

The Haunted House on the Hill

By W. J. Wintle, F.Z.S.

I don't suppose anyone will believe a word of this story; and so it would be only a waste of time to assure you that every word of it is true. But whether you believe it or not makes no difference at all. All the believing in the world will not make fiction into fact: and even your scepticism cannot make a true story false. Frankly I don't care if you believe it or not: what does it matter?

It was about ten years ago that I went to live at the house on the hill, where the incidents happened that are related in this veracious narrative. It was occupied at the time by a friend of mine whose name you may perhaps have heard before. It was Smith. He was a married man, with a wife and two boys aged twelve and fourteen respectively. There was also a servant, who wanted to be called Ethel, and for that reason was known as Emma. This made up the household when I went to live there as a boarder. Mrs. Smith always spoke of me to her friends as the paying guest; but it came to the same thing. I paid a certain sum per month, and lived with the Smiths as one of the family.

Smith was something in the city—whatever that may mean. Nobody seemed to quite know. Mrs. Smith said vaguely that he was engaged on the Exchange; but whether it was the Stock Exchange or the Hop Exchange or some less well-known exchange she did not condescend to explain. Anyway he was absent from home during the day on some business or other; and apparently he did very well at it.

He was a man of level judgment and sound sense; about the last man in the world to give way to any foolish fancies, or to believe anything for which he had not good evidence. Mrs. Smith was like him in this: she was one of the most sensible women that I have ever met. She was also one of the homeliest—to use the Yankee term which sounds so much prettier than ugliest—that ever captured a husband. But that was his business, and had nothing to do with me.

As to the servant Ethel, otherwise Emma, she was a dull, plodding, industrious girl, with no imagination about her. She was slow to notice things; but a thing had to be a solid fact in order to arrest her attention. Thus when she said that she had seen a thing, you could be pretty well certain that it was a fact. So I attach a good deal of importance to her evidence in connection with the happenings at the house on the hill.

The two boys, Tom and George, were bright, intelligent little fellows and no worse liars than other boys of their age. Their mother had never allowed them to read or to hear ghost stories—which is one of the things that showed how sensible she was—and so it is hardly likely that they made up their contributions to the strange story that I have to tell.

As for the house on the hill, where these curious things happened, there was nothing specially remarkable about it. The house had been built less than a hundred years, and was roomy and comfortable. It stood at a little distance from its neighbours and was surrounded by a large garden and shrubberies. There was no history of any sort connected with it, so far as the Smiths had heard. They had moved into it about three months before I went to live with them; and had only just completed the various alterations that they had thought desirable.

Having thus described the house and the people with whom I went to live, I suppose that I must say just a word about myself. I saw some of the things that happened; so it may be as well to put on record the fact that I am a strict teetotaler and am not given to seeing things. Nor am I any more of a romancer than other unfortunates who get their living by writing stories and such-

like things. But, as I said at the start, I don't suppose you will believe this story—and I don't care whether you do or not!

As a matter of fact, it was to me that the first queer thing happened, though I did not take any notice of it at the time. It was only afterwards that it proved to be anything out of the ordinary. I was sitting reading in the garden one afternoon, when an old lady in very old-fashioned dress came up path from the gate as if going to the house. I was some little distance away, so that there was no occasion to take any notice; and I naturally supposed that she was going to the front door. But she went round the end of the house as if going to the garden door which opened from the back hall. I supposed that she was some intimate friend of the Smiths, and thought no more about it.

Half an hour later, when the servant brought me a cup of tea, I learnt that Mrs. Smith had been out all the afternoon and that no one had called during her absence. It seemed odd; but it was no business of mine. Possibly the old lady was some friend of the servant.

A few days later, I heard one of the boys asking his mother who the old lady was that he had seen in the garden. Mrs. Smith said she had seen no one, and asked the servant if anyone had called. But she also had seen no one; and Mrs. Smith could only suggest that it was someone who had stepped in to look at the flowers, remarking that old ladies sometimes did odd things.

I suppose that it was about a week after this when Mr. Smith mentioned that he had, met an old lady coming out of the gate as he entered; and that she had looked at him with a curiously searching glance when he raised his hat, supposing her to have been some caller upon his wife. He asked who she was, and was evidently surprised to find that his wife knew nothing about her.

