

Tom Ossington's Ghost

By Richard Marsh

CHAPTER I

A NEW PUPIL

The first of the series of curious happenings, which led to such a surprising and, indeed, extraordinary denouement, occurred on the twelfth of October. It was a Monday; about four-thirty in the afternoon. Madge Brodie was alone in the house. The weather was dull, a suspicion of mist was in the air, already the day was drawing in.

Madge was writing away with might and main, hard at work on one of those MSS. with which she took such peculiar pains; and with which the editors for whom they were destined took so little. If they would only take a little more—enough to read them through, say—Madge felt sure they would not be so continually returned. Her pen went tearing away at a gallop—it had reached the last few lines—they were finished. She turned to glance at the clock which was on the mantel-shelf behind her.

“Gracious!—I had no idea it was so late. Ella will be home in an hour, and there is nothing in the place for her to eat!”

She caught up the sheets of paper, fastened them together at the corner, crammed them into an envelope, scribbled a note, crammed it in after them, addressed the envelope, closed it, jumped up to get her hat, just as there came a rat-tat-tat at the hall—door knocker.

“Now, who’s that? I wonder if it is that Miss Brice come for her lesson after all—three hours late. It will be like her if it is—but she sha’n’t have it now. We’ll see if she shall.”

She caught up her hat from the couch, perched it on her head, pushed a pin through the crown.

“If she sees that I am just going out, I should think that even she will hardly venture to ask me to give her a lesson three hours after the time which she herself appointed.”

As she spoke she was crossing the little passage towards the front door.

It was not Miss Brice—it was a man. A man, too, who behaved somewhat oddly. No sooner had Madge opened the door, than stepping into the tiny hall, without waiting for any sort of invitation, taking the handle from her hand, he shut it after him with considerably more haste than ceremony. She stared, while he leaned against the wall as if he was short of breath.

He was tall; she only reached to his shoulder, and she was scarcely short. He was young—there was not a hair on his face. He was dressed in blue serge, and when he removed his felt hat he disclosed a well-shaped head covered with black hair, cut very short, with the apparent intention of getting the better of its evident tendency to curl at the tips. His marked feature, at that moment, was his obvious discomposure. He did not look as if he was a nervous sort of person; yet, just then, the most bashful bumpkin could not have seemed more ill at ease. Madge was at a loss what to make of him.

“I’m feeling a little faint.”

The words were stammered out, as if with a view of explaining the singularity of his bearing—yet he did not appear to be the kind of individual who might be expected to feel “a little faint,” unless nature belied her own handwriting. The strength and constitution of a Samson was written

large all over him. It seemed to strike him that his explanation—such as it was—was a little lame, so he stammered something else.

“You give music lessons?”

“Yes, we do give music lessons—at least, I do.”

“You? Oh!—You do?”

His tone implied—or seemed to imply—that her appearance was hardly consistent with that of a giver of music lessons. She drew herself a little up.

“I do give music lessons. Have you been recommended by one of my pupils?”

She cast her mind over the scanty list to ascertain which of them might be likely to give such a recommendation. His stumbling answer saved her further trouble on that score.

“No, I—I saw the plate on the gate, so I—I thought I’d just come in and ask you to give me one.”

“Give you a music lesson?”

“Yes, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“But”—she paused, hardly knowing what to say. She had never contemplated giving lessons to pupils of this description. “I never have given lessons to a—gentleman. I supposed they always went to professors of their own sex.”

“Do they? I don’t know. I hope you don’t mind making an exception in my case. I—I’m so fond of music.” Suddenly he changed the subject. “This is Clover Cottage?”

Yes, this is Clover Cottage.”

“Are you—pardon me—but are you Miss Ossington?”

“Ossington? No—that is not my name.”

“But doesn’t some one of that name live here?”

“No one. I never heard it before. I think there must be some mistake.”

She laid her hand on the latch—by way of giving him a hint to go. He prevented her opening it, placing his own hand against the door; courteously, yet unmistakably.

“Excuse me—but I hope you will give me a lesson; if it is only of a quarter of an hour, to try what I can do—to see if it would be worth your while to have me as a pupil. I have been long looking for an opportunity of taking lessons, and when I saw your plate on the gate I jumped at the chance.”

