

# The House in the Wood

By Amyas Northcote

“I do not feel called upon to vouch for the truth of the story I am going to tell you,” said the “drummer,” in whose company I was making the journey from Chicago to New York, “I will merely say that my friend Larrabee was a man on whose word I implicitly relied, and as he told me the story several times, never contradicted himself, and always declared he was telling the truth, I, for one, believe it.”

This declaration was made by Chas. Smithson, a commercial traveller for the large New York importing house of Higsby and Dayland, in the smoking-room of the vestibuled limited express from Chicago to New York, one fine April morning not a hundred years ago. I knew Mr. Smithson slightly, and knew him to be as good a fellow as ever breathed, and when I had entered the train at Chicago the night before I had been heartily glad to see his jovial sell preceding me. We had assembled in the smoking-car of the train, a party of half a dozen, the usual kind of gathering one sees on such a trip. After the various staples of conversation had been discussed, and dismissed, there had been somewhat of a break in the conversation, interrupted by some one inquiring: “Does anyone here believe in ghosts?” This remark had occasioned the wrangle always incident upon it; and story after story, some old, some new, had been narrated, and canvassed, and the anti-ghost party had gradually but slowly been winning the day, when Smithson, who had hitherto, unlike his usual self, been silent, suddenly made the above observation. There was a dead silence. Smithson had spoken with such unusual vehemence that every one saw that, mild though the words of his speech were, yet underlying their mildness was an evident deep-rooted meaning that the subject was a grave one, and should not lightly be discussed. We all turned towards him, and in one voice demanded that he should tell his tale. After a moment’s pause he said:

“Well, gentlemen, I will do so, but I request that none of you will laugh at me. My friend, Mr. Larrabee, who is lately dead, was an eye-witness, or at least believed himself to have been an eye-witness of what I am going to relate; and firmly believed as I do that he witnessed a spiritual manifestation take place with a view to accomplishing a definite object. Though the adventure did not happen to myself,” he added, “I will by your leave tell it in the first person, as I think I can thus do it better justice.”

So after another round of drinks had been ordered and disposed of, and all the cigars had been properly lighted, we settled ourselves in our chairs, and prepared to listen in the prosaic smoking-room of the limited express to one of the most astonishing stories we had ever heard solemnly told as true.

“Some years ago,” commenced Smithson, in the character of Larrabee, “it happened to be my fate to be a travelling salesman for a big Boston house, which had a branch in Chicago, and my route led me into the northern part of Wisconsin and into Minnesota; and, in fact, embraced that part of the country where many of the great iron mines are situated. The country was then much wilder than it is now, railroad transportation was poor, and justice and the enforcement of the law also were very negligently attended to. The journeys, too, were over rough and unfrequented roads in many instances, while the hotel accommodations were always bad. However, I was quite young then and, as my sales were good, I did not particularly mind the hardship of the life.

“I remember that the hardest part of the task allotted to me and the part I was always most glad to have done with was my visit to the village of Milnaska, which lay some thirty miles from the end of a little branch railroad connecting with the main line for Chicago. My custom was to put up for the night at the railway terminus, spend the next day in a buggy driving through the hilly, forest-covered country to Milnaska, sleep there, spend the next day, and then early in the following morning return in time to catch the evening train to the South. Milnaska was, though off the line of travel, a place of sufficient importance to make this trip desirable, especially lately, since an iron mine of some consequence had been opened in its immediate vicinity.

“The road from the railroad terminus to Milnaska was one of the most dreary I have ever seen; for Milnaska being close to the shore of Lake Superior its iron was sent off by boat, and most of its supplies received in the same way, so that there was very little travel between it and Little Forks, as the railroad terminus was named. Though the Lake was the easiest way of getting to Milnaska, it was not the quickest either from Chicago, where the headquarters of the mining company were, or for myself, who came to Milnaska from a point further west.

