

# The Haunting of White Gates

By G. M. Robins

## I

In a Vault not far from this Tablet  
Repose the mortal Remains  
of two Protestant Gentlewomen,  
Mrs. ANNA and Mrs. CLARA KENTON,  
of White Gates, in this Parish.  
For many Years they led a Life of  
Virtuous Retirement, united in Sisterly Affection.  
They lived to mourn the loss of amiable Parents, of three  
Brothers, and two Sisters,  
Whose names are duly recorded on a Tablet in the Chancel,  
and after presenting to the World a shining Example of  
Christian Patience, Fortitude, and Resignation,  
quitted this Life for a better, in sure and certain  
Expectation of future Glory.  
Mrs. ANNA deceased Dec. 8, 18—, Mrs. CLARA surviving her  
beloved Sister only one month and three days.  
This Monument is erected  
by the Piety of their Nephew and sole Descendant,  
JOSHUA KENYON HACKETT,  
In Commemoration of Qualities in this life, Alas! too rare!

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The soft dark eyes of a young girl in a shady black hat and feathers perused with languid interest the information recorded on the square, ugly marble tablet, mounted upon slate, which adorned the wall just above the mouldering oak pew labelled "White Gates."

The piety of the sole descendant of the Kenyon family had limited itself to a very plain, not to say bald memorial of his maiden aunts. Not a carving, not a flourish, no death's-head, nor dove, nor weeping willow, testified to the depth of his affection.

Muriel North, whose imagination was keen, found herself taking a definite dislike to the idea of Mr. Joshua Hackett's personality, while she speculated as to the grammatical accuracy of his description of himself as the *descendant* of these irreproachable ladies.

The date of the tablet was twenty years earlier than the dull November Sunday upon which Miss North formed, for the first time, a part of the scanty congregation in the ramshackle village church.

"Why doesn't he live at White Gates himself, instead of letting it?" she idly mused, as the Litany came to an end, and the aged clerk, pulling himself to his feet with an effort, gave out a hymn.

Terrible groans in the west gallery announced the preliminary spasms of the harmonium; and then the shrill quavering voices of the schoolchildren broke out into song.

The place, the ritual, were survivals such as are yet to be found in the remoter agricultural districts of England. Muriel had never been in such a church, never assisted at such a function before; and it added to a curious sense of remoteness from the world she knew, which had assailed her as soon as she arrived at White Gates yesterday.

The chambers which, in London, she shared with two girl friends, and the city office in which her daily lot was cast, with a typewriter, were things alien, far removed from the moaning, desolate wolds, the silent, depopulated waste which surrounded the village of Longstreet Parva.

Coming at last out of church, from the oppression of mustiness and dry-rot, and the suggestion of wet vaults and gaping coffins under the uneven stone slabs of the floor, there encompassed her a heaving expanse of country sown with the graves of a race that had ceased to be, before the armed tread of Cæsar's legions shook the land. Even in summer a wind always moaned about the hill where the church stood; now, in the dreary November, the gusts whistled and screamed, and sprinkled Muriel's dainty hat and feathers with the first drops of the water they had drawn as they scudded over the cold bosom of the Atlantic.

Below her a creeping mist hid the village—rent here and there by a desultory wind that had no heart to persevere.

The contorted chimneys of White Gates showed against black fir-trees.

"No wonder they let it cheap," reflected Muriel, as she descended the hill.

The few worshippers dispersed in silence.

Nobody spoke to the girl. The natives of the Wolds are not a friendly race. Perhaps in their blood still lurks the memory of a time when they dwelt in pile-raised villages in the marshes to escape their foes.

"It may have been bearable in summer," Miss North was thinking, as she pushed open one of the white gates and walked among the yellow leaves to the unpretentious house door, "but in winter—rather they than I!"

"They" were Muriel's father and his second wife. Being very poor and in weak health, it was but natural that Major North should marry again; and still more natural that he should become the property of the most impecunious of the ladies who showed him special attention at the boarding-houses frequented by him and his daughters. Two of these daughters, Evie and Constance, married; Muriel, the youngest, chose to be independent. But the chronic ill-health of the major had now developed into positive disease; and Mrs. North had implored Muriel to come and relieve her for a time of a portion of her heavy nursing duties.

The firm in whose employ the girl worked well knew her value, and readily agreed to keep her post for her during her father's illness; so she repaired, as in duty bound, to the remote village where the couple resided in a house of some pretensions, which they had procured ridiculously cheap.

"Oh, he's better to-day," said Mrs. North, as she and her step-daughter sat down to their Sunday roast beef and apple tart. "I think your coming cheered him up. The church is rather depressing, isn't it?"

"The whole place seems to me a little depressing," said Muriel, with a shiver, thinking of her terribly cold drive from the station the previous day, eleven miles across the wold in a carrier a cart. "I dare say it's better in summer."

“It’s very pretty,” said Mrs. North eagerly, “and such a nice house! Stables, you know, and the rent so low, owing to the distance from the railway; your father is able to keep his horse, his great pleasure. He was so counting upon the hunting this winter.” She sighed regretfully.

“He may get some yet,” said Muriel hopefully. “He is not nearly so ill as I expected to find him.”

“He’s been so well all the autumn, and taking such an interest in the place,” regretted his wife. “Really it is so far beyond anything we thought our means would allow, and yet not a big house, not expensive to keep up. And the garden so well stocked! Mr. Hackett had it all attended to in spite of the house being empty for so long.”

“Was the house long empty?”

“Oh, dear yes. People don’t care for remote places now-a-days. Every one is for railways and telephones and automobiles. The house-agent told us he had only to say, ‘In the Cotswolds,’ and intending tenants fled!”

“I wonder Mr. Hackett should let it, if it is his family place,” mused Muriel. “One’s own place never seems remote—at least, so I should have fancied.”

