

At the Dip of the Road

By Mrs. Molesworth

Have I ever seen a ghost? I do not know.

That is the only reply I can truthfully make to the question nowadays so often asked. And sometimes, if inquirers care to hear more, I go on to tell them the one experience which makes it impossible for me to reply positively either in the affirmative or negative, and restricts me to "I do not know."

This was the story.

I was staying with relations in the country. Not a very isolated or out-of-the-way part of the world, and yet rather inconvenient of access by the railway, for the nearest station was six miles off. Though the family I was visiting were nearly connected with me I did not know much of their home or its neighbourhood, as the head of the house, an uncle of mine by marriage, had only come into the property a year or two previously to the date of which I am writing, through the death of an elder brother.

It was a nice place. A good comfortable old house, a prosperous, satisfactory estate. Everything about it was in good order from the farmers—who always paid their rents—to the shooting—which was always good—and from the vineries—which were noted—to the woods, where the earliest primroses in all the countryside were to be found each year.

And my uncle and aunt and their family deserved these pleasant things and made a good use of them.

But there was a touch of the commonplace about it all. There was nothing picturesque or romantic. The country was flat though fertile, and the house, though old, was conveniently modern in its arrangements, airy, cheery and bright.

"Not even a ghost, or the shadow of one," I remember saying one day with a faint grumble.

"Ah, well—as to that," said my uncle, "perhaps we—" but just then something interrupted him, and I forgot his unfinished speech.

Into the happy party of which for the time being I was one, there fell one morning a sudden thunderbolt of calamity. The post brought news of the alarming illness of the eldest daughter, Frances, married a year or two ago and living—as the crow flies—at no very great distance. But as the crow flies is not always as the railroad runs, and to reach the Aldoyn's home from Fawne Court, my uncle's place, was a complicated business. In fact it was scarcely possible to go and return in a day.

"Can one of you come over?" wrote the young husband. "She is already out of danger, but longing to see her mother or one of you. She is worrying about the baby"—a child of a few months old—"and wishing for a nurse."

We looked at each other.

"Nurse must go at once," said my uncle to me, as the eldest of the party. Perhaps I should here say that I am a widow, though not old, and with no close ties or responsibilities. "But for your aunt it is impossible."

"Quite so," I agreed. For she was at the moment painfully lamed by rheumatism.

"And the other girls are almost too young at such a crisis," my uncle continued. "Would you, Charlotte—" and he hesitated. "It would be such a comfort to have personal news of her."

“Of course I will go,” I said. “Nurse and I can start at once. I will leave her there, and return alone to give you, I have no doubt, better news of poor Frances.”

He was full of gratitude. So were they all.

“Don’t hurry back tonight,” said my uncle. “Stay till—till Monday if you like.” But I could not promise. I knew they would be glad of news at once, and in a small house like my cousin’s, at such a time, an inmate the more might be inconvenient.

“I will try to return tonight,” I said. And as I sprang into the carriage I added: “Send someone to meet the last train, unless I telegraph to the contrary.”

My uncle nodded; the boys called after me, “All right”; the old butler bowed assent, and I was satisfied.

Nurse and I reached our journey’s end promptly, considering the four or five junctions at which we had to change carriages. But on the whole, the trains fitted astonishingly.

We found Frances better, delighted to see us, eager for news of her mother, and, finally, disposed to sleep peacefully now that she knew that there was an experienced person in charge. And both she and her husband thanked me so much that I felt ashamed of the little I had done. Mr. Aldoyne begged me to stay till Monday—but the house was upset and I was eager to carry back my good tidings.

“They are meeting me from the last train,” I said. “No thank you, I think it is best I go.”

“You will have an uncomfortable journey,” he replied. “It is Saturday, and the trains will be late, and the stations crowded with the market people. It will be horrid for you, Charlotte.”

But I persisted.

It *was* rather horrid. And it was queer. There was a sort of uncanny eeriness about that Saturday evening’s journey that I have never forgotten. The season was very early spring. It was not very cold, but chilly and ungenial. And there were such odd sorts of people about. I travelled second—class; for I am not rich and I am very independent. I did not want my uncle to pay my fare, for I liked the feeling of rendering some small service in return for his steady kindness to me. The first stage of my journey was performed in the company of two old naturalists travelling to Scotland to look for some small plant which was to be found only in one spot in the Highlands. This I gathered from their talk to each other. You never saw two such extraordinary creatures as they were. They both wore black kid gloves much too large for them, and the ends of the fingers waved about like feathers.

Then followed two or three short transits, interspersed with weary waitings at stations. The last of these was the worst, and tantalising too, for by this time I was within a few miles of Moore. The station was crowded with rough folk, all, it seemed to me, more or less tipsy. So I took refuge in a dark waiting-room on the small side of the line by which I was to proceed, where I felt I might have been robbed and murdered and no one the wiser.

But at last came my slow train and I jumped in—to jump out again more joyfully some fifteen minutes later when we drew up.