“One dreary October evening in the year of Our Lord 18— beheld me tired and dirty, disembarking from the train at Little Forks, and seeking the seclusion of the one uncomfortable and not particularly clean hotel the place boasted. On my arrival at its inhospitable doors, I registered, and having no business in Little Forks, and no desire to wander about its uninviting streets, I quietly sat down by the stove to await the announcement of supper. A few of the usual country hotel loafers were grouped about the hotel office, but there was no one who excited my particular curiosity, till there entered a gentleman whom, travel learned as I was, I had great difficulty in ‘placing.’ A native of Little Forks he certainly was not, but that he knew the place was equally certain, and that he was known in it, for the landlord hastily advanced to greet him, calling him Mr. Sykes, and shaking him by the hand. But he certainly was not a drummer, or the landlord would have offered to take the little unpretentious black bag he carried, and this he did not do. The stranger walked up to the desk and, still resting his left hand on his bag, registered, whilst the landlord observed, ‘The fast buggy at eight tomorrow morning as usual, Mr. Sykes?’ To which the other responded only by a nod, and preceded by the bell boy disappeared up the stairs. I ought, I suppose, to give a short description of Mr. Sykes, and a short one will do, for he was one of those negative men, who have no very marked characteristics. Rather short and squarely built, his grey hair and lined face rather marked the man who had suffered than the old man. But though his countenance bore signs of sorrow, yet it showed also courage and great resolution, coupled with keen watchfulness. He was dressed in deep black, evidently in remembrance of some lately lost loved one.

“As soon as Mr. Sykes had disappeared, I strolled over to the desk, and after a few remarks I asked the landlord who Mr. Sykes was. The man looked queerly at me for a few moments, and then said, ‘I am sorry, Mr. Larrabee, you can see for yourself in the register that he comes from Chicago, but I am not able to tell you anything about him. Mr. Sykes is very particular, and has requested me never to mention who he is, or what is his business. But,’ he continued, ‘to oblige you as a good customer, I’ll put you at the same table at supper, and you can get what you can out of him. But he is awful closemouthed. I’ll tell you this, though, he is going to Milnaska tomorrow.’

“I was obliged to be content with this answer and wait till supper time, which luckily was not far off. As soon as it was announced I walked in, and seating myself had got about a quarter of the way through my very leathery beefsteak, when the landord, true to his promise, ushered Mr. Sykes to the seat next mine. He ordered supper, and while it was being brought sat quietly

looking around him. I was surprised to see that he had brought his black bag down with him, and that it lay on the chair next him. Presently I decided to break the ice, and did so with the remark, 'Bad weather, isn't it?' 'Yes,' replied Mr. Sykes. 'I am mighty sorry I have got to drive to Milnaska to-morrow,' I went on. 'if it goes on raining like this, I shall be wet through in half an hour.' 'Indeed,' answered my neighbour.

"This taciturnity irritated me; I was determined to find out something about him, so after a moment's pause I said, 'If it isn't taking a liberty, sir, may I ask if you are going to Milnaska too?' He shot a quick, suspicious glance at me, then slowly answered, 'Yes, I am.' 'Well,' said I, 'in that case, what do you think of our going over together? It is a dull trip at best. I have made it often enough to know. My name,' I continued, 'is Larrabee. I represent Potter and Dennis of Boston. What name did you say yours was, sir?' 'My name is Sykes,' he replied, 'I am in the employ of the Milnaska Mining Co. of Chicago.'

"He gradually became somewhat more friendly, possibly under the influence of the supper, and when we went out into the hotel office I saw him walk up to the landlord and exchange a few words with him, evidently about myself, from the looks they cast in my direction. Mr. Sykes then joined me near the stove, still clasping his precious bag, and talked for some little time pleasantly and well. By the time for retiring, we had agreed to make the trip to Milnaska and back together, as we discovered that we should neither of us have to spend more than one day there. We went to rest early agreeing to start at eight o'clock the following day.