She hesitated. The situation was an odd one—and yet she had already been for some time aware that young women who are fighting for daily bread have not seldom to face odd situations. Funds were desperately low. She had to contribute her share to the expenses of the little household, and that share was in arrear. Of late MSS. had been coming back more monotonously than ever. Pupils—especially those who were willing to pay possible prices—were few and far between. Who was she, that she should turn custom from the door? It was nothing that this was a stranger—all her pupils were strangers at the beginning; most of them were still strangers at the end. Men, she had heard, pay better than women. She might take advantage of this person’s sex to charge him extra terms—even to the extent of five shillings a lesson instead of half a crown. It was an opportunity she could not afford to lose. She resolved to at least go so far as to learn exactly what it was he wanted; and then if, from any point of view, it seemed advisable, to make an appointment for a future date.

She led the way into the sitting room—he following.

“Are you quite a beginner?” she asked.

“No, not—not altogether.”

“Let me see what you can do.”

She went to a pile of music which was on a little table, for the purpose of selecting a piece of sufficient simplicity to enable a tyro to display his powers, or want of them. He was between her and the window. In passing the window he glanced through it. As he did so, he gave a sudden start—a start, in fact, which amounted to a positive jump. His hat dropped from his hand, and, wholly regardless that he was leaving it lying on the floor, he hurried backwards, keeping in the shadow, and as far as possible from the window. The action was so marked that it was impossible it should go unnoticed. It filled Madge Brodie with a sense of shock which was distinctly disagreeable. Her eyes, too, sought the window—it looked out on to the road. A man, it struck her, of emphatically sinister appearance, was loitering leisurely past. As she looked he stopped dead, and, leaning over the palings, stared intently through the window. It was true that the survey only lasted for a moment, and that then he shambled off again, but the thing was sufficiently conspicuous to be unpleasant.

So startled was she by the connection which seemed to exist between the fellow's insolence and her visitor's perturbation that, without thinking of what she was doing, she placed the first piece she came across upon the music-stand—saying, as she did so:

“Let me see what you can do with this.”

Her words were unheeded. Her visitor was drawing himself into an extreme corner of the room, in a fashion which, considering his size and the muscle which his appearance suggested, was, in its way, ludicrous. It was not, however, the ludicrous side which occurred to Madge; his uneasiness made her uneasy too. She spoke a little sharply, as if involuntarily.

“Do you hear me? Will you be so good as to try this piece, and let me see what you can make of it.”

Her words seemed to rouse him to a sense of misbehaviour.

“I beg your pardon; I am afraid you will think me rude, but the truth is, I—I have been a little out of sorts just lately.” He came briskly towards the piano; glancing however, as Madge could not help but notice, nervously through the window as he came. The man outside was gone; his absence seemed to reassure him. “Is this the piece you wish me to play? I will do my best.”

He did his best—or, if it was not his best, his best must have been something very remarkable indeed.

The piece she had selected—unwittingly—was a Minuet of Mozart's. A dainty trifle; a pitfall for the inexperienced; seeming so simple, yet needing the soul, and knowledge, of a virtuoso to make anything of it at all. Hardly the sort of thing to set before a seeker after music lessons, whose acquaintance with music, for all she knew, was limited to picking out the notes upon the keyboard. At her final examination she herself had chosen it, first because she loved it, and, second, because she deemed it to be something which would enable her to illustrate her utmost powers at their very best.

It was only when he struck the first few notes that she realised what it was she had put in front of him; when she did, she was startled. Whether he understood what the piece was there for—that he was being set to play it as an exhibition of his ignorance rather than of his knowledge—was difficult to say. It is quite possible that in the preoccupation of his mind it had escaped him altogether that the sole excuse for his presence in that room lay in the fact that he was seeking lessons from this young girl. There could be no doubt whatever that at least one of the things that he had said of himself was true, and that he did love music; there could be just as little doubt that he already was a musician of a quite unusual calibre—one who had been both born and made.

He played the delicate fragment with an exquisite art which filled Madge Brodie with amazement. She had never heard it played like that before—never! Not even by her own

professor. Perhaps her surprise was so great that, in the first flush of it, she exaggerated the player's powers.