“He did live here for a time,” was the reply, “but I don’t think he was popular in the neighbourhood; anyhow, he left, and all kinds of people have had it since. But it suits us admirably. Not a large neighbourhood, but every one has called; your father’s position, you know.” And the poor soul, whose life’s ambition had been fulfilled when she married an “army man,” smiled in satisfaction.

Muriel would not for worlds have damped Agnes’s simple pride, so she said nothing; but she felt that, personally, she did not consider the house comfortable.

It was not old enough to be picturesque or quaint. The rooms were square, with early Victorian sash windows. A horrible green iron verandah made dark the interior of the dining- and drawing-rooms. It was hard to believe that, at any season of the year, the Cotswolds would feel themselves in harmony with that flimsy erection.

This girl was quick to feel local influences. Her own mother had been a Celt, pure-blooded, the descendant of a race of Irish kings; and Muriel had inherited, with her clear skin and wonderful eyes, the sensitive temperament which is so curiously alive to the pressure of the unseen through nature’s visible order.

More than one curious experience, of a nature almost too elusive to be chronicled, had fallen to her lot; and once, as quite a small child, she had declined to sleep in a certain house where lodgings had been taken by the family, and had sobbed without reason, refusing to be left alone, and next day it was discovered that a corpse lay that night in the room next that in which the child slept.

Her thoughts, as that afternoon she sat by her father’s bed, were of the two old Protestant gentlewomen whose bones had lain somewhere not far from the soles of her boots as she sat in the melancholy church that morning.

What kind of lives had they really led, concealed in that Virtuous Retirement which figured so well upon their tombstone? Had they quarrelled? Or had they clung together the closer, as Fate tore from them, one by one, all those who had formerly played and romped with them through the gardens of White Gates? Had their hearts broken, under the stroke of some forsaking lover, keener even than the death of brother or sister? Or had they been content to vegetate and make up their lives out of servants’ shortcomings, fruit preserving, and the gossip of a scanty neighbourhood? Food for much conjecture floated in the brain of Muriel, sitting where they might have sat, beside a sickbed—perhaps the very same bed which had held the pining, dying

limbs of many Kenyons. It was a mahogany four-poster, upholstered in gay new chintz, according to the taste of Mrs. North. Muriel wished it still wore the green damask hangings and woollen fringe which formed, she was certain, its original garment.

This room looked to the front of the house, and had a communicating dressing-room. The two best bedrooms were at the back, over the dining- and drawing-rooms, and these also had a communicating door. Muriel felt certain that it was these two latter rooms which had watched over the virgin slumbers of the Protestant gentlewomen.

On the other side of the landing was a bachelor's room, now assigned to her own use, as it was possible, even in this weather, to warm it with a fire. Here she felt certain that Joshua had slept, when he came on a visit to his maiden aunts.

It was a bitterly cold night. Muriel passed it on a sofa at the foot of her father's bed, Mrs North occupying the bachelor's room, that she might get a sound night's rest for the first time in many weeks.

All through the dark hours the girl's dreams were confused. The thoughts she had cherished during the gloomy day, of death and dissolution, in that house, that bed, filled her brain with curious imaginings. The light tread of watchers, the slow shuffling step of undertaker's men, the murmur of voices round a bed, and of deep groaning breaths, woke her again and again, but always to find the room quiet and her father sleeping peacefully. Yet, as soon as her eyes, still weary with her long cold journey of yesterday, closed again, the weird procession passed before her brain, the ceaseless out-going of the dead from White Gates! The tolling of the bell in the crazy church tower smote her ear, every room contained a corpse, watched with candles. People moved to and fro, doing the last sad offices. The very smell of death was in her nostrils as she struggled awake again. The night-light burned beside her watch; it was half-past five.

Rising noiselessly she put fresh billets on the dying fire, and kindled it afresh, listened with satisfaction to the major's even breathing, and was just about to lie down again when she heard a door softly close.

In the absolute stillness the sound seemed all the more audible because it was manifestly made with extreme caution, by one not desiring to be heard.

"How vexing of Agnes to be awake and on the fidget when she might be having a good night," she thought; and, hurrying swiftly to the door, she peeped across the passage with the design of assuring her step-mother that all was well. A lamp was burning upon a small table on the landing, as the two women thought it quite possible that communication between them during the night might be necessary.

Just outside the door of the room in which Mrs. North was sleeping, and immediately opposite Muriel, a young woman stood, her hand still on the latch of the door. She was tall, fair, pale, with a look of great determination, and a rigid line of jaw which was especially noticeable. Her eyes gave the impression of being artificially darkened beneath, and her fair hair was elaborately puffed and waved.

As Muriel peeped out, she was in the act of turning quickly away from the door which she had just closed; her face was but for a moment visible, then she turned round and walked swiftly along the passage leading to the other end of the house, where the servants' rooms were.

This passage was considerably to the right of where Muriel stood, beyond the stair-head; and the woman was thus completely lost to view the moment she reached it.

Two things in her appearance struck the gazing girl as odd. One was the expression—as of a mind tensely nerved to some special effort—which appeared on her strong face—the thin lips compressed, the eyes narrowed; the other was a small point, but curious. As she turned her back,

it could be seen that her conspicuous-looking hair was arranged in a large ball behind, and that this ball was encircled by a string of beads, apparently tied beneath with ribbon streamers, which hung down her dress to the waist.

Her presence mildly surprised Muriel. She knew that there was only one indoor servant—a capable, elderly person, whom she had already seen; but she had heard her step-mother mention a young dressmaker from the village, who had come in to help her with the nursing, and she took it for granted that this was she. Still, it was both annoying and puzzling to find her prowling about the passage at such an hour; and her appearance conveyed anything but a favourable impression.

Leaving the door at which she stood slightly ajar, she slipped noiselessly across the landing, turned the handle of Mrs. North's door, and peeped in.

The night-light showed the occupant of the bed motionless in the heavy sleep of the thoroughly tired woman.