"The next morning broke raw and damp, and after breakfast, when Mr. Sykes and I went outside to look at the roads, we saw that we should have a bad trip of it and be lucky to get through without mishap. However, we had got to go, and as we both knew the road, and the landlord knew he could trust us, we decided not to overload the buggy with a driver, but be our own charioteers. We started cheerfully enough, Mr. Sykes having first carefully lashed his black bag under the seat with a stout bit of cord, and for some little time proceeded slowly along chatting pleasantly. We had taken a light lunch with us, there being no hotel on the road. We drove along for a considerable time, and having become absorbed in an energetic political discussion we did not notice what slow progress we were making. Presently, however, we awoke to the fact that at the rate we were now going we should not reach Milnaska that night and accordingly quickened our pace. But the roads were in a fearful condition and though we had been promised a good horse only a sorry jade had actually been put between the shafts.

"We both worked, however, and worked the harder, as the rain was again beginning to fall and the wind to rise and blow in our faces, thus still further retarding our progress. Still we managed to proceed and, though I think it would have been late, yet we should have reached Milnaska that night, had not our unfortunate horse suddenly gone dead lame. Here was a predicament! We were we scarcely knew how many miles from either Little Forks or Milnaska, in the heart of the pine woods, with a broken-down horse, and night, accompanied by a violent storm, rapidly coming on.

"After gloomily cogitating over the situation I suddenly remembered that about two-thirds of the way between Little Forks and Milnaska was an old, rambling frame house, tenanted apparently by some squatter's family. I recollected that we had not yet passed it and, judging by the distance we had travelled that it could not be very far off, I suggested to Mr. Sykes that we should make the best of our way there on foot, leading the horse, seek shelter for the night, and either borrow a new horse in the morning or try to reach Milnaska with our present steed. 'I had already thought of the Joneses' place,' said Mr. Sykes in reply, 'but I don't like it, I don't want to

go there.' 'Why not?' said I. 'It seems to be the only place there is?' 'Well, I suppose we must try it,' replied Mr. Sykes.

"We pushed on through the pouring rain and driving wind for about a mile, when at a turn in the road to my great joy I saw a light gleaming through the gathering darkness, and in a few moments we reached the door of an old-fashioned frame house. The house which we drew up before stood end on, as I afterwards discovered, to the road. It was an old, two story log house, of great solidity of construction, possibly having been built to resist marauding Indians, though its peculiar situation, backed up against the side of a hill, seemed to render this doubtful. At first sight it appeared much smaller than it really was, owing to its position and to the entrance being at one end. A rough, unkempt garden ran back from the road, and at one end of this were a barn and a storehouse in a very tumble-down condition.

"As soon as we drew up at the door, there appeared from within a tall, slatternly looking woman, who stood on the threshold eyeing us in silence. I addressed her as politely as I could, asking her if we could have a night's lodging for man and beast. For a moment she made no reply, then sullenly said, 'No, you can't.' I was so surprised at this lack of politeness that I remained speechless till presently, roused by the voices he had heard, a gaunt, powerful looking man came up from behind the woman and stared out at us. To him I addressed myself, again asking for lodging, explaining our predicament and offering to pay well for a night's entertainment. At first he, too, seemed inclined to refuse, when suddenly catching sight of Mr. Sykes's face behind the top of the buggy he said, 'Well, I guess you can; Jenny,' turning to the woman, we ain't the folk to turn travellers from the door. Come in, come in, you are welcome.' So saying he came out into the rain, helped us to alight and, ordering his wife to show us the way into the house, led off our horse towards the barn,

"We followed the woman into the low, dirty kitchen into which the door opened and, Mr. Sykes still retaining his precious bag, sat down by the fire to dry and get warm. There was nothing remarkable in the aspect of the kitchen. It was perhaps rather dirtier than most and there was a lack of the comforts and bright, pretty things frequently seen in farmers' houses. I judged that Jones must spend most of his time hunting by the various sportsman's accoutrements in the room, and while I was still speculating on the delights of a hunter's existence he himself entered. 'Well,' said he, 'I have fixed up your horse, he'll be all right in the morning, I guess he found these roads powerful heavy to draw you two fellows over. Are ye going to Milnaska, Mr. Sykes?' he added. 'Yes,' replied Mr. Sykes. 'Usual business I suppose this time of the month, ain't it?' continued Mr. Jones with a grin. 'There's some folk will be mighty glad to see you to Milnaska, I reckon.'