It seemed to her that this man played like one who saw into the very depths of the composer's soul, and who had all the highest resources of his art at his command to enable him to give a perfect—an ideal—rendering. Such an exquisite touch! such masterly fingering! such wondrous phrasing! such light and shade! such insight and such execution! She had not supposed that her cheap piano had been capable of such celestial harmony. She listened spellbound—for she, too, had imagination, and she, too, loved music. All was forgotten in the moment's rapture—in her delight at hearing so unexpectedly sounding in her ears, what seemed to her, in her excitement, the very music of the spheres. The player seemed to be as oblivious of his surroundings as Madge Brodie—his very being seemed wrapped up in the ecstasy of producing the quaint, sweet music for the stately old-time measure.

When he had finished, the couple came back to earth, with a rush.

With an apparent burst of recollection his hands came off the keyboard, and he wheeled round upon the music-stool with an air of conscience-stricken guilt. Madge stood close by, actually quivering with a conflict of emotions. He met her eyes—instantly to avert his own. There was silence—then a slight tremor in her voice in spite of her effort to prevent it.

"I suppose you have been having a little jest at my expense.

"A jest at your expense?"

"I daresay that is what you call it—though I believe in questions of humour there is room for wide differences of opinion. I should call it something else."

"I don't understand you."

"That is false."

At this point-blank contradiction, the blood showed through his sallow cheeks.

"False?"

"Yes, false. You do understand me. Did you not say that you had been for some time seeking for an opportunity to take lessons in music?"

"I—I——"

Confronted by her red-hot accusatory glances, he stammered, stumbled, stopped.

"Yes?—go on."

"I have been seeking such an opportunity."

"Indeed? And do you wish me to suppose that you believed that you—you—could be taught anything in music by an unknown creature who fastened a plate announcing lessons in music, to the palings of such a place as this?"

He was silent—looking as if he would have spoken, but could not. She went on:

"I thank you for the pleasure you have given me—the unexpected pleasure. It is a favourite piece of mine which you have just performed—I say 'performed' advisedly. I never heard it better played by any one—never! and I never shall. You are a great musician. I?—I am a poor teacher of the rudiments of the art in which you are such an adept. I am obliged by your suggestion that I should give you lessons. I regret that to do so is out of my power. You already play a thousand times better than I ever shall—I was just going out as you came in. I must ask you to be so good as to permit me to go now."

He rose from the music stool—towering above her higher and higher. From his altitude he looked down at her for some seconds in silence. Then, in his deep bass voice, he began, as it seemed, to excuse himself.

"Believe me—"

She cut him short.

"I believe nothing—and wish to believe nothing. You had reasons of your own for coming here; what they were I do not know, nor do I seek to know. All I desire is that you should take yourself away."

He stooped to pick up his hat. Rising with it in his hand, he glanced towards the window. As he did so, the man who had leaned over the palings came strolling by again. The sight of this man filled him with his former uneasiness. He retreated further back into the room—all but stumbling over Miss Brodie in his haste. In a person of his physique the agitation he displayed was pitiful. It suggested a degree of cowardice which nothing in his appearance seemed to warrant.

"I—I beg your pardon—but might I ask you a favour?"

"A favour? What is it?"

"I will be frank with you. I am being watched by a person whose scrutiny I wish to avoid. Because I wished to escape him was one reason why I came in here."

Madge went to the window. The man in the road was lounging lazily along with an air of indifference which was almost too marked to be real. He gave a backward glance as he went. At sight of Madge he quickened his pace.

"Is that the man who is watching you?"

"Yes, I—I fancy it is."

"You fancy? Don't you know?"

"It is the man."

"He is shorter than you—smaller altogether. Compared to you he is a dwarf. Why are you afraid of him?"

Either the question itself, or the tone in which it was asked, brought the blood back into his cheeks.

"I did not say I was afraid."

"No? Then if you are not afraid, why should you have been so anxious to avoid him as to seek refuge, on so shallow a pretext, in a stranger's house?"

The intruder bit his lip. His manner was sullen.

"I regret that the circumstances which have brought me here are of so singular and complicated a character as to prevent my giving you the full explanation to which you may consider yourself entitled. I am sorry that I should have sought refuge beneath your roof as I own I did; and the more so as I am compelled to ask you another favour—permission to leave that refuge by means of the back door."

She twirled round on her heels and faced him.

"The back door!"

"I presume there is a back door?"

"Certainly—only it leads to the front."

Again he bit his lip. His temper did not seem to be improving. The girl's tone, face, bearing, were instinct with scorn.

"Is there no means of getting away by the back without returning to the front?"

"Only by climbing a hedge and a fence on to the common."