On reflection it was perhaps natural to suppose that the dressmaker had come to ascertain that the worn-out watcher was really getting the rest she needed; but Muriel had not liked her expression, and returned to bed somewhat displeased at the incident.

"What is the name of the young woman, the dressmaker you told me of, who is sleeping in the house?" she asked when she and Agnes met down-stairs at breakfast, having left the patient comfortable after his good night.

"What, Miss Abel? But she is not sleeping in the house now; she went home yesterday morning."

"She was sleeping, or, I should say, walking about the house at half-past five this morning," replied Muriel. "I was making up the fire, and heard your door shut. I thought you were on the fidget, and looked out to see; and she was standing just outside your door listening. I thought it rather queer, for she was fully dressed; but I supposed she thought she might be wanted."

Mrs. North, who had listened with open mouth, turned extremely red.

"Oh," she said nervously, "then—then, I suppose Miss Abel came back. I did not know; now I think of it, I believe I remember her saying something of the kind. She has been very attentive, and probably thought, as you say, that I might want her."

"Very attentive; but she doesn't look like a country dressmaker, her dress did fit and hang so remarkably well."

"I will ask Caroline," murmured Agnes, and, taking up her keys, she hurriedly went out of the room, leaving Muriel rather mystified. Miss Abel's appearance had impressed her most disagreeably, and she wondered at Mrs. North's liking to have such a person about; but then Agnes was always odd—apt to foregather with the most unlikely people.

## II

At about eleven o'clock that morning the doctor arrived: a hale, elderly man, who seemed imbued with the strong, robust air of the Cotswolds, and whose general appearance captivated

Muriel. She soon found that he knew all there was to know of every house, church, family, estate, barrow, or cromlech in the district; and with the keenest interest she began to ply him with questions about the Kenyons and White Gates.

"I remember them well, of course," he said. "I knew the whole family from a boy, but I had been already ten years in practice here when Miss Anna was found dead in her bed."

"Was she found dead in her bed?" asked the girl, with breathless interest.

He nodded. "Sudden failure of the heart's action," he said. "But what caused it, my dear—what caused it is another matter, and did not come within the scope of my certificate."

"Then you knew what caused it?"

"Certainly not; nobody knew. I do not suppose anybody ever will."

"What kind of old ladies were they, really?" asked Muriel.

"They were about the most detestable people I ever was personally acquainted with," responded the doctor simply. The girl's eager eyes drew him on, and after a bit he resumed. "The whole family of Kenyon was as odious as it is possible for people to be who live within the narrowest borders of respectability. The father of these two old women had made money in Bristol, and built this house upon the site of a farm which had belonged to his family for generations. He was a morose, evil-tempered man, repulsively ugly; and his wife was worse. The children were most of them sickly in constitution, and all hideous. One of the seven was an idiot—they used to say she was ill-treated, and had been heard to scream o' nights; she died in her early teens. The eldest son also died young. The eldest daughter ran away with a gamekeeper named Hackett. She was the least ill-favoured of the lot, but as ill-conditioned as any, I should say. The second son went to London, and formed a *liaison* with some woman, so was not received at home. The others all died unmarried, fortunately for society; it was a stock one could not wish to see preserved. The Hacketts had one son; shortly after his birth they quarrelled—going, as I understand, to the length of fire-irons and carving-knives—and separated. I imagine he had thought he should get money out of the old man, and ill-treated his wife when he found he could not. She came back home with the child, who was brought up in this house; he was about thirty years old when his aunts died, and for nearly twenty years they had been his only living relations."

"Were they rich?"

"They were commonly reported to be so. All the neighbourhood knew them as misers. They lived almost without servants, for their temper was so bad that nobody would stay with them. One woman, who had been their nurse when they were children, remained faithful; she survived them a few years. Except for her there was no indoor servant, save such women as could be persuaded to come in by the day from the village; and they kept no horses. But the curious thing, the thing that has never been explained, was—what became of their money? . . . They left Hackett, their nephew, heir of all they possessed, on the sole condition of his erecting a suitable monument to their memory in the church. But when he came to examine their affairs, there was found to be just enough invested stock to bring in about £300 a year—a sum which would have more than covered their annual expenses for years past. Their lawyer—a solicitor of very good standing in Bristol—told Hackett that, ever since they had been mistress of their fortune they had been realizing large sums of money, whenever the condition of the market was advantageous. They had sold land, they had sold shares, they were constantly having big consignments of bank-notes sent down to them at White Gates. He had an idea that they turned this money into gems, or gold plate, or something concrete, which they could look at and treasure. There was something like forty thousand pounds to be accounted for. You look interested, Miss North."

"I should think so! Do go on! Who would have thought that Virtuous Retirement could be so sensational? Please—what happened?"

"Why, nothing. The money was not forthcoming, that was all."

"Surely the heir searched—"

"Searched? I should think so! After due investigation of the safe—"

"The safe! What safe?"

“Oh, haven’t you seen the safe? The one built into the wall of Miss Anna’s room!

“Do show me,” urged Muriel.

They were talking in the dressing-room adjoining the patient’s room, and the doctor, laughing to find so charming a listener to his gossip, led the girl across the landing, and opened the door into one of the two large communicating bedrooms at the back of the house.

In the wall between these rooms was fixed the iron door of a safe: and there were signs that the wall had been artificially thickened for its reception, for the doorway leading from one room to the next was furnished with two doors, and between these was comfortable space for a person to stand.

“The will,” said the doctor, “Particularly included the contents of the safe, in the list of the possessions to which Hackett was to succeed. But, when opened, it contained only a few trinkets which had belonged to the sisters, and a fair quantity of silver plate, the total value of the whole collection being perhaps fifty pounds. Everything was neatly arranged, packed, and labelled. There was no appearance of anything having been disturbed.