"My companion made no reply, and our host turned to me. We quickly found a congenial subject in the shape of fishing, and I had begun to lose the instinctive dislike I had taken to the man in the discussion of a favourite topic, when we were summoned to supper by Mrs. Jones. We seated ourselves at the table and were soon busy in the discussion of a plain though very welcome repast. Once during the meal my suspicions of my host were roused from the sleep into which the fishing discussion had lulled them by noticing a queer look pass between him and his wife, as they saw Mr. Sykes place his black bag under his chair.

"At the end of the meal Jones said, 'I suppose, gentlemen, you are kinder cold after the rain, what do you think of a drop of the best stuff in Wisconsin?' I had no objection, and our host rose and went to a rather dark corner of the room, where he commenced fumbling in a cupboard containing quite a number of bottles. I watched and saw him take down three glasses and a demijohn of whisky. At that moment Mrs. Jones dropped a plate with a crash; I turned to look

and, as I turned towards my host again, saw him coming back with the three glasses of whisky in his hand. We each took one, and I, after carefully tasting mine and finding it, as Jones had promised, excellent, drank it down. So did Mr. Sykes, and as he set down his glass once more I noticed a peculiar look pass over our host's face.

"We sat for some little time gossiping after this, and presently Mr. Sykes, who had rapidly been becoming drowsy, announced his desire to retire. I said I would go too, and Mr. Jones preceded us up the narrow stairway to the upper hall. On arriving at the top of the steps for the first time I became aware of how large the house was. The stairs ran up at one end of it, and opened into a passage which led back quite a distance. I was given little time to speak to Sykes. Mrs. Jones had come up with us and, addressing me, she said, 'Come this way to your room.' I followed her down the whole length of the passage, having a vague consciousness that Jones had escorted Mr. Sykes and his black bag into a room near the staircase and was shown into a large, poorly furnished room at the end of the hallway. Bidding me good night in a harsh voice, Mrs. Jones set down the lamp and departed.

"My room, as I have said, was large and ill furnished. There was a repulsive-looking bed in the centre, a chair, a little table supporting a water basin and jug, and two pocket-handkerchief towels and an old wardrobe. The room smelt close, and my first move was to the window. It was with a sense of relief I threw it open and looked out. The rain had ceased, and the full moon shone brightly on the pine woods, which lay ghostly still. Right from under my window the ground sloped sharply upward, and I experienced a queer feeling of pleasure when I noticed that it was within easy jumping distance of my window. After a few minutes, being very sleepy, I cast off coat, waistcoat and shoes, and having fastened the door as best I could I threw myself on the bed and was soon sound asleep.

"I awoke with a start, and with the impression firmly fixed on my mind that some one was calling me. I lay with my face to the open window, through which the moon was still streaming, making all within the room as light as day. I lay for an instant straining my ears, when again, this time unmistakably, and close to me, the voice, sounded. 'Mr. Larrabee,' it said, 'Mr. Larrabee, get up, get up quick.' The voice was faint and low; it appeared to be that of a girl, and to sound from behind me. I turned quickly, and saw standing close to my bed, and near enough for me to touch, the figure of a girl of about twelve. She was neatly and prettily dressed, and her face, as I could make out distinctly in the moonlight, was refined and gentle. Even at the time I know I thought it strange that the moonlight should be so bright as to enable me to make out her dark blue eyes and golden coloured hair, but I could distinguish them plainly.