"Perhaps the feat will be within my powers—if you will allow me to try."

"Allow you to try! And is it possible that you forced your way into the house on the pretence of seeking lessons in music, when your real motive was to seek an opportunity of evading pursuit by means of the back door?"

"I am aware that the seeming anomaly of my conduct entitles you to think the worst of me."

“Seeming anomaly!” She laughed contemptuously. “Pray, sir, permit me to lead the way—to the back door.”

She strode off, with her head in the air; he came after, with a brow as black as night. At the back door they paused.

“I thank you for having afforded me shelter, and apologise for having sought it.”

She looked him up and down, as if she were endeavouring, by mere force of visual inspection, to make out what kind of a man he was.

“I want to ask you a question. Answer it truthfully, if you can. Is the man in front a policeman?”

He started with what seemed genuine surprise.

“A policeman! Good heavens, no.”

“Are you sure.”

“Of course I’m sure. He’s very far from being a policeman—rather, if anything, the other way.” What he meant to infer, she did not know; but he laughed shortly. “What makes you ask such a thing?”

She was holding the door open in her hand. He had crossed the threshold and stood without. Malice—and something else—gleamed in her eyes.

“Because,” she answered, “I wondered if you were a thief.”

With that she slammed the door in his face and turned the key. Then, slipping into the kitchen which was on her left, keeping the door on the jar, remaining well in the shadow, she watched his proceedings through the window.

For a moment he stayed where she had left him standing, as if rooted to the spot. Then, with an exaggerated courtesy, taking off his hat, he bowed to the door. Turning, he marched down the garden path, his tall figure seeming more gigantic than ever as she noted how straight he held himself. In a twinkling he was over the fence and hedge. Once on the other side, he shook his fist at Clover Cottage.

The watcher in the kitchen clenched her teeth as she perceived the gesture.

“Ungrateful creature! And to think that a man who has the very spirit of music in his soul, and who plays the piano like an angel, should be such a wretch! That a monster seven feet high, who looks like a combination of Samson and Goliath rolled into one, should be such a coward and a cur—afraid of a pigmy five foot high! I hope I’ve seen the last of him. If I have any more such pupils I shall have to shut up shop. Now perhaps I shall be allowed to post my MS. and run across to Brown’s to get a chop for Ella’s tea.”

With that she passed from the back to the front. Outside the front door she paused to look around her and take her bearings, half doubtful as to whether any more dubious strangers might not be in sight.

The only person to be seen was the man whose presence had proved so disconcerting to her recent visitor. He had reached the corner of the street, and, turning, strolled slowly back towards Clover Cottage. He gave one quick, shifty glance at her as she came out, but beyond that he took—or appeared to take—no notice of her appearance.

“Now, I wonder,” she said to herself, “who you may be. Your friend, who, for all I know, is now running for his life across the common, said you were no policeman—and, I am bound to say, you don’t look as if you were; he added that, if anything, you were rather the other way. If, by that, he meant you were a thief, I’m free to admit you look your profession to the life. I wonder if it would be safe to run across to Brown’s while you’re about;—not that I’m afraid of you, as I’ll prove to your entire satisfaction if you only let me have the chance. Only you seem to

be one of those agreeable creatures who, if they are only sure that a house is empty, and there's not even a girl inside, can enact to perfection the part of a sneak; and neither Ella nor I wish to lose any of the few possessions which we have."

While she hesitated a curious scene took place—a scene in which the gentleman on the prowl played a leading rôle.

The road in which Clover Cottage stood was bisected on the right and left by other streets, within a hundred yards of the house itself. On reaching the corner of the street on the left, the gentleman on the prowl, as we have seen, had performed a right-about—face, and returned to the cottage. As he advanced, a woman came round the corner of the street, upon the right. He saw her the instant she appeared, and the sight had on him an astonishing effect. He stopped, as if petrified stared, as if the eyes were starting from his head; gave a great gasp; turned; tore off like a hunted animal; dashed round the corner on the left; and vanished out of sight. Having advanced to within a few feet of where Madge was standing, she was a close spectator of his singular behaviour. As she looked to see what had been the exciting cause, half expecting that her recent visitor had come back and that the tables had been turned, and the gentleman on the prowl had played the coward in his turn, the woman who had come round the other corner had already reached the cottage. Pushing the gate unceremoniously open, she strode straight past Madge, and, without a with-your-leave or by-your-leave, marched through the open door into the hail beyond.

