A Tale of a Gas-Light Ghost

By Anonymous

’Tis an easy thing for me to tell you a story of ghosts, for from my childhood I have been accustomed to hear of them; from my infancy I was taught to believe in them. Not the old nurses’ tales of white-draped spectres, of grinning skulls and ghastly goblins; but the well-authenticated appearances after death of those known upon earth, in the dress they wore when toiling in the world.

Ghosts ran in the Dale family, people said jeeringly—insanity too, they added; and from time to time we have been made the butts for jokes of those would-be wags, who refuse to believe anything which does not happen to have come under their own narrow experience. I could tell you a story of my great-grandfather, who was haunted by the spirit of a man he slew in a duel, who followed him in the spirit form wherever he went, beckoning to him from the midst of a crowd at times; at others visiting him in the solitude of his chamber, till my great-grandfather, driven to frenzy, one day drew his sword and nearly ran his butler through the body for denying the ghost of the murdered man stood by him. The constant terror of this continual appearance drove my ancestor out of his mind though, of course, there were people who declared he was out of his mind in the first instance.

So of Roderick Dale, his son, who was haunted by an unknown figure, and finished his days in a lunatic asylum; so of Charles Mervyn, his nephew, who was again and again surprised by the apparition of his father, starting as it were from out the wall upon him. I could tell you all these stories, but you would not even pretend to listen to them.

The story I am about to tell you is quite different from these. It happened less than two years ago. There are a dozen men alive at the present day to vouch for its truth; and it does not depend on any of the usual ghost properties for its effect. In it there is no dismal ruined mansion, no desolate churchyard, no bell tolling the hour of midnight, no rattling of chains or hollow groanings; in short, it is a matter-of-fact ghost story, with none of the ordinary paraphernalia generally supposed to appertain to the spirit world. In order, however, that you may understand it properly, I must give you a short description of the parish of Mapleton, and a few of its inhabitants some twenty months since.

Mapleton is an essentially agricultural parish; its acreage is large, and so are its tillers; its population is small, and so are its wants; its politics are conservative, its society is exclusive, and its ignorance of the other parts of the world is great. Furthermore, its landowners are few and wealthy, and its tenant-farmers well-to-do and contented. It was on record that only one farmer had ever been dissatisfied with the state of things at Mapleton—a young man who had considered the old house in which generations of his ancestors had been born and died too gloomy for him, and had built himself a brand new house, of a mixture of the cottage and villa style, on the outskirts of the village, and had immediately afterwards gone to the dogs, and had been forced to seek a living away from his native place.

Thus it came about that there was a house to let in Mapleton; but how Gregory Barnstake came to know of it, and how, knowing it, he came to take it, after it had remained empty several years, was never understood. Where he came from nobody knew—who he was no one could find out. He was a severely handsome man, by which I mean that his face in marble would have been called superb, but in flesh and blood it was too hard and too expressionless; he was neither young nor old; he had no friends who came to see him, and he appeared to be well off. Society at Mapleton settled that from such a man it would be well to keep aloof until something was known of his antecedents, but Gregory Barnstake never gave society an opportunity of showing its feelings, for he avoided as much as possible even necessary intercourse with his neighbours, and, as the villagers put it, “kept himself to himself”.

The doctor was the only man in the parish who had ever entered his house. Gregory Barnstake one afternoon fell down in a fit, and his servant ran to Dr. Sweetman and brought him in all haste to where the new inhabitant of Mapleton lay stretched on a couch, with his limbs cold and stiff and his eyes fixed and glassy, looking more like a corpse than a man.

In an hour’s time the rigidity left his limbs, and his eyes assumed their ordinary expression. Sitting up, his glance rested somewhat angrily on the doctor.

“Who are you?” he asked abruptly.

“Doctor Sweetman. I heard from your servant that you were ill, and came to see if I could be of any service.”

“Thank you. When I want physic I will send for you.”

The doctor, who was as merry and good-natured a little round man as you could wish to meet with, took this, of course, as a dismissal, and not a very polite one. He was not prone to take offence, but he could not feel pleased with such a reception.

“Good day, sir,” he said, opening the door.