“Hackett had the place pretty well pulled down, the safe taken from the wall, the space between the walls examined, inch by inch, the interior and exterior measurements of every inch of space ascertained mathematically. Then the floor, both of this and the adjoining room, was taken up, bit by bit, the beams and rafters overhauled, every scrap of furniture taken to pieces, the frames of the beds, the very rungs of the chairs subjected to the minutest scrutiny, since miserly old maiden ladies have strange ideas of securing the safety of their treasures. Every scrap of writing existing in the house was carefully gone through to see if any clue could be found. The old servant, of whom I spoke—her name was Deborah Blaize—declared most positively that her mistresses had frequent dealings with diamond merchants, that she had actually seen a sapphire which they told her was worth two thousand pounds; and that she knew for a fact that these treasures were packed in the safe, the gems being secured inside a dispatch-box with a triple lock, of which Miss Anna always wore the three keys on a slender gold chain round her neck, under her clothes.”

“Surely the diamond merchants could have been found,” broke in Muriel.

“Hackett could not discover them. Neither were there any keys found round Miss Anna’s neck at her death. There was no document found bearing the slightest reference to any such transactions. You see,” said the doctor, “the difficulty was this. Nothing of the terms of the will, nor of the existence of the secret hoard, came to light till the death of Miss Clara, who was the elder, but much the weaker-minded of the couple. In fact, I never used to think her quite ‘all there,’ as the saying is; but she was left by her father absolute mistress of the house and the money, because he had a spite against Anna, the only one of the family who used to dare to browbeat him. Anna ruled the roast, however, but it was thought extremely likely that her desire to realize the property was the result of a fear that she might die first, and Clara be induced to alter her will, or otherwise imposed upon. Clara survived her sister more than a month, so there was no question of opening the will until her death. It is perfectly possible, indeed most likely, that she, who was the one to find her sister dead, would instantly remove from her neck the chain and keys that guarded the treasure, and hide or dispose of them as best occurred to her. The two seem to have acted completely in concert about most things, though it was always Anna who led, and Clara who followed.”

“What did the elder, Miss Clara, die of?”

“Primarily, of the family scourge—consumption; they all had either weak hearts or weak lungs. The shock of her sister’s death, and exposure to the cold in her night-dress, brought on a paralytic stroke, and bronchitis supervened.”

“Exposure?” queried Muriel.

The doctor nodded, pointing to the adjoining room.

“She slept in there. The door of communication was always open, and they burned a light all night—their solitary extravagance. One terribly cold night—a bitter black frost and an icy wind, such as we revel in here in Longstreet—old Deborah was aroused by being violently shaken in her bed, and sitting up in the pitch darkness, cried aloud to know who was there, getting in reply only curious, inarticulate sounds. Wild with terror she struck a light, expecting to find herself in the clutches of a lunatic; but it was Miss Clara who stood there, speechless, and with her mouth drawn horribly to one side. She wore only her nightdress, and was as cold as ice. Huddling on some clothes, Deborah ran with her along the passage to Miss Anna’s room; and there, in that place—the doctor pointed—“though not in that bed you see before you—the old one was simply cut to bits afterwards to find treasure—there sat Miss Anna, still grim, erect, facing them—glaring at them in her frilled nightcap, with eyes astare, stone dead!”

Muriel gave an involuntary gasp. The horror of that situation, and of the two lonely old women in the grip of it, made her shudder.

“Was the nephew in the house?” she asked.

“No, oh no, he was in Bristol.”

“Were there any signs of confusion in the room?”

“None whatever, nothing to make any one fancy that any special thing had occurred in the night. Miss Clara could not speak, and the idea of writing does not seem to have occurred to her feeble brain in the first moments of horror, so no suspicion was aroused. On ascertaining that Miss Anna was dead, old Deborah tried to force the body into a recumbent position. But it was frozen stiff; and, at that culminating horror, the old woman told me that her nerve deserted her, and she rushed screaming from the room. Her first care was to bestow the shivering, trembling old Miss Clara in her own bed, then she rushed from the house, roused the gardener, who then lived in the cottage across the road, and sent him for me.

“When I got here Miss Clara was delirious—quite wandering in the head. She had still the use of her hands at that time, and had her brain been clear, she could have written us some account of what had passed in the dead hours of that night. She was icy cold when she aroused Deborah, we felt sure she must have been long out of bed. But she was never sensible again till very near death, when she evidently wished to say something, but by that time all power of communicating anything had left her. On the day of Miss Anna’s death there was a severe snowfall, I never remember a worse in all my winters on these wolds. It was some days before we could send a telegram to Hackett, two or three more before he could reach White Gates. When he came, it was evident that his surviving aunt was dying, and he could do nothing but wait for the end. He knew of the treasure in the safe, though I fancy he had no idea of its comprising the bulk of their fortune; but nobody said a word that could lead him to suppose it had been tampered with. The shock of finding her sister dead was more than enough to account for Miss Clara’s seizure. It was not until her death that old Deborah first awoke his suspicions by saying that she could not find the triple keys, and at there dawned upon us all the extreme probability that something might have happened on that night to cause the failure of heart which had killed Miss Anna.

“It was then too late to search for traces—the snow out of doors and house-cleaning within had eliminated all such; the only thing that could be called a clue at all, was the testimony of a

charwoman to the effect that, some weeks after Miss Anna's death, she had found the remains of burnt paper in the stove in the hall, which was never by any chance lighted."

"You suppose, then, that the valuables really were in the safe, but were carried off by a thief?"

"Against that theory is the fact that no such person was ever seen or heard of; and that the safe was apparently quite undisturbed, being securely locked when Hackett first examined it, the key in its usual position in the old ladies' key-box. On the other hand, the triple keys, of whose existence old Deborah was positive, were gone. There was no sort of reason, either then or afterwards, to doubt old Deborah's complete fidelity. Most people inclined strongly to the idea that the jewels were concealed somewhere in the house, and this opinion grew when months went by and no sales of important gems could be discovered to have taken place, though Hackett had people on the watch everywhere. He and his wife came and lived here for a bit, for it turned out that he was married, had been secretly married for more than a year. He did nothing all the time but ransack the place, quite fruitlessly. Soon his wife died, in her first confinement. He said then that the house was no better than a grave, and he went back to Bristol with his little boy. Then there was a rush of people anxious to rent White Gates; everybody thought that they were sure to discover the treasure. But it has never been found; perhaps you may hit upon it, Miss North."