As Madge eyed her with mingled surprise and indignation she exclaimed, with what seemed unnecessary ferocity—

"I've come to see the house."

CHAPTER II

THERE'S A CONSCIENCE

Madge had been taken so wholly unawares that for a moment she remained stock—still—and voiceless. Then she followed the woman to the door.

"You have come to do what?"

"I've come to see the house."

"And pray who are you?"

"What affair is that of yours? Don't I tell you I've come to see the house?"

"But I don't understand you. What do you mean by saying you've come to see the house?"

For only answer the woman, turning her back on her, walked another step or two along the little passage. She exclaimed, as if addressing the staircase, which was in front of her, in what seemed a tone of intense emotion—

"How his presence is in all the place! How he fills the air!"

Madge felt more bewildered than she would have cared to admit. Was the woman mad? Mad or sane, she resolved that she would not submit tamely to such another irruption as the last. She laid her hand upon the woman's shoulder.

"Will you be so good as to tell me, at once, to whom I have the pleasure of speaking, and what business has brought you here?"

The woman turned and looked at her; as she did so, Madge was conscious of a curious sense of discomfort.

She was of medium height, slender build, and apparently between forty and fifty years of age. Her attire was not only shabby, it was tawdry to the last degree. Her garments were a heterogeneous lot; one might safely swear they had none of them been made for the wearer. One and all were shocking examples of outworn finery. The black chip hat which she wore perched on her head, with an indescribable sort of would-be jauntiness, was broken at the brim, and the one-time gorgeous ostrich feathers were crushed and soiled. A once well-cut cape of erstwhile dark blue cloth was about her shoulders. It was faded, stained, and creased. The fur which had been used to adorn the edges was bare and rusty. It had been lined with silk—as she moved her arms one perceived that of the lining there was nothing left but rags and tatters. Her dress, once the latest fashionable freak in some light-hued flimsy silk, had long since been fit for nothing else than cutting into dusters. She wore ancient patent-leather shoes upon her feet, and equally ancient gloves upon her hands—the bare flesh showing through holes in every finger.

If her costume was strange, her face was stranger. It was the face of a woman who had once been beautiful—how long ago, no one who chanced on her haphazard could with any certainty have guessed. It might have been five, ten, fifteen, twenty years ago—and more than that—since hers had been a countenance which charmed even a casual beholder. It was the face of a woman who had been weak or wicked, and maybe both, and who in consequence had been bandied from pillar to post, till this was all that there was left of her. Her big blue eyes were deep set in careworn caverns; her mouth, which had once been small and dainty, was now blurred and pendulous, the mouth of a woman who drank; her cheeks were sunk and hollow as if she had lost every tooth in her head, the cheek-bones gleaming through the yellow skin in sharp and cruel ridges. To crown it all, her hair was dyed—a vivid yellow. Like all the rest of her, the dye was old and worn. It stood in urgent need of a renewal. The roots were grey, they demonstrated their greyness with savage ostentation. Here and there among the yellow there were grey patches too—in some queer way her attempt at juvenescence had made her look older even than she was.

This was not a pleasant face to have encountered anywhere at any time, being the sort from which good women instinctively shrink back. Just now its unpleasantness was intensified by the fact that it was lit up by some, to Madge, inscrutable emotion; inflamed by some mastering excitement. The hollow eyes gleamed as if they were lighted by inner fires; the lips twitched as if the muscles which worked them were uncontrollable. The woman spoke in short, sharp, angry gusts, as if she were stumbling on the verge of frenzied passion.

“This house is mine,” she said.

“Yours?”

“It was his, and mine—and now it’s mine.”

Madge, persuaded that the woman must be either mad or drunk, felt that perhaps calmness might be her safest weapon.

“Do you mean that you’re the landlady?”

“The landlady!” The woman laughed—unmirthfully. “There is no landlady. And the landlord—he’s a ghost. He’s in it now—don’t you feel that he is in it?”

She spoke with such singular intensity that, in spite of herself, Madge shuddered. She was feeling more and more uncomfortable—wishing heartily that some one might come, if it was only the mysterious stranger who had previously intruded.

The woman went on—her excitement seeming to grow with every word she uttered.

“The house is full of ghosts—full! They’re in every corner, every nook and cranny—and I know them every one. Come here—I’ll show you some of them.”