The next person to see the old lady was Mrs. Smith herself. She happened to be standing close inside the gate, but concealed by a laurel bush, when the old lady came up and seemed to hesitate before entering. Mrs. Smith stepped into view and said, "Good morning." But apparently the old lady neither saw nor heard, for without looking in her direction or taking any notice of her she turned away.

A moment later, when Mrs. Smith looked out to see where she went, she was nowhere in view. This was very strange, for there was no turning nor gate through which she could have gone in so short a time. But Mrs. Smith was not greatly interested, and gave no further thought to the incident.

Last of all, the mysterious old lady was seen by the servant, who met her coming out of the gate as she returned from an errand. She also was struck by the curious look with which she regarded her; and she mentioned it to her mistress. But no one had called at the house during the past few hours.

So the position now was that five people had seen the strange visitor separately and quite without looking for her. Nothing had happened in either case, except that she had a piercing glance and either did not hear or took no notice when she was addressed.

Of course the thing was talked over; but none of us attached any significance to it, naturally supposing that it was merely some only lady in the neighbourhood, of eccentric but harmless habits. It was not until other strange things happened that we began to think more seriously of it.

One morning not long afterwards the elder boy, Tom, asked at breakfast who the people were who were talking in the garden during the night. As he was no exception to the rule that boys of fourteen are sound sleepers, his parents supposed that he had dreamed it, and said so; but he seemed pretty sure that he had wakened up while it was still dark and had heard the voices. He said that the voices sounded like those of a man and a woman; but naturally no importance was attached to the vague impressions of a sleepy boy.

But some support was given to the tale by the statement of the servant, who had not heard the boy's story, that she had been very much bothered by dreams in the night and had fancied that there were people walking about the garden. She thought it was only a dream, but admitted the possibility that she might really have heard the people when half awake.

I took very little notice of the affair; but during the morning something occurred that brought it back to mind. I was sitting on the lawn trying to think out a troublesome story to a conclusion that would not make too great a demand on the reader's credulity, when I became vaguely conscious that I was not alone. There were low and indistinct voices somewhere behind me; and one of them sounded like that of an old woman. Without paying any very alert attention to the matter, I looked round in a rather absent-minded fashion and thought that I saw two people—a man and an old woman—standing in the shadow of some shrubs. It was only a vague impression; and on looking a second time and more intently I could see no one. The only reasonable conclusion seemed to be that the incident was merely a fleeting memory of the talk at breakfast; and that the half-conscious thought had formed a passing image in the mind's eye.

Nothing more occurred for about a month, except that the old lady was seen two or three times in the garden towards dusk; but she was nowhere to be found when people went out to see who she was. Then a much more serious affair came to call for attention. About half an hour after midnight, Mr. Smith was aroused by a policeman who had called to tell him that one of the downstairs windows was open, and at the same time remarked that he supposed we had someone ill in the house, as there was a light at one of the windows under the roof so frequently.

This was very puzzling, as the window under the roof was that of an unoccupied room in which only a little old furniture was stored. Mr. Smith at once went up to it, but found no sign that anyone had been there. Everything was as usual: so he locked the door, took the key away, and asked the policeman to let him know if the light was seen there again. In the morning everybody was questioned on the subject; but no one could offer any explanation. When the room was examined by daylight, the undisturbed dust that lay thickly on the furniture went to show that no one had been there recently.

A few nights later, Mr. Smith and I were sitting up rather late, talking over some small matter that happened to interest us both, when a tap came at the window. We went to the door and found the policeman, who had come to say that the light was at that very moment showing at the window under the roof. We all three went up together without delay, and as quietly as we could; but we found the door locked and the room empty. It was quite a task to make the policeman believe that it was the same room.

On the following morning, the younger boy, George, had a tale to tell. He said that when he went up to bed the night before, he met an old lady coming down from the room under the roof. At first he thought that it was his grandmother, and wondered that he had not heard of her arrival; but, before he could speak to her, she turned and looked at him, and he saw that she was a stranger. He said that she looked very sour and disagreeable; and of course he wanted to know who she was.

His parents seemed too much astonished to quite know what to answer; and I fear it was I who rushed to the rescue with the first bit of fiction that came to mind. So far as I now remember, I said she was a Mrs. Coleman, who had called to see about buying some of the old furniture that was stored away upstairs. At any rate it served to stop further questions and to change the subject.

When the boys had gone to school, Mr. Smith and I went up to the room under the roof, bent on a thorough search. It resulted in very little. There was no evidence that anyone had entered the

room—in addition to the fact that the door was still locked—but it struck both of us that the old furniture had been moved farther away from a cupboard in the corner. But, as we had not taken any exact note of the original position of the things, we could not be sure that they had been moved. But our impression was that they had.