"Perhaps; I shall dream of it, at least," she laughed. "Why, here comes Agnes, wondering what on earth we are plotting here in the cold!"

Mrs. North looked surprised, and anything but pleased, to find them in this room.

"I am showing Miss North the safe," said Dr. Forrest. "You ought to get her to find the treasure for you, ma'am; she looks a bit of a *clairvoyante*."

"Oh, I don't believe that nonsense about the treasure," said Mrs. North frigidly. "Muriel dear, go to your father, I want to speak to the doctor;" and, as the girl left the room, she heard her begin, urgently, "I do hope you have not—" The rest was lost in the shutting of the door; but as she moved away, she caught the doctor's hearty response—

"No, no, my dear madam, certainly not!"

That night Muriel slept soundly and undisturbed in the small front room, never moving until awakened at eight o'clock. The major also slept well, so well that on the morrow his wife declared that she did not want her "night off" again; but Muriel insisted.

"While I am here, I may as well do my share," she urged.

Accordingly she slept again on the sofa, and slept well until two o'clock, when her father woke, and grew restless. As it soon appeared that he was not likely to sleep again, Muriel suggested reading aloud; he seemed pleased with the idea. She had a volume of Kipling with her, which she had left in the drawing-room, so, lighting a candle, she softly stole from the room to get it. There was, perhaps, a half-thought in her mind that Miss Abel might be prowling on the landing; but she was not there, nor in the house at all, as far as Muriel knew. She went with noiseless feet to the stair-head, the thoughts that occupied her being, as nearly as she could afterwards remember, as to which of the stories in *Life's handicap* she should select to soothe the major.

She was half-way down; her candle flung long, wavering shadows across the hall; something light, something that moved, caught her eye in the darkness near the floor. She turned her light fully upon the place, grasping the balustrade, and with an undefined feeling of expectation in her heart she stood still.

There was a woman, stooping, crawling on her hands and knees, upon the black and red diamond tiles that paved the hall. The curiously fair hair, with its conspicuous arrangement,

could only belong to Miss Abel. What in the world was she about? The momentary terror became merged in curiosity; she was picking up something from the floor.

Muriel saw the quick movement of her hand as it pounced on an apparently very small object, took it up, glanced at it, bestowed it in some receptacle. Then, as though attracted by a sound, the searcher raised her head; the attitude was that of listening—keen, furtive. Her glance travelled up to the landing above her; she remained a moment motionless, then, like one reassured, she stooped and again felt carefully about her, to and fro, shifted her position slightly, repeated the movement of picking up something. After a little she sat upon her heels, took the box, or what it was that she held, from the ground, and seemed to examine the contents; then bowed herself afresh, and again searched the floor.

Muriel watched like one petrified, a consideration creeping into her consciousness that made her shiver. Until the coming of her light Miss Abel must have been searching for those minute objects she had dropped *in the pitch dark*. The coming of the candle and the spectator made no effect upon her movements; she neither started nor turned her head.

An urgent need to make sure was the first imperative impulse. Leaning over the rail, and subduing her voice that the invalid above might not hear it, she spoke—

“Miss Abel, what are you doing?”

The quavering accents fell dead upon the silence, the crouching figure took no heed. It was just possible that she might be deaf; and Muriel, taking her courage in both hands, cleared the remaining stairs at a run, and, gaining the hail, circled round so as to face the intruder.

The woman with the sinister jaw and heavily shaded eyes now stood up. Her movements all suggested a fierce necessity for noiseless haste. She made a dart at the house door, and with one last backward gaze of alarmed watchfulness seemed to let herself out instantly. The sound of the cautious click of the latch as it closed behind her, echoed through the still house to its remotest end, like the widening of ripples on a pool when a stone is gently dropped. The first momentary impression of the listening girl was the conviction that her step-mother must be aroused by a noise so solitary, so incisive.

Shaking all over she approached the door. The chain was up, the bolts drawn. The whole figure of this woman was delusion then—stark and sheer delusion. Her knees knocked together, she almost lost grip on her own consciousness; only the thought of her father’s critical state kept her from abject panic. For his sake she mastered fear, compelled her limbs to obey her will—to enter the drawing-room, take thence the book she needed, and to walk, not to stampede, up the stairs again.

The bedroom, with its fire and lamp, seemed the essence of comfort and friendliness. She crouched by the generous blaze, warming her chilled fingers, steadying her convulsive shaking.

“This *is* a cold house,” she said to her father, forcing her wan lips to a smile.

“Is Agnes awake?” asked the major.

She looked up quickly. “No! What makes you ask?”

“I thought I heard you speak to her; and I thought I heard her door close.”

### III

“Ah, Dr. Forrest,” said Muriel, archly, next day, “I have made a discovery! Not treasure—no! But I have found out what Agnes was so anxious you should not tell me yesterday White Gates is haunted!”

“Ah!” said the doctor, retaining her hand that he might feel her pulse, “so you have been dreaming of horrors, have you? I’m not surprised; I should not have told you all that yarn.

“You cannot be responsible for my dreaming; you left out the essential person in the story; who is she?”

He looked genuinely puzzled. “Tell me what you saw, Miss North.”

“Tell me first—you knew the house is haunted?”

“I have heard people say so.”

“And tenants left, and the rent went down, in consequence?”

“Folks are superstitious.”

“Now, doctor, what did people see, or fancy they saw?”

“Pon my life, I hardly know. Noises, rustlings, doors opened, some one about the house at night—the usual thing. The manner of the old ladies’ death was more than enough to give the place a bad name.”

