But I saw more than that: I saw the shadow of a lean arm with a hand and thin, lengthy fingers across a portion of the window, apparently groping at where was the latch by which the casement could be opened.

My impression at the moment was that there was a burglar on the leads trying to enter the house by means of this dormer.

Without a minute's hesitation I ran into the passage and looked up at the window, but could see only a portion of it, as in shape it was low, though broad, and, as already stated, was set at a great height. But at that moment something fluttered past it, like a rush of flapping draperies obscuring the light.

I had placed the ladder, which I found hooked up to the wall, in position, and planted my foot on the lowest rung, when my wife arrived. She had been alarmed by the housemaid, and now she clung to me, and protested that I was not to ascend without my pistol.

To satisfy her I got my Colt's revolver that I always kept loaded, and then, but only hesitatingly, did she allow me to mount. I ascended to the casement, unhasped it, and looked out. I could see nothing. The ladder was over-short, and it required an effort to heave oneself from it through the casement on to the leads. I am stout, and not so nimble as I was when younger. After one or two efforts, and after presenting from below an appearance that would have provoked laughter at any other time, I succeeded in getting through and upon the leads.

I looked up and down the valley—there was absolutely nothing to be seen except an accumulation of leaves carried there from the trees that were shedding their foliage.

The situation was vastly puzzling. As far as I could judge there was no way off the roof, no other window opening into the valley; I did not go along upon the leads, as it was night, and moonlight is treacherous. Moreover, I was wholly unacquainted with the arrangement of the roof, and had no wish to risk a fall.

I descended from the window with my feet groping for the upper rung of the ladder in a manner even more grotesque than my ascent through the casement, but neither my wife—usually extremely alive to anything ridiculous in my appearance—nor the domestics were in a mood to make merry. I fastened the window after me, and had hardly reached the bottom of the ladder before again a shadow flickered across the patch of moonlight.

I was fairly perplexed, and stood musing. Then I recalled that immediately behind the house the ground rose that, in fact, the house lay under a considerable hill. It was just possible by ascending the slope to reach the level of the gutter and rake the leads from one extremity to the other with my eye.

I mentioned this to my wife, and at once the whole set of maids trailed down the stairs after us. They were afraid to remain in the passage, and they were curious to see if there was really some person on the leads.

We went out at the back of the house, and ascended the bank till we were on a level with the broad gutter between the gables. I now saw that this gutter did not run through, but stopped against the hall roof; consequently, unless there were some opening of which I knew nothing, the person on the leads could not leave the place, save by the dormer window, when open, or by swarming down the fall pipe.

It at once occurred to me that if what I had seen were the shadow of a burglar, he might have mounted by means of the rain-water pipe. But if so—how had he vanished the moment my head was protruded through the window? and how was it that I had seen the shadow flicker past the light immediately after I had descended the ladder? It was conceivable that the man had concealed himself in the shadow of the hall roof, and had taken advantage of my withdrawal to run past the window so as to reach the fall pipe, and let himself down by that.

I could, however, see no one running away, as I must have done, going outside so soon after his supposed descent.

But the whole affair became more perplexing when, looking towards the leads, I saw in the moonlight something with fluttering garments running up and down them.

There could be no mistake—the object was a woman, and her garments were mere tatters. We could not hear a sound.

I looked round at my wife and the servants,—they saw this weird object as distinctly as myself. It was more like a gigantic bat than a human being, and yet, that it was a woman we could not doubt, for the arms were now and then thrown above the head in wild gesticulation, and at moments a profile was presented, and then we saw, or thought we saw, long flapping hair, unbound.

“I must go back to the ladder,” said I; “you remain where you are, watching.”

“Oh, Edward! not alone,” pleaded my wife.

“My dear, who is to go with me?”

I went. I had left the back door unlocked, and I ascended the staircase and entered the passage. Again I saw the shadow flicker past the moonlit patch on the wall opposite the window.

I ascended the ladder and opened the casement.

Then I heard the clock in the hall strike one.

I heaved myself up to the sill with great labour, and I endeavoured to thrust my short body through the window, when I heard feet on the stairs, and next moment my wife’s voice from below, at the foot of the ladder. “Oh, Edward, Edward! please do not go out there again. It has vanished. All at once. There is nothing there now to be seen.”

I returned, touched the ladder tentatively with my feet, refastened the window, and descended—perhaps inelegantly. I then went down with my wife, and with her returned up the bank, to the spot where stood clustered our servants.

They had seen nothing further; and although I remained on the spot watching for half an hour, I also saw nothing more.

The maids were too frightened to go to bed, and so agreed to sit up in the kitchen for the rest of the night by a good fire, and I gave them a bottle of sherry to mull, and make themselves comfortable upon, and to help them to recover their courage.

Although I went to bed, I could not sleep. I was completely baffled by what I had seen. I could in no way explain what the object was and how it had left the leads.

Next day I sent for the village mason and asked him to set a long ladder against the well-head of the fall pipe, and examine the valley between the gables. At the same time I would mount to the little window and contemplate proceedings through that.

The man had to send for a ladder sufficiently long, and that occupied some time. However, at length he had it planted, and then mounted. When he approached the dormer window—“Give me a hand,” said I,” and haul me up; I would like to satisfy myself with my own eyes that there is no other means of getting upon or leaving the leads.”

He took me under both shoulders and heaved me out, and I stood with him in the broad lead gutter.