We examined the cupboard carefully, but without finding anything unusual. But we both had a strange feeling that the cupboard was not unoccupied. I don't quite know how to explain it; but most probably you have noticed that a room in which people live has a different kind of feeling from an unoccupied one. It was just like that. We felt that somebody had either been in that cupboard lately, or was there still. It sounds absurd; but that is the fact.

We could make nothing of it; nor could we arrive at any explanation of the boy's adventure with the lady on the stairs. We could only decide to drop the subject, and advise Mrs. Smith to pay no attention to it. She quite agreed that it was the best thing to do under the circumstances.

But about a week later she opened the question afresh; though neither she nor her husband had any idea at the time that they were doing so. She drew our attention to the damage done by some dog or cat in the garden. A bed had been newly planted with some bulbs; and these had been disturbed. They were seriously displaced; and yet it did not look quite like the work of an animal. There were no footprints nor any signs of scratching. It looked more as if some person had turned the ground over or dug it up, and had then tried to smooth over the surface and to replace the bulbs that had been uprooted. But this seemed an absurd supposition; for who would want to dig up another person's garden?

So we could only conclude that appearances were deceptive, as usual, and decide that it must have been some stray dog that had done the damage. How to prevent its recurrence was not easy to see; but Mr. Smith had a spring put on the grate so that it might not be left open at any time. It occurred to me later that the disturbed bed was close by the spot where I had thought that I saw a man and woman standing in the garden.

The next incident in connection with the haunting of the house on the hill happened to be witnessed by myself, and would have been quite without significance but for the other occurrences. I was walking in the garden at dusk when I saw a cat coming along the top of a kind of balcony that ran round part of the house. It was a large black Tom for whom I had formed a distinct dislike. In my time I have experienced the musical endeavours of the feline tribe both in season and out of season, by day and by night, in both town and country; but never have I met with a cat whose vocal efforts pleased me less than those of this particular Tom. He did his best: and his best was his worst. Many a time have I longed for a gun, or even for half a brick, when my slumbers have been rudely broken by the heart-rending love ditties of this disreputable beast. I therefore viewed his progress with interest, and found myself wishing that he would overbalance and break his neck.

He came strolling idly along, apparently with not a care in the world, until he reached a spot where he could look in at the window of the room under the roof. Here he paused for a moment and bestowed a hasty lick on a spot in his fur whose smoothness seemed capable of improvement. Then he was about to proceed, when he—apparently quite by chance—glanced into the room. What he saw I don't know and cannot imagine; but he sprang up as if shot, and fled back at full speed by the way he had come. He had evidently received a bad scare; and at the time I supposed that someone was in the room and had frightened him. But a casual inquiry of Mr. Smith later in the evening gave me the information that the room was still kept locked up and that he had not let the key go out of his possession. The question, What the cat saw, was therefore an interesting one, but was likely to remain unsolved.

A few days after this, Mr. Smith stayed up with me after his wife had gone to bed and said that he wanted to tell me something that he did not wish her to know. A very queer thing had happened, and he did not know what to think about it. Very early that morning he had wakened up with the strong idea that someone was in the house. He listened and distinctly heard soft footsteps on the stairs.

So he got up quietly without disturbing his wife, switched on a small electric hand-lamp, and went out of the room to investigate. No one was to be seen and all was quite quiet. But he still felt uneasy, and decided to go down and make sure that all was right. As he went silently down the stairs, he distinctly heard soft footsteps following him. Again and again he stopped suddenly and turned sharply; but there was no one to be seen. He noticed that the footsteps ceased as soon as he turned; but they went on again when he started afresh.

This suggested an echo: but no echo had ever before been noticed in the house. Moreover the limited space and the presence of curtains and other hangings went against the idea. An echo was hardly possible under the circumstances. But what followed seemed to dispose of this suggestion altogether.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, the footsteps ceased and he went into the various rooms to make sure that all was in order. He found nothing unusual; but, while standing in the dining-room and looking round, he distinctly heard the footsteps in the hall. This time there could be no question of an echo of his own steps, for he was standing still at the time.