“But the person—the individual that walks and rustles, that opens or closes doors—who is she? No Kenyon, I am quite sure, from your description of the family. Do tell me how she comes into the story.”

“My dear young lady, I have no notion what you are talking about; please explain.”

She told him, then, of the two appearances of the fair-haired woman—told him so simply and directly, that he could not help but feel in some sort impressed.

“The first time I saw her,” she said, “nothing could have been more totally unexpected. Now, do tell me who she is!”

“But I have no idea who she is.” He looked thoroughly puzzled. “The idea of her being Miss Abel is absurd, of course. The little dressmaker is a dark-haired hunchback.”

“Is she not one of the treasure-hunters who occupied the house in such numbers for the last twenty years?”

“No, certainly not. There have been five sets of tenants, and I have known them all. You see, folks here are at my mercy completely. If they fall ill, they must either die or call me in. He laughed. “Nobody at all like the person you describe has ever, to my knowledge, set foot in the house. And yet, oddly enough, I do know of a person to whom your description applies in some curious points: the hair especially—the unusual style of it. She is a Mrs. Gibson, the wife of a farmer who lives at Cloverhead, nearly twelve miles from here, on the wolds. She isn’t young now by any means; and she is no ghost—as much alive as you or I—and I would take my oath she never was at White Gates in her life.”

“Who is she? A native of these parts?”

“A native of God knows where. She was a barmaid in Bristol, and turned the heads of half the young men in the place, in my day. I don’t know why she married Gibson of Cloverhead; he’s rich, of course; but she might have done better, I should think.”

“I should like to see her,” said Muriel suddenly. “Was she married at the time of Miss Kenyon’s death?”

He pondered. “Was she? No. That spring, I think it was. Yes, of course, that spring. I remember it now, because Hackett’s wife and she were confined much the same time. Her child—Mrs. Gibson’s—was born prematurely, about six months after her marriage, and did not live. She was left without a baby, and poor little Hackett without a mother.”

“I *should* like to see her,” said Muriel.

“If it was summer-time, I’d drive you over, said the doctor. “But this time of year it’s out of the question.”

The human brain weaves threads faster than any spider; and Muriel's was busy indeed after the doctor left her.

Mrs. Gibson—ex-barmaid in Bristol—very attractive. Young Hackett was in business in Bristol. . . . Her sudden marriage, immediately after the announcement of his—for Dr. Forrest had said that the fact of his being married came as a surprise to the neighbourhood. . . . The birth of her child. . . . Oh, surely, surely there was some thread of connection here! Was it not possible that after all Mrs. Gibson, and she alone, knew the secret of the disappearance of the bulk of Joshua's fortune? The motive?—Revenge.

It all seemed to unroll itself before her like a drama. Young Hackett, the doctor said, knew of the secret hoard; if Muriel's suspicions hit the mark, the one person to whom he would be likely to mention such a thing would be the barmaid. How easy to gain access to a house inhabited solely by three women, all advanced in years! In so many empty rooms, how easy concealment to one who had learned the ways of the house from the nephew and heir of its owners!

And no possible clue to connect the woman and her secret could, as far as one saw, have been forthcoming, short of her own haunting presence there! In the very place!

Muriel was divided between a great desire to pass a night in the room containing the safe, and a great fear of doing so. The thought of Agnes was the casting vote; her distress and disapproval would be so great, and Muriel could think of no device by which permission to change her room could be obtained, without speaking of the second apparition which was so far, a secret between herself and the doctor. Neither he nor she had the least reason to suppose that Mrs. North had ever been disturbed nocturnally, though she knew the house was reputed haunted, and was most anxious that her step-daughter should be kept in ignorance.

Major North's turn for the better became so marked, that very soon there was no more night-nursing required. The weather changed, and grew soft and genial, which was very favourable to him.

Dr. Forrest and Muriel more than once discussed the fanciful theories which she had based upon his casual mention of Mrs. Gibson: the doctor inclining to the belief that, had she really abstracted the jewels, she would have taken herself off and lived in wealth upon the proceeds; Muriel strongly urging that such a theory was opposed to the motive of the theft, as she conceived it, and that Mrs. Gibson's possession of the treasures accounted entirely for the undoubted fact that no sale of them had been attempted.

One evening, unusually late, the doctor dropped in, finding the girl, as he expected, alone in the library.

"Miss Muriel," he said, "I'm sent for, to Cloverhead. Mrs. Gibson is ill. I shall start early tomorrow morning, and as it's so fine, if you like. I'll take you; but you must wrap up.

Mrs. North eagerly accepted the chance for Muriel to get a good long drive; and the following morning, amid the chill, still smiles of a sunny, quiet December day, they set off in the clog-cart over the wolds, to the remote farm known as Cloverhead.

A more desolate drive than that which lies between the two places could hardly be imagined. The wold, in its most treeless, exposed form, heaved in sullen savagery all about it. The square, grey, hard-looking house, with its ricks and outbuildings, stood out as a landmark for miles and miles.

A pebble-capped walk, edged with pointed cypress bushes, led from the gate to the house door; and, as the doctor's cart stopped, a tall woman, wrapped in a shawl, came slowly down the dark entrance passage, and paused on the threshold, holding her shawl over her mouth as though she feared the keen air.

“Good-morning, Mrs. Gibson,” called the doctor. “May I bring in this young lady out of the cold?”

The woman nodded silently; and, with some tumult of nerves, Muriel found herself approaching, facing, actually speaking to—the spectre that haunted White Gates.

There was no doubt it was she. The face was gaunt, aged, haggard, the hard line of jaw was even more pronounced; but the sunken eyes were still accented with artificial pencilling, the abundant hair was not grey, and was still elaborately dressed. As she preceded them into her parlour, the grandeur of her carriage, and the fine lines of her build, showed traces of a personality not usual in farmers’ wives.

“Sit down,” she said abruptly to Muriel, pulling forward a solid old Chippendale chair.