“There’s no other opening whatever,” said he, “and, Lord love you, sir, I believe that what you saw was no more than this,” and he pointed to a branch of a noble cedar that grew hard by the west side of the house.

“I warrant, sir,” said he, “that what you saw was this here bough as has been carried by a storm and thrown here, and the wind last night swept it up and down the leads.”

“But was there any wind?” I asked. “I do not remember that there was.”

“I can’t say,” said he; “before twelve o’clock I was fast asleep, and it might have blown a gale and I hear nothing of it.”

“I suppose there must have been some wind,” said I, “and that I was too surprised and the women too frightened to observe it” I laughed. “So this marvellous spectral phenomenon receives a very prosaic and natural explanation. Mason, throw down the bough and we will burn it to-night.”

The branch was cast over the edge, and fell at the back of the house. I left the leads, descended, and going out picked up the cedar branch, brought it into the hall, summoned the servants, and said derisively: “Here is an illustration of the way in which weak-minded women get scared. Now we will burn the burglar or ghost that we saw. It turns out to be nothing but this branch, blown up and down the leads by the wind.”

“But, Edward,” said my wife, “there was not a breath stirring.”

“There must have been. Only where we were we were sheltered and did not observe it. Aloft, it blew across the roofs, and formed an eddy that caught the broken bough, lifted it, carried it first one way, then spun it round and carried it the reverse way. In fact, the wind between the two roofs assumed a spiral movement. I hope now you are all satisfied. I am.”

So the bough was burned, and our fears—I mean those of the females—were allayed.

In the evening, after dinner, as I sat with my wife, she said to me: “Half a bottle would have been enough, Edward. Indeed, I think half a bottle would be too much; you should not give the girls a liking for sherry, it may lead to bad results. If it had been elderberry wine, that would have been different.”

“But there is no elderberry wine in the house,” I objected.

“Well, I hope no harm will come of it, but I greatly mistrust——”

“Please, sir, it is there again.”

The parlourmaid, with a blanched face, was at the door.

“Nonsense,” said I, “we burnt it.”

“This comes of the sherry,” observed my wife. “They will be seeing ghosts every night.”

“But, my dear, you saw it as well as myself!”

I rose, my wife followed, and we went to the landing as before, and, sure enough, against the patch of moonlight cast through the window in the roof, was the arm again, and then a flutter of shadows, as if cast by garments.

“It was not the bough,” said my wife. “If this had been seen immediately after the sherry I should not have been surprised, but—as it is now it is most extraordinary.”

“I’ll have this part of the house shut up,” said I. Then I bade the maids once more spend the night in the kitchen, “and make yourselves lively on tea,” I said—for I knew my wife would not allow another bottle of sherry to be given them. “To-morrow your beds shall be moved to the east wing.”

“Beg pardon,” said the cook, “I speaks in the name of all. We don’t think we can remain in the house, but must leave the situation.”

“That comes of the tea,” said I to my wife. “Now,” to the cook, “as you have had another fright, I will let you have a bottle of mulled port to-night.”

“Sir” said the cook, “if you can get rid of the ghost, we don’t want to leave so good a master. We withdraw the notice.”

Next day I had all the servants’ goods transferred to the east wing, and rooms were fitted up for them to sleep in. As their portion of the house was completely cut off from the west wing, the alarm of the domestics died away.

A heavy, stormy rain came on next week, the first token of winter misery.

I then found that, whether caused by the cedar bough, or by the nailed boots of the mason, I cannot say, but the lead of the valley between the roofs was torn, and water came in, streaming down the walls, and threatening to severely damage the ceilings. I had to send for a plumber as soon as the weather mended. At the same time I started for town to see Mr. Framett. I had made up my mind that Fernwood was not suitable, and by the terms of my agreement I might be off my bargain if I gave notice the first month, and then my tenancy would be for the six months only. I found the squire at his club.

“Ah!” said he, “I told you not to go there in November. No one likes Fernwood in November; it is all right at other times.”

“What do you mean?”

“There is no bother except in November.”

“Why should there be bother, as you term it, then?”

Mr. Framett shrugged his shoulders. “How the deuce can I tell you? I’ve never been a spirit, and all that sort of thing. Mine. Blavatsky might possibly tell you. I can’t. But it is a fact.”

“What is a fact?”

“Why, that there is no apparition at any other time. It is only in November, when she met with a little misfortune. That is when she is seen.

“Who is seen?”

“My aunt Eliza—I mean my great-aunt.”

“You speak mysteries.”

“I don’t know much about it, and care less,” said Mr. Framett, and called for a lemon squash. “It was this: I had a great-aunt who was deranged. The family kept it quiet, and did not send her to an asylum, but fastened her in a room in the west wing. You see, that part of the house is partially separated from the rest. I believe she was rather shabbily treated, but she was difficult to manage, and tore her clothes to pieces. Somehow, she succeeded in getting out on the roof and would race up and down there. They allowed her to do so, as by that means she obtained fresh air. But one night in November she scrambled up and, I believe, tumbled over. It was hushed up. Sorry you went there in November. I should have liked you to buy the place. I am sick of it.”

I did buy Fernwood. What decided me was this: the plumbers, in mending the leads, with that ingenuity to do mischief which they sometimes display, succeeded in setting fire to the roof, and the result was that the west wing was burnt down. Happily, a wall so completely separated the wing from the rest of the house, that the fire was arrested. The wing was not rebuilt, and I, thinking that with the disappearance of the leads I should be freed from the apparition that haunted them, purchased Fernwood. I am happy to say we have been undisturbed since.