She caught the girl by the arm. Madge, yielding to her strange frenzy, suffered herself to be led into the sitting-room. Once inside, the woman loosed her hold. She looked about her. Then crossed to the fireplace, standing in the centre of the hearth—rug.

“This is where I struck him.” She pointed just in front of her. “He was sitting there. I had asked him for some money. He would not let me have any. He always clung to his money—always! I swear it—always!” She raised her hands, as if appealing to the ceiling to bear her witness. “He said that I was ruining him. Ruining him? bah! I knew better than that. He would let no one ruin him—he was not of that kind. I told him I must have money. He said he’d given me five pounds last week. ‘Five pounds!’ I cried; ‘what are five pounds?’ Then we quarrelled—he said things, I said things. Then I flew into a rage; my temper has been the curse of my whole life. I caught up a decanter of whisky which was on the table, and struck him with it on the head. The bottle broke, the whisky went all over him—how it smelt! Can’t you smell it?—and he went tumbling down, down, on to the floor. He’s lying there now—can’t you see him lying there?” She turned to Madge with a gesture which seemed to make the girl’s blood run colder. “Can’t you see the ghost?”

She moved a little to one side.

“Just here is where I knelt down, and asked him to forgive me. That was after—I’d been carrying on with some fellow I’d met at a dance, and he had found me out. I cried and cried as if my heart would break, and at last he came and put his hand upon my head—when I set myself to do it, and stuck at it, I could twist him round my finger!—and he began to stroke my hair—I’d lovely hair then, no woman ever had lovelier, and he was always one to stroke it when I’d let him and he said, ‘My girl, how often shall I have to forgive you?’ Listen! Can’t you hear him saying it now? Can’t you see the ghost?”

She went to where the modest sideboard stood.

“This is where we had our sideboard too—it was a bigger one than this; all our things were good. I was standing here, leaning against it just like this, the first time he saw me drunk. He’d been out all the evening on some sort of business, and I’d been left in the house alone with the girl, and I hadn’t liked it, and I’d been sulking. And at last I got to the whisky and I started to drink, drink, drink. I always had been fond of drink long before that, but I’d never let him find it out. But that time I was that sulky I didn’t seem to care, and by the time I might have cared I couldn’t care—I was too far gone. I had to keep on drinking. There wasn’t much in the bottle; when I got to the end of it I started on another. Then I got to the sideboard, and stood leaning over it, lolly fashion, booze, booze, boozing. All of a sudden the door opened, and he came into the room. I turned to have a look at him, the bottle in one hand and the glass in the other. Directly I got clear of the sideboard I went flop on the floor, and the bottle and the glass went with me, and there I had to lie. He rushed towards me, and as soon as he had had a look at me he saw how it was. Then he fell on his knees at my side, and put his hands up to his face, and began to cry. My God, how he did cry I—not like me. His sobs seemed tearing him to pieces, and his life’s blood seemed coming from him with every tear. Drunk as I was, it made me cry to hear him. Listen! Can’t you hear him crying now? Can’t you see the ghost?”

The woman’s words and manner were so realistic, and despite—or perhaps because of—her seeming frenzy, she had such an eerie capacity of conjuring up the picture as her memory painted it, that Madge listened spellbound. She was as incapable of interrupting the other’s flow of language as if the conscience haunted wretch had cast on her some strange enchantment.

The sea of visions went to the table, and, bending over it, beckoned to Madge to draw closer. As if she found the invitation irresistible, Madge approached. The woman’s outstretched finger

pointed to a particular place about the centre of one side of the table. Her excitement all at once subsided; her voice grew softer. Her manner became more human, more womanly.



“Can’t you hear him crying now? Can’t you see the ghost?”

“See!—this is where my little baby died—my little child—the only one I ever had. It was a girl; we called it Lily—my name’s Lily”—she glanced up with a grin, as if conscious of how grotesquely inappropriate in her case, such a name was now; “it was such a little thing—I didn’t want it when it came. I never was fond of children, and I wasn’t one to play the mother. But, when it did come, it got hold of me somehow—yes, it did! it did! I was fond of it, in my way. As for him, he worshipped it; it was baby, baby, baby I all the time. I was nowhere. It made me wild to hear him, and to see the way that he went on. We fell out because I would have it brought up by hand. He wanted me to let it have my milk—but I wouldn’t have it. I wasn’t going to be any baby’s slave—not likely I I don’t think he ever forgave me that. Then he was always at me because he said I neglected it; and that made me worse than ever: I wasn’t going to have a crying brat thrust down my throat at every turn, and so I told him. ‘Why isn’t there a place in which they bring up babies so that they needn’t worry their mothers?’ I wanted to know. When I said

that, how he did look at me, and how he went on! I thought he would have killed me—but I didn't care. He did his share of all the nursing that baby ever had—and perhaps a little more.”