“You must have had a chilly drive. There s a good fire. I’ll go and have a chat with the doctor, and tell the girl to bring you some cake.” Muriel sat down, bewildered. The corporeal touch of the woman’s fingers upon her own jarred with probabilities. Many people in these days have heard of Phantasms of the living. Muriel never had. It seemed uncanny, even to the point of horror, that she should have spoken face to face with a woman whom she had recently seen vanish through barred doors.

The room was hot and stuffy, the big clock ticked lazily, the wood fire crackled. An armchair, such as one sees in old pictures, with very high back, drawn near the fire and piled with tumbled pillows, showed that Mrs. Gibson had been sitting here until the doctor’s arrival. There was an inkstand on the table near, and a litter of papers and pens. It was a relief to see signs of habitation among the wool mats, albums, and wax-flower groups.

Muriel’s eye rested idly on a folded vellum document that looked legal, thence it wandered to a packet of letters, carefully tied up. There was sealing-wax upon the package—newly spilt, as one could see by the adjacent candle and smell by the unmistakable fragrance. There was in the girl’s mind no smallest intent to spy, but her eye fell on the inscription, written in a large, flowing hand.

“To be given, with all the other contents of this box, to Maurice Kenyon Hackett, on the death of his father. The contents to justify my entire course of conduct.”

A hot flush mounted slowly to Muriel’s brow. Springing up, she turned her back upon the table, and walked to the window. Her heart beat uncomfortably. She was ashamed, yet triumphant. She felt like a spy, yet she longed—oh, how ardently—to break the seal, and possess herself of the secret those letters hid!

After a long hesitation she took a sudden resolution—with a swift movement back to the table she turned the package over so that the wax lay uppermost, and the inscription was hidden from view. Then she went back to the window. A minute later a servant-girl brought in a tray of cake and currant wine; and, to beguile the time of waiting, Muriel presently ate some, for her long drive had made her hungry. More than an hour was she alone with that packet of mystery, before the doctor and his patient rejoined her.

The woman’s face was more drawn, her eyes more sunken than ever.

“I’m sorry you’ve had to wait so long,” she said.

Muriel murmured a word of deprecation, and thanked her for her hospitality.

Mrs. Gibson approached the table, against which she leaned, like one who needs support; the girl saw a sudden swift start, as her eye fell on the package; she saw her note that it lay so that no writing could be seen, saw her glance from it to her visitor, and push it away as though inadvertently, under some loose sheets of blotting-paper.

“We must get off, Miss Muriel, or we shall be benighted,” said Dr. Forrest.

“Are you staying with the doctor?” asked Mrs. Gibson.

“Oh no, I am staying at White Gates,” replied Muriel, smiling full into her eyes. There was not a flicker, not a ray of recognition, nor of consciousness.

“White Gates? Where’s that?” said the slow, hard voice.

For a moment Muriel held her breath; then she replied simply—

“I think you know the house; I have seen you there.”

The woman looked at her in blank, broad surprise.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said.

The doctor drew back, watching Muriel, his hand hiding his amused lips.

“I have been staying a month at White Gates, in Longstreet,” said Muriel, “and I have twice seen you there; the second time, you were picking up those things that you dropped in the hall, you remember.”

Still the woman faced her with unmoved muscles; but a red spot crept into her cheeks.

“You make a mistake,” she said coldly, “I have not been beyond the garden since October.”

“Nevertheless, I have seen you at White Gates,” steadily repeated the girl. “Next time., do you think you will know me?”

“I don’t understand your insinuation,” replied her antagonist, after a pause. “I have hardly been in Longstreet village in my life, and I do not know the house you allude to.”

“Nor the owner?” softly suggested Muriel.

Nothing could daunt this woman; her lips tightened themselves like cords. “Nor its owner,” she replied unflinchingly. Then she turned to the doctor.

“This young lady has—a bee in her bonnet.”

“She seems to be asking queer questions,” said Dr. Forrest, twinkling.

“I will ask no more,” said Muriel, her face relaxing into a smile. “I have found out all I wished to know. Good-bye, Mrs. Gibson; do speak to me next time we meet. We have been introduced now, you know.”

“I am sure she must be cracked,” was the only answer vouchsafed by the hostess.

The woman had strung herself to a point, but, as they shook hands, Muriel felt that she was quivering, and her breath came in quick, short pants. They drove away in silence from the desolate place, and, standing at the door, she watched them go, her shawl over her mouth.

“She sent for rue chiefly to tell me that she has made me sole executor of her will,” said the doctor, speaking at last. “I don’t fancy she and Gibson get on over well. Poor soul! Her days are numbered, I hardly think she will get through the winter.”

Mrs. Gibson never moved until the dog-cart dipped down out of sight, over the brow of the moor. Then she turned back to the sitting-room, and, closing the door, stood motionless in the middle of the room. After a silence, she flung her arms upwards and outwards, with a gesture that sent her shawl to the ground, and showed the attenuation of her finely-proportioned figure.

“My God!” she said aloud, “after twenty years! . . . My God! How long it takes to die!”

#### IV

Of course Muriel told Dr. Forrest of the inscription on the packet of letters, and he gave her in return the information that Maurice was certainly the name of Joshua Hackett’s son. It began to seem to him almost probable that the wronged woman had chosen so to avenge herself and that the box to be given to the young man might actually prove to contain the missing fortune. Meanwhile, no action was possible; all was surmise; and Mrs. Gibson so near death that the

doctor could not find it in his heart to break confidence, and confide his suspicions to Joshua Hackett.

For several days the image of the miserable woman, her desolate house, and her haggard eyes, so dwelt in Muriel's mind that she went about the house expecting to meet her at every corner. But as days went by, and all things at White Gates pursued their normal course, the strength of the impression began to fade.. Several external circumstances combined in this direction. The weather continued "saft," the major liked her to exercise his horse, she was introduced by the doctor to the young people at the Manor House, and with them she rode and also played hockey, and had something of a good time. But soon after Christmas the weather became severe. A heavy snowfall, accompanied by a driving gale, plunged the Cotswolds into a mass of drifts; and White Gates, when communication with the outer world was practically severed, was a weird and gruesome abode.