“Stay a moment, doctor, I beg,” said Mr. Barnstake; “I fear I have offended you. Let me explain to you that these fits of mine come upon me at intervals. I can never tell when to expect them. They seize me and leave me in a state of torpor for one, two, or sometimes three hours, during which time no doctor’s skill could benefit me. When they have passed I recover at once, as you see I have done now.

“Is your mind unconscious at the time?’ asked Dr. Sweetman.

“Unconscious of the present, but living in the past,” was the answer with a weary sigh.

“Have you any pain when you are attacked in the first instance?” “Yes. I feel as if a hand of ice were laid over my heart; then that its hold tightens, causing me exquisite pain, till at last I fall senseless.

“Hum!” said the doctor; “a curious but not an unprecedented case. If you would allow me to send you something I fancy I could alleviate your sufferings.”

“Quite a mistake. You doctors go on prescribing medicine till you believe in their efficacy.”

“You have a bad opinion of the profession,” responded the doctor.

“Not of the profession so much, perhaps, as of those who practise it. The world is composed of knaves and fools; the fools take the medicines, the knaves prescribe.”

Retorted the doctor hotly:

“Then, sir, I am to conclude that you alone are superior to the world at large, as you are neither knave enough to prescribe, nor fool enough to take, prescriptions.”

“You are to conclude nothing of the sort, but to see in me an unfortunate man whose love of playing the knave led him on to play the fool, and reduced him to what he now is. If you knew the story of my life you . . .”

“Well, sir?”

“You would know the story of a miserable man.”

The doctor had to be content with that ending to the sentence, and took his leave, puzzling his head to make out whether he had been talking to a man whose brains were a little touched, or whether his conversation had been with one of those dark and mysterious heroes so often met with in books and melodramas, but so seldom in real life.

The months went by at Mapleton, the crops were gathered in and sown again, and Gregory Barnstake remained as great a mystery as ever. With the doctor he had had on one or two occasions short conversations, but with no one else had he interchanged more than a few words of abrupt courtesy.

A time came, however, when he was driven to consort with his neighbours. An enterprising railway company, having discovered there was no iron road near Mapleton, sent out its staff of surveyors to walk over the farms and inspect the country, with a view to making a branch line from Overbury through Mapleton to Harstone Heath, and the landowners rose in a body to repel the intrusive steam engines.

Gregory Barnstake received a letter to inform him of these facts, and that a meeting, commencing with a dinner, was to be held at the “Seven Stars” on a certain day for the purpose of remonstrating, petitioning, and doing anything that might be necessary to stop the proposed railway. To this letter he returned no answer.

A second was sent, repeating the substance of the first and adding the information that his house was the proposed site of the station. To this he rejoined that he was sorry to hear it, as he should certainly leave the place in the event of a railroad coming there, but that at the same time he must decline to attend the dinner.

However, still further pressure was put upon him, till at last, in an interview with Dr. Sweetman, he said angrily:

“Well, well, to save further words I will attend, but bear in mind whatever may happen I am not responsible.”

There were many reasons why his presence was so much desired at the meeting, the principal being that he was a person much interested, as the whole of the land he held on lease would be required by the railway company. Another, that it was whispered that he was very clever; that he read Latin and Greek books for amusement; and that mysterious volumes of matter incomprehensible, save to the learned, lay generally on the table by his side. Now the Mapletonians, as a rule, knew more of farming than of literature, and it was deemed that to have a man amongst them who would polish up any petition they might send forward, and to see to the correctness of expression in such letters as they might consider it incumbent on them to write, would be of the greatest advantage; and so it was that Gregory Barnstake was worried into a reluctant assent to attend the meeting.

The day, big with fate for the Mapletonians, arrived. The landowners and the majority of tenant-farmers met in the largest room of the “Seven Stars”, and, punctual to the minute, Gregory Barnstake entered. As the door opened to give him admission, he happened to be the subject of the conversation, and an awkward silence ensued as he came forward; but one or two speedily advanced towards him and gave him a hearty welcome, thanking him for breaking through his rule of never mixing with his neighbours, and hoping that, now he had commenced, they might often have the pleasure of seeing him, to all of which he answered, gravely and seriously, that it was no pleasure to him to mix in what was called society; but, as they had pressed him so much to be present on this occasion, he had felt he must do as they desired, “but,” he added, speaking loudly enough for the whole room to hear, “in accepting your invitation, I omitted to state that it would be impossible for me to come alone, and, therefore, I must beg that a chair may be set apart for another guest.”