Again the woman laughed.

“At last the little thing went wrong. It always was small; it never seemed to grow—except thin. It was the queerest looking little mite, with a serious face like a parson's, and great big eyes which seemed to go right through you, as if it was looking at something which nobody but itself could see. He would have it that it got worse and worse, but he was always making such a fuss that I said he was making a fool of the child. The doctor came and came, but I was pretty often out, and when I wasn't I didn't always choose to see him, so I only heard what he cared to tell me—and I didn't believe the half of that.

“One night I went to a masked ball with Mrs. Sutton—she was a larky one, she was, and led her husband a pretty dance. It was latish when I came back I hadn't enjoyed myself one bit, and left in a temper and came off home by myself. I let myself in at the front door, and when I came into this room, on the table just here”—she pointed with her finger—“there was a pillow, and on the pillow was the baby, and he was kneeling on the floor in front, his elbows on the table, and his face on his hands, and the tears streaming down his cheeks as if they'd never stop. I'd been to the ball as a ballet girl—though he hadn't known it, and I hadn't meant that he should, but the sight took me so aback that, without thinking, I dropped my cloak and stood before him just as I was. ‘What's the matter now?’ I cried; ‘what's the child down here at this time of the night for?’ I expected that he'd let fly at me, and perhaps send me packing out of the house right there and then. But, instead, he just glanced my way as if he hardly saw me, or wanted to, and said, ‘Baby's dying.’ When he said that, it was as if he had run something right into my heart. ‘Dying,’ I cried, ‘stuff! ‘ I ran to the table and bent over the pillow. I had never seen anybody dying before, and knew nothing at all about it, but directly I looked at it, I seemed to know that what he said was true, and that the child was dying. My heart stopped beating—I couldn't breathe, I couldn't speak, I couldn't move, I could only stare like a creature who had lost her wits—it was as if a hand had been stretched right out of Heaven to strike me a blow. There he was on one side of the table—and there was me leaning right over the other, both of us motionless, neither of us speaking a word; and there was the baby lying on the pillow between us, stiller than we were. How long we stopped like that I don't know; it seemed to me as if it was hours—but I daresay it was only a few minutes. All at once the baby—my baby—gave a little movement with its little arms—a sort of trembling. He moved his arm, and put one of his fingers into its tiny hand; the baby seemed to fasten on to it. ‘Give it one of your fingers,’ he said, sobbing as if his heart would break. ‘It'll like to feel your finger as it goes!’ Hardly knowing what I was doing, I stretched out one of my fingers it was the first finger of my right hand—this one.” She held up the finger in question in its ragged casing. “And I put it in the mite's wee hand. It took it—yes, it took it. It closed its fingers right round it, and gave it quite a squeeze—yes, quite a squeeze. Then it loosened its hold. It was dead. Dead upon the pillow.—And it's there now. Can't you see it lying on the pillow, with a smile on its face? a smile! Can't you see the ghost?

Stooping, the woman made pretence to kiss the lips of some one who was lying just beneath her. It might have been that to her the thing was no pretence, and that, as in a vision, the dead lips did indeed touch hers. Then, drawing herself erect again, she broke into another of her discordant laughs. Throwing out her arms on either side of her, she exclaimed in strident tones

“Ghosts! Ghosts! The place is full of them—I see them everywhere. I touch them, hear them all the time. They've been with me all through the years, wherever I've been—and where

haven't I been? My God—in heaven and hell! crowds and crowds of them, more and more as the years went on. And do you think that I can't see them here—in their house, and mine! Can't you see them too?"

Madge replied between set lips—she had been forming her own conclusions while the woman raved:

"No, I do not see them. Nor would you were you not under the influence of drink."

The woman stared at her in what seemed genuine surprise.