He went out into the hall, but found no one there. Then he again heard the soft footsteps; and they seemed to be going up the stairs. He at once made up his mind to follow them. As I think has been said already, he was a level-headed, sensible man, not at all given to fancies; and 'the idea that there was something here that was not natural does not seem to have occurred to him. he was simply puzzled; but had no doubt that the thing would soon be explained.

Hence he had no hesitation about following the mysterious footsteps: he only wanted to see the person to whom they belonged. He followed them up the stairs; and they led him to the room under the roof and seemed to go in. But the door was closed; and when he tried to open it he found that it was locked as he had left it. He was brought to a stop; but, as he stood listening, he distinctly heard the footsteps again. They were now inside the room. He also heard the cupboard door in the room opened and closed.

There could be no sort of doubt that someone was in the room in spite of the locked door: and he meant to find out who that someone was. So he went quickly downstairs to his dressing-room, got the key from his pocket, and came up again. Before opening the door of the room, he paused and listened, with the result that he again heard footsteps inside and the door of the cupboard closed.

Then he quickly unlocked the door, flung it open, and went in. No one was there. He opened the cupboard, and found it empty. But he had that curious impression that he was not alone and that the cupboard—or perhaps the room—was occupied. But there was no sense of danger or of fear. It was rather as if any presence that might be there was quite harmless and friendly.

Mr. Smith searched the room thoroughly, found nothing, and at last went back to bed thoroughly perplexed. Later in the morning, as he went out to business, a policeman remarked to him that there had been a light in the room under the roof all through the night.

We talked it over, but could make nothing of it. As we went upstairs to bed, we both thought that we heard soft footsteps following us; but we put it down to imagination resulting from the object of our conversation.

A day or two later, a further development took place. The lad, Tom, came downstairs to breakfast in a great state of excitement and told us that when he woke up there was an old lady standing by his bed and looking at him. He said she had very piercing eyes; and, just as he was going to ask her who she was and what she wanted, she muttered something about “those letters,” and he could not see her any more. The boy was quite sure that she did not go out of the room: but she simply was not there. How she got away he could not make out. The odd thing about the whole affair was that the boy was not frightened in the least by this strange experience. He was only interested and puzzled.

The servant had also a tale to tell, but nothing so interesting as the boy’s. She had dreamed that she woke up and went to look out of the window. It was in the middle of the night, but the moon was so bright that everything outside could be seen clearly. In the garden she saw an old lady and a man doing something to the bed of bulbs that had been disturbed before. She thought they were digging, but could not be sure.

Of course we told the servant not to trouble her head about dreams, which never meant anything; but it was not so easy to get rid of the boy’s story. Mr. and Mrs. Smith and I had a long discussion that evening after the others had gone to bed. We put all the facts together, and we could not get away from the impression that there was something in them. They certainly seemed to suggest that some old lady—and apparently a man as well— came to the house and were interested in the room under the roof and in one of the flower-beds in the garden. What it was that attracted them to these places was unknown to us; but the old lady had said something about “those letters”—that is, supposing that the boy’s tale was to be relied upon.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith had no belief in ghosts or in anything of the kind, while I had an open mind on the subject. In fact I was a trifle proud of having such an open mind. Unkind friends said that it was rather a case of an empty mind than an open one—but never mind! I was quite prepared to believe in ghosts if anyone could produce a specimen in a reasonable state of preservation. So I suggested that, without expressing any opinion on the subject, we might very well decide to investigate the room under the roof and the flower-bed in the garden, and see if those letters could be found.

This was agreed upon; and Mr. Smith and I spent the next Saturday afternoon in digging up the flower-bed. There was nothing at all near the surface; but we meant to do the work thoroughly while we were at it. So we kept on until we had an opening as deep as a grave. And then we came upon an old chest, bound with iron, which proved to be full of papers.

Next we thoroughly searched the room under the roof, and found that there was a hollow space behind the match-board lining of the cupboard; and here again we found a quantity of papers. On examining the two sets of papers, we found that they consisted of a long series of love letters—of no interest whatever except to the writers. We burnt them after reading, as that seemed the right thing to do.

We afterwards learnt that the name of the lady writer was that of an old lady who had once lived in the house on the hill, and was said to be very eccentric. Rumour in the neighbourhood had it that she had long been in love with a man whose circumstances did not permit him to marry; and when he died she came to the house on the hill and lived a very retired life. She died without a will or she would no doubt have left directions for the letters to be destroyed after her death, as she apparently did not like to burn them in her lifetime.

It only remains to add that the old lady was never seen after the discovery and destruction of the correspondence.