

CASE VII
“Pearlin’ Jean” of Allanbank

By Elliot O’Donnell

Few ghosts have obtained more notoriety than “Pearlin’ Jean,” the phantasm which for many years haunted Allanbank, a seat of the Stuarts.

The popular theory as to the identity of the apparition is as follows:—

Mr. Stuart, afterwards created first baronet of Allanbank, when on a tour in France, met a young and beautiful French Sister of Charity of the name of Jean, whom he induced to leave her convent. Tiring of her at length, Mr. Stuart brutally left her, and, returning abruptly to Scotland, became engaged to be married to a lady of his own nationality and position in life. But Jean was determined he should not escape her so easily. For him she had sacrificed everything: her old vocation in life was gone, she had no home, no honour,—nothing, so she resolved to leave no stone unturned to discover his whereabouts. At last her perseverance was rewarded, and, Fortune favouring her, she arrived without mishap at Allanbank.

The truth was then revealed to her: her cruel and faithless lover was about to be wedded to another. But despair gave her energy, and, burning with indignation, she hastened to his house to upbraid him. She reached the spot just as he was driving out with his fiancée. With a cry of anguish, Jean rushed forward and, swinging herself nimbly on to the fore-wheel of the coach, turned her white and passionate face towards its occupants. For a moment, Mr. Stuart was too dumbfounded to do anything; he could scarcely believe his senses. Who on earth was this frantic female? Good Heavens Jean! Impossible! How on earth had she got there? And the tumultuous beating of his guilty heart turned him sick and faint.

Then he glanced fearfully and covertly at his fiancée. *She* must not know the truth at any cost. Possibly he lost his head! At all events, that is the kindest construction to put on his subsequent action, for, dastardly as his behaviour had been to Jean in the past, one can hardly imagine him capable of deliberately murdering her, and in so horrible a fashion. There was not a second to lose; an instant more, and the secret, that he had so assiduously hidden from the lady beside him, would be revealed. Jean’s mouth was already open to speak. He waved her aside. She adhered to her post. He shouted to the postilion, and the huge, lumbering vehicle was set in motion. At the first turn of the wheels, Jean slipped from her perch, her dress caught in the spokes, and she was crushed to death.

Her fate does not appear to have made any deep impression either on Mr. Stuart or his lady-love, for they continued their drive.

The hauntings began that autumn. Mr. Stuart, as was only fit and proper, being the first to witness the phenomenon. Returning home from a drive one evening, he perceived to his surprise the dark outlines of a human figure perched on the arched gateway of his house, exactly opposite the spot where Jean had perished. Wondering who it could be, he leaned forward to inspect it closer. The figure moved, an icy current of air ran through him, and he saw to his horror the livid countenance of the dead Jean. There she was, staring down at him with lurid, glassy eyes; her cheeks startlingly white, her hair fluttering in the wind, her neck and forehead bathed in blood.

Paralysed with terror, Mr. Stuart could not remove his gaze, and it was not until one of the menials opened the carriage door to assist him down, that the spell was broken and he was able

to speak and move. He then flew into the house, and spent the rest of the night in the most abject fear.

After this he had no peace—Allanbank was constantly haunted. The great oak doors opened and shut of their own accord at night with loud clanging and bangs, and the rustling of silks and pattering of high-heeled shoes were heard in the oak-panelled bedrooms and along the many dark and winding passages.

From her attire, which was a piece of lace made of thread, the apparition became known as “Pearlin’ Jean,” and a portrait of her was actually painted. It is recorded that when this picture was hung between one of Mr. Stuart and his lady-love, the hauntings ceased, but that as soon as it was removed they were renewed. Presumably, it was not allowed to remain in the aforesaid position long, for the manifestations appear to have gone on for many years without intermission.

Most phantasms of the dead inspire those who see them with horror,—and that is my own experience,—but “Pearlin’ Jean” seems to have been an exception to this rule. A housekeeper called Betty Norrie, who lived for many years at Allanbank, declared that other people besides herself had so frequently seen Jean that they had grown quite accustomed to her, and were, consequently, no more alarmed at her appearance than they were by her noises.

Another servant at the house, of the name of Jenny Blackadder, used constantly to hear Jean, but could never see her—though her husband did.

The latter, when courting Jenny, received a rare scare, which suggests to me that Jean, in spite of her tragic ending, may not have been without a spice of humour. Thomas, for that was the swain’s name, made an assignation one night to meet Jenny in the orchard at Allanbank.

It was early when he arrived at the trysting-place—for Thomas like all true lovers, was ever rather more than punctual—and he fully contemplated a long wait. Judge, then, of his astonishment, when he perceived in the moonlight what he took to be the well-known and adored figure of his lady-love. With a cry of delight, Thomas rushed forward, and, swinging his arms widely open to embrace her, beheld her vanish, and found himself hugging space! An icy current of air thrilled through him, and the whole place—trees, nooks, moonbeams, and shadows, underwent a hideous metamorphosis. The very air bristled with unknown horrors till flesh and blood could stand no more, and, even at the risk of displeasing his beloved Jenny, Thomas fled! Some few minutes later, at the appointed hour, Jenny arrived on the scene, and no one was there. She dallied for some time, wondering whatever could have happened to Thomas, and then returned, full of grave apprehensions, to the house.

It was not until the next morning that the truth leaked out, and Jenny, after indulging in a hearty laugh at her lover, who felt very shamefaced now that it was daylight, sensibly forgave him, and raised no obstacle when asked to fix a day for their marriage.

In after years, Jenny used to retail the story with many harrowing allusions to “Pearlin’ Jean,” whom she somewhat foolishly made use of as a bogey to frighten children into being good. A Mr. Sharpe, who when he was a little boy was once placed in her charge, confesses that he was dreadfully scared at her stories, and that he never ventured down a passage in those days without thinking “Pearlin’ Jean,” with her ghostly, blood-stained face, clawlike hands, and rustling lace dress, was after him.

Nurse Jenny used to tell him that the Stuarts tried in vain to lay Jean’s spirit, actually going to the length of calling in seven ministers to exorcise it. But all to no purpose; it still continued its nocturnal peregrinations.

In the year 1790 the Stuarts let the house to strangers, who, when they took it, had not the least idea that it was haunted. However, they did not long remain in ignorance, for two ladies, who

occupied the same bedroom, were awakened in the night by hearing some one walking across the floor. The “presence” did not suggest burglars, for the intruder behaved in the most noisy manner, pacing restlessly and apparently aimlessly backwards and forwards across the room, swishing the floor (with what sounded like a long lace train) and breathing heavily. They were both terrified, and so cold that they could hear one another’s teeth chatter. They were too frightened to call for help; they could only lie still, hoping and praying it would not come nearer to them. The sufferings of these two ladies were indescribable, for the ghost remained in their room all night, moving restlessly about until daybreak. It was not until some days later, when other people in the house had experienced the phenomenon, that they were told the story of the notorious “Pearlin’ Jean.”

But was the so-called “Pearlin’ Jean” really the apparition of the murdered French woman? To my mind, her identity with that of the beautiful Sister of Charity has not been satisfactorily established, and I think there are reasons to doubt it.

If, for instance, the apparition were that of a Sister of Charity, why should it appear incongruously attired in a long trailing gown of lace? And if it were that of a woman of the presumably staid habits of a Sister of Charity, why should it delight in mischief and play the pranks of a *poltergeist*? And yet if it wasn’t the ghost of Jean, whose ghost was it?