I peered about for the carriage. It was not to be seen; only two or three tax—carts or dog—carts, farmers’ vehicles, standing about, while their owners, it was easy to hear, were drinking far more than was good for them in the taproom of the Unicorn. Thence, nevertheless—not to the taproom, but to the front of the inn—I made my way, though not undismayed by the shouts and roars breaking the stillness of the quiet night. “Was the Fawne Court carriage not here?” I asked.

The landlady was a good-natured woman, especially civil to any member of the “Court” family. But she shook her head.

“No, no carriage has been down today. There must have been some mistake.”

There was nothing for it but to wait till she could somehow or other disinter a fly and horse, and, worst of all a driver. For the men she had to call were all rather. . . “well, ma’am, you see it’s Saturday night. We weren’t expecting any one.”

And when, after waiting half an hour, the fly at last emerged, my heart almost failed me. Even before he drove out of the yard, it was very plain that if we ever reached Fawne Court alive, it would certainly be more thanks to good luck than to the driver’s management.

But the horse was old and the man had a sort of instinct about him. We got on all right till we were more than half way to our journey’s end. The road was straight and the moonlight bright, especially after we had passed a certain corner, and got well out of the shade of the trees which skirted the first part of the way.

Just past this turn there came a dip in the road. It went down, down gradually, for a quarter of a mile or more, and I looked up anxiously, fearful of the horse taking advantage of the slope. But no, he jogged on, if possible more slowly than before, though new terrors assailed me when I saw that the driver was now fast asleep, his head swaying from side to side with extraordinary regularity. After a bit I grew easier again; he seemed to keep his equilibrium, and I looked out at the side window on the moon-flooded landscape, with some interest. I had never seen brighter moonlight.

Suddenly from out of the intense stillness and loneliness a figure, a human figure, became visible. It was that of a man, a young and active man, running along the footpath a few feet to our left, apparently from some whim, keeping pace with the fly. My first feeling was of satisfaction that I was no longer alone, at the tender mercies of my stupified charioteer. But, as I gazed, a slight misgiving came over me. Who could be running along this lonely road so late, and what was his motive in keeping up with us so steadily. It almost seemed as if he had been waiting for us, yet that, of course, was impossible. He was not very highwayman—like certainly; he was well dressed—neatly dressed that is to say, like a superior gamekeeper—his figure was remarkably good, tall and slight, and he ran gracefully. But there was something queer about him, and suddenly the curiosity that had mingled in my observation of him was entirely submerged in alarm, when I saw that, as he ran, he was slowly but steadily drawing nearer and nearer the fly.

“In another moment he will be opening the door and jumping in,” I thought, and I glanced before me only to see that the driver was more hopelessly asleep than before; there was no chance of his hearing if I called out. And get out I could not without attracting the strange runner’s attention, for as ill-luck would have it, the window was drawn up on the right side and I could not open the door without rattling the glass. While, worse and worse, the left-hand window was down! Even that slight protection wanting!

I looked out once more. By this time the figure was close—very close to the fly. Then an arm was stretched out and laid along the edge of the door, as if preparatory to opening it, and then, for the first time, I saw his face.

It was a young face, but terribly, horribly pale and ghastly, and the eyes—all was so visible in the moonlight—had an expression such as I had never seen before or since. It terrified me, though afterwards on recalling it, it seemed to me that it might have been more a look of agonised appeal than of menace of any kind.

I cowered back into my corner and shut my eyes, feigning sleep. It was the only idea that occurred to me. My heart was beating like a sledge hammer. All sorts of thoughts rushed through me; amongst them I remember saying to myself: “He must be an escaped lunatic—his eyes are so awfully wild.”

How long I sat thus I don't know—whenever I dared to glance out furtively he was still there. But all at once a strange feeling of relief came over me. I sat up—yes, he was gone! And though, as I took courage, I leant out and looked round in every direction, not a trace of him was to be seen, though the road and the fields were bare and clear for a long distance around.

When I got to Fawne Court I had to wake the lodge-keeper—everyone was asleep. But my uncle was still up, though not expecting me, and very distressed he was at the mistake about the carriage.

“However,” he concluded, “all's well that ends well. It's delightful to have your good news. But you look sadly pale and tired, Charlotte.”

Then I told him of my fright—it seemed now so foolish of me, I said. But my uncle did not smile—on the contrary.

“My dear,” he said, “it sounds very like our ghost, though, of course, it may have been only one of the keepers.”

He told me the story. Many years ago in his grandfather's time, a young and favourite gamekeeper had been found dead in a field skirting the road down there. There was no sign of violence upon the body; it was never explained what had killed him. But he had had in his charge a watch—a very valuable one—which his master or some reason or other had handed him to take home to the house, not wishing to keep it on him. And when the body was found late that night, the watch was not on it. Since then, so the story goes, on a moonlight night the spirit of the poor fellow haunts the spot. It is supposed that he wants to tell what had become of his master's watch, which was never found. But no one has ever had the courage to address him.

“He never comes farther than the dip in the road,” said my uncle. “If you had spoken to him, Charlotte, I wonder if he would have told you his secret?”

He spoke half laughingly, but I have never quite forgiven myself for my cowardice. It was the look in those terrible eyes!