"I remained lost in wonderment as to who my visitor was and how she had got in to me. I knew I had locked the door, and the window was full high for her to get in at. Besides, who was she, and why had I not seen her at supper-time? She was surely too dainty a child to be the daughter of the Joneses.

"Whilst I still lay wondering, she spoke again. 'Come, Mr. Larrabee, Father's in danger, follow me, quick, quick, quick.' There was an air of authority about her that compelled obedience, so slipping out of bed I followed her. I remember stopping to unlock my door as I went through, and noticing that no sound of steps or rustle of garments accompanied my guide's progress.

"But as we stole softly down the passage, my attention was attracted by a faint light in Sykes's room. I hastened forward, thinking something was wrong, lost sight of the girl, and pushed open the door of the room. As I entered and gazed round I saw by the faint light of a lamp Mr. Sykes stretched on the bed, apparently in a drugged sleep, and Jones bending over him, whilst Mrs. Jones was endeavouring to force open the black bag with a knife. They gave a cry of amazement

as they saw me enter, and for a moment stood paralysed; then Jones, leaving the bedside, came forward. 'I heard the gentleman cry out,' said he, 'Mrs. Jones and I thought he was sick, and came up to do what we could for him. He is mortal bad, I am thinking.'

"Taking no notice of this remark, I walked up to the bed, and ordering the discomfited couple to put down the bag, which Mrs. Jones said she was trying to open to see if it contained medicine, and to leave the room, I pushed Mr. Sykes by the shoulder, and after some trouble succeeded in arousing him from his drugged sleep. He started violently when he came to his senses and, recognizing me, eagerly asked for his bag. I showed it to him, and having examined it and found it unopened he asked how I came to be there. I told him of my mysterious visitor, and of the intruders I had expelled from his room, and then for the first time I began to wonder where the girl was. She had disappeared, and I was anxious to find her, to take her away with us in the morning out of reach of the Joneses' vengeance. 'What was she like?' asked Mr. Sykes. 'I have never heard of anyone living in this house except the Joneses.'

"I told him that she was golden haired with dark blue eyes. He seemed strangely agitated. 'What were the words she used?' he said. 'Why,' I answered, 'they were, "Come, Mr. Larrabee, Father's in danger, follow me quick, quick, quick."' 'My God,' he exclaimed, 'can this be so? Mr. Larrabee,' he went on earnestly, 'just before you roused me, I was dreaming that my little daughter, my own little Maud, who died six months ago, was standing calling to me to wake up. I tried to do so, I struggled, for I could hear her plaintive little voice, but a weight oppressed me and I could not. It is the hand of God,' he said solemnly; and bowing his head became absorbed in prayer or meditation. I left the room, but established myself outside, where I remained on guard for the rest of the night. Early the next morning Mr. Sykes joined me. 'Let us leave this house,' he said, 'as quickly as may be.'

"We went downstairs, but found no one. Apparently the Joneses had fled in fear of us, and so, making the best meal we could out of the scraps in the larder, we went out to the barn and, harnessing up our horse, were soon once more on our way to Milnaska. On the road Mr. Sykes informed me that he was the paymaster of the Mining Company in Milnaska, and once a month had to convey a quantity of money to that place to pay the men employed there. He was well-known on the road, but had never been molested, though he had never before tried the experiment of putting up for a night at Jones's place. The latter had a bad character, and I heard afterwards that this last episode caused him finally to decamp from the vicinity with his wife. We met with no further adventure, and arrived in Milnaska in due course, where I parted from Mr. Sykes, not without the assurance of seeing him again whenever I might be in Chicago.

"That is the story of my late friend, Mr. Larrabee," said Mr. Smithson. "I believe him to have been a truthful man, and I consequently for one believe in ghosts."

This dogma we none of us felt inclined to dispute, especially as the welcome call, "Dinner now ready in the dining-car," was heard approaching.