On the third night of the. siege Muriel went to bed wearied out. The weather made. the major worse, the doctor could not be sent for, and she. had sat up with him the previous night, scarcely sleeping at all. To-night, no sooner was her head on the pillow than she was wrapped in the healthy slumber of a thoroughly tired girl.

How long she had been asleep she did not know; but suddenly she found herself wide awake., with an impression that some one had called her. She sat up; the expanse of snow without cast a reflection of light into the room, and, truth to tell, she expected to see Mrs. Gibson; but there was no one.

Concluding that Mrs. North might have called her, and her father be worse, she slipped out of bed, wrapped her warm gown about her, and opened the door. All was still. She crossed the passage, and from the bedroom came the sound of the major's snores. Reassured she turned to go back, when her attention was caught by a curious phenomenon.

Between her and the open door of her own room there hovered a pale., nebulous light. It was of no particular shape, and perhaps two feet in height, seeming not to touch the floor. As the girl's eyes fell upon it, it began to move, crossed the stair-head, and passed slowly on until it was in front of the door leading to the bedroom which contained the safe.. Muriel caught her breath. Oh, if it went in there, she dared not, could not follow!

But it did go in—or rather, it vanished, seeming to pass through. the wooden panels; and suddenly fear fell away from her like an external thing, and she knew that she must follow. As she turned the key, she heard the hall clock strike three, and thought, "I am not asleep; I hear the clock."

The waning moon was on this side of the house, and objects in the room could be clearly distinguished; but quite distinct from its pallid radiance was the blue, quivering mass of light near the safe. It grew in size and height until it was the shape and size of a human figure—and slowly, as it seemed to her, it took on the likeness of Mrs. Gibson.

The details of her appearance were not like the former ones; she now wore the shawl in which Muriel had seen her in the flesh; her eyes were fixed upon the girl with eagerness and recognition; after a moment, words were clearly audible.

"It was the keys—can you hear me? Do you hear me? You say you have seen me— hear me now. The keys, I left that out, and the doctor ought to know. I buried them in my baby's coffin; I shut them in his little dead hand, for it should all have been his; he was the heir. Three keys on a little chain . . ."

Muriel had no recollection of the end of the episode, nor of how she got back to bed. When she next awoke, in the broad sunshine, she was strongly inclined to consider the whole thing as a

dream, in spite of the clock. However, as soon as she was up, she wrote down the curious words of the message. It was not until after the episode was finished that she heard that her step-mother, coming out of her room early that morning, had been startled to see the door of the spare room standing wide open.

Two days after, Dr. Forrest succeeded in braving the drifts, and arrived shortly after breakfast. The first thing he said to Muriel was— “Mrs. Gibson died the night before last, between two and three in the morning.”

The girl turned very white.

“She came to me with a message,” said she. “A very curious message about a key. I wonder if there is any sense in it.”

“About a key!” cried the doctor. “If it should be the missing one! I was there when she died, but she had been unconscious for hours when I arrived, and she never spoke or moved. After it was over, her husband showed me her will. She had no property of any kind to bequeath; all I have to do, is to take in charge the box mentioned in the inscription you saw, and to hand it and its contents intact to Maurice. Hackett immediately on his father’s death. There was no stipulation that we should not see what was inside, so I unlocked the box. It contains the. letters you told me of, a quantity of babies’ clothes, a wedding-ring, one or two photographs, and a dispatch-box, of an expensive kind, with a lock which is evidently a complicated one., and no key that we can find. I really feel pretty sure that it is *the* dispatch-box, and I must take legal advice about withholding it from Hackett, I think.”

Muriel handed him the. message, as she had written it. He was profoundly struck. At last— “They will have to open the vault to bury the mother,” he said. “If Gibson will consent, we might at least test the truth of this.”

\* \* \*

Within a fortnight it was known that Joshua Hackett, of White Gates, had died on the same night as that in which Josephine Gibson passed away. He was found dead in bed—heart failure — the Kenyon scourge, they said. Whether the vision that visited Muriel that night passed on to his bedside., who can say?’

The dispatch-box was handed over at once, by the much relieved doctor, to Maurice, and with it the. keys, taken from the hand of a dead baby, in Mr. Gibson’s family vault.

The jewels were all there; with them was a sheaf of Bank of England notes, the. total value of which was £25,000.

The packet of letters from Joshua to the woman whom he had deceived by a mock marriage, were a full explanation of her wrongs. There was no doubt that her intention in making the theft was to secure a part of Joshua’s fortune for her unborn child. A written statement which accompanied the letters showed that she had no idea of the amount of the hoard beforehand; but dare not afterwards send any of it back. This statement also related in full how she. had opened the box, when she got safely out of the room, to remove any papers which might supply a clue to the owner of the. property; how, not clearly understanding how the intricate lock worked, she had failed to re-fasten it securely, and how, just as she was in the act of flight, the box flew open, and the jewels rolled about the hall, on which she gave up all for lost, till emboldened by the fact that, although she knew Miss Anna had been awakened by her theft of the keys from her neck, still there was no sign or sound of any one moving in the house. She then ventured to light her lantern, to pick up every single gem, and to make good her escape; and it was not until weeks

after that she heard the horrible news that she had been the unintentional murderer of the old lady.

The above curious facts remain the solitary psychic experience in the life of Muriel North. No doubt the girl arrived at the house just when the thoughts of the woman, by reason of approaching death, were constantly and strongly turned upon the events immediately preceding her marriage: the period into which had been crowded all the tragedy and bitterness of her afterwards monotonous existence. The influence was potent, the girl's temperament of a quality to respond. She has been inclined to avoid haunted houses since. White Gates no longer belongs to this interesting category.