Everyone was astonished, for never had Gregory Barnstake been seen talking familiarly with anyone, never had he been supposed to have any intimate; and yet there was some one from whom he could not be separated himself even for a few hours.

"Is your friend in any way interested in this proposed railway encroachment?" asked the squire.

"Not in the least."

"Has he any property about here?"

"None whatever."

"We have not expected anyone here today," stammered the squire, getting very red in the face, "who was not in some way connected or, at all events, interested in the subject we have met to discuss, but, of course . . ."

"If you have any objection I will at once withdraw."

"No, no; on no account. I was about to add that any friend of yours we would accept."

There was a silence, then a short desultory conversation, and in the middle of it dinner was announced.

"Has your friend arrived?" asked the squire of his strange acquaintance. "I see no unfamiliar face amongst us."

"He is not here, yet, but he is sure to come. If I may keep this seat next to me vacant for him, it is all I require."

No objection was made, the party took their seats, leaving that one chair unoccupied; the covers were removed, and the dinner commenced.

There was not much conversation then, for the Mapletonians held that to dine was one of the chief duties of man; but ere the first course was at an end the entire party, with one accord, raised their eyes from their plates and fixed them on a figure sitting in the chair that had been left vacant. Gregory Barnstake alone seemed quiet and unsurprised. In the chair by his side sat a man, remarkable more for his aristocratic appearance than for any beauty of feature. His age, apparently, was between forty and fifty; his hair and whiskers were iron grey, and arranged with scrupulous neatness and precision; but the most extraordinary thing about him was his complexion, which was of a pale ash hue, such as to cause more than one to shudder and wonder. Another peculiarity about him was his attire. He was in full evening dress. His black coat and spotless shirt front, his sparkling studs and snowy cravat, contrasted strangely with the farmers' shooting jackets and the squire's bird's-eye neckerchief.

Quietly he sat at table, eating nothing, but trifling with the fork laid beside his plate. No one had seen him enter, no one had observed him take his seat, but there he sat as calmly and unconcernedly as if he were a bidden guest, known to the whole company.

As he played with the fork with his left hand another fact was apparent, which was that the second and third fingers on that hand were wanting.

It was strange that, while the whole table paused to regard the stranger the only person who seemed unconscious of his presence was he who sat by his side, and through whose agency he was in the room. There was a great awkwardness about it, the squire thought, for Gregory Barnstake had apparently no intention of introducing him, and not one of the company seated in that warm gas-lighted room, with a good dinner on the table before them, but felt a sensation of uneasiness, for which they were totally unable to account.

"Come, gentlemen," said the squire, feeling it incumbent upon some one to break the silence, "there's no occasion for so much solemnity, I hope. Mr. Parkhurst, pleasure of a glass of wine with you."

Mr. Parkhurst filled his glass.

"Ah," continued the squire, "I remember old Tony buying this wine—very good it is, too-let me see when was it; '44 I think."

"No," said the stranger, "'48."

"I beg your pardon sir. Did you know Tony Bean?"

The stranger shook his head.

"Anyhow it was in the year Jem Hales was transported for poaching. His time's up now; he'll be coming home soon, I suppose."

"Jem Hales will never come home," said the stranger.

"Do you know him then?"

"I saw him a short time since."

"Indeed. In England?"

"No.''

"Where is he now?"

"In his grave."

The squire gazed, not without a certain amount of fear, on the uninvited guest, and pursued the matter no further.

The conversation at the dinner-table languished, and, in spite of one or two attempts to revive it, finally died into confidential whisperings between those sitting next each other.

With the removal of the cloth the spirits of the company revived, and the squire, getting on his legs, inveighed with all the eloquence of which he was master against all the railway companies, and that one in particular which threatened to destroy the primitive innocence of Mapleton. Everybody spoke at once, and the meeting had like to have proved a failure, but Gregory Barnstake, rousing himself, made a speech such as had never been heard in Mapleton, putting all the facts before them clearly and concisely, and urging the immediate drawing up and signing of the proposed petition.

All this time the stranger sat calm and immovable, but when preparations were being made for framing the petition he spoke.

"You may spare yourself trouble," he said; "your petition will be of no avail."

"How do you know that?" asked the squire sharply.

"I state a fact."

"Perhaps you are a shareholder in the company," said a farmer, in a tone meant to be sarcastic.

"This day nineteen months," said the stranger, "a train will pass through Mapleton."

"I hope you are a false prophet, sir," said the squire.

"I am not," rejoined the other.

In spite of his prediction, the petition was drawn up and signed, and the meeting broke up.

"You see we persevere in our plan, although you predict failure," said the squire, putting on his hat.

The stranger bowed.

"Good evening, sir."

"We shall meet again. In eight weeks."

"You are certainly a very circumstantial prophet," answered the squire, and with a slight bow he left the room.

Said Dr. Sweetman, taking Gregory Barnstake by the button, "an extraordinary-looking man, your friend."

"Very."

“Excuse me, I don’t wish to be impertinent, but, in the interest of my profession, do you know if he is suffering from any internal disease?”

“He is not. I can answer for it,” said Gregory with a slight shudder.

“It is strange. I never saw a living man with such a complexion.”

“He is not a living man,” was the reply, and the speaker walked away, leaving the little doctor gazing after him in frightened astonishment.

Eight weeks after this dinner the squire was out with the hounds, and his horse, in taking a hedge, stumbled, and pitched his rider over his head. The squire was not hurt, neither was the horse, for he trotted away, leaving his owner to follow as best he might, and over fields and hedges he went, till, on emerging from a small copse, he saw his steed standing by a pond, and near to him the figure of a man. The man was dressed in spotless evening attire, and was without a hat and the squire in a moment identified him as the stranger at the dinner two months before.

His appearance had been singular enough within the walls of the “Seven Stars”, but now to meet him in a precisely similar dress in the open country was much more startling, and the squire, though a brave man, would have avoided him if possible; he would have given a well-filled purse to have been able to reach his horse without passing by the motionless figure, but it was an impossibility, so, raising his hat and putting as bold a face on it as he could, he thanked the stranger for catching his beast, but received not a syllable in response. Only, at last, when he had remounted his horse did the figure move, then it turned towards him, and, stretching out the hand on which the two fingers were missing, pointed to the water.

The squire set spurs to his horse and rode away.

The days became weeks, and the weeks months, the railway company got permission to make their line through Mapleton, and some hundred navvys were busily employed in making an embankment. In draining the pond which was memorable to the squire they found something which induced them to leave off work for the time, and send for the authorities to the spot, and that something was the skeleton of a man half-buried in the mud.

Dr. Sweetman was, of course, amongst those summoned. The bones were left untouched for his inspection.

“It’s strange,” he said, when he had finished his inspection, “but there are two fingers wanting.”

There was nothing to be done after the inquiry but to place the bones in a coffin and inter them in the churchyard; but an idea had come into the doctor’s head—a fancy—that Gregory Barnstake might know something of the skeleton. Had not that mysterious friend of his lacked two fingers of his left hand? So the doctor, on his way home, called at the house at the end of the village.

He rapped at the door with his knuckles, but received no answer. The door was on the latch and he pushed it open. He entered the sitting-room where he had had his first interview with its strange occupant, and the first thing that met his eyes was Gregory Barnstake stretched on the floor, his handsome face terribly distorted with pain—dead!

Was he really dead, or was it only one of those strange fits to which he was subject? The little doctor tried every test, and decided it was really death that had come upon him; that the agony of one of those fits had killed him. For the rest, I hardly dare tell you; but nevertheless it is true that, when the body came to be examined, over the heart were distinctly discernable the livid marks as of a hand pressed tightly there, but of a hand of which the second and third fingers were wanting.

That is the story I had to tell you. You are welcome to put what interpretation on it you please. It was a mystery, and a mystery it will always remain. I cannot attempt to give you a clue to one of the strangest stories it has ever been my lot to hear and know to be true.

In conclusion, I can only add that there are now at least a dozen men alive who can vouch for the accuracy of the facts I have stated, but who, like myself, whatever may be their opinions, forbear to attempt an explanation of this strange occurrence to which I, perhaps without sufficient reason, have given the name of “The Tale of a Gas-light Ghost.”