"Under the influence of drink! Me? No such luck I I wish I were." Again she gave one of those bursts of laughter which so jarred on Madge's nerves. "When I'm drunk I can't see ghosts—it's only when I'm sober. I've had nothing to eat since I don't know when, let alone to drink. I'm starving, starving! That's the time when I see ghosts. They point at me with their fingers and say, 'Look at us and look at you—this is what it's come to!' They make me see what might have been. He made me come to-day; I didn't want to, but he made me. And now he's in all the house.—Listen! He's getting out of bed in the room upstairs—that's his bedroom. Can't you hear his lame foot moving about the floor? How often I've thrown that lame foot in his face when I've been wild!—can't you hear it hobble—hobble?"

"You are mad! How dare you talk such nonsense? There's no one in the house but you and I."

The woman seemed to believe so implicitly in the diseased imaginings of her conscience—haunted brain, that Madge felt that unless she made a resolute effort her own mental equilibrium might totter. On the other's face there came a look of shrewd, malignant cunning.

"Isn't there! That's all you know,—I'm no more mad than you are. And I tell you what—he's not the only thing that's in the house. There's something else as well. It was his, and now it's mine. And don't you think to rob me."

"Rob you?—I."

"Yes, you. There's others after it as well as you—I know! I'm not the simpleton that some may think. But I won't be robbed by all the lot of you—you make no error. It was his, and now it's mine."

"If there really is anything in the house to which you have the slightest shadow of a claim, which I very much doubt, and let me know what it is, and where it is, I'll see that you have it without fail."

A look of vacancy came on the woman's face. She passed her hand across her brow.

"That's it—I don't know just where it is. He comes and tells me, almost, but never quite. He says it's in the house, but he doesn't say exactly where. But he never lies—so I do know it's in the house, and I won't be robbed."

"I have not the slightest idea of what you mean—if you really do mean anything at all. I don't know if you know me—or are under the impression that I know you; if so, I can only assure you that I don't. I have not the faintest notion who you are."

The woman, drawing nearer, clutched Madge's arm with both her hands.

"Don't you know who I am? I'm the ghost's wife!"

Her manner was not only exceedingly unpleasant; it was, in a sense, uncanny—so uncanny that, in spite of herself, Madge could not help a startled look coming into her face. The appearance of this look seemed to amuse her tormentor. She broke into a continuous peal of unmelodious laughter.

"I'm the ghost's wife!" she kept repeating. "I'm the ghost's wife."

Madge Brodie prided herself on her strength of nerve, and as, a rule, not without cause. But, on that occasion, almost for the first time in her life it played her false. She would have been glad to

have been able to scream and flee; but she was incapable even of doing that. The other seemed to hold her spellbound; she was conscious that her senses were reeling—that, unless something happened soon, she would faint.

But from that final degradation she was saved.

“Madge,” exclaimed a voice, “who is this woman?”

It was Ella Duncan, and with her was Jack Martyn. At the sound of the voice, the woman released her hold. Never before had Madge been sensible of such a spasm of relief. She rushed to Ella with a hysterical sob.

“Oh, Ella!” she cried, “how thankful I am you’ve come.”

Ella looked at her with surprise.

“Madge!—who is this woman?”

The woman in question spoke for herself. She threw up her arms.

“I’m the ghost’s wife!” she shrieked, “I’m the ghost’s wife!”

Before they had suspected her purpose, or could say anything to stop her, she had rushed out of the room and from the house.

CHAPTER III

TWO LONE, LORN YOUNG WOMEN

Ella and Jack eyed each other. Madge refuge in a chair, conscious of a feeling of irritation at her weakness now that the provocation had passed. Ella regarded her curiously.

“What’s the matter with you, Madge? What’s happened?”

“It’s nothing—only that horrible woman has upset me.”

“Who is she? and what’s she been doing? and what’s she want?”

“I don’t know who she is, or what she wants, or anything at all about her. I only know that she’s prevented me getting anything for your tea.”

“That’s all right—we’ve got something, haven’t we, Jack?” Jack waved a parcel. “But whatever did you let such an extraordinary-looking creature into the house for? and whatever did she mean by screaming out that she’s a ghost’s wife? Is she very mad?”

“I think she is—and I didn’t let her in.”

Then, while they were preparing tea, the tale was told, or at least a part of it. But even that part was enough to make Jack Martyn grave. As the telling proceeded, he grew graver and graver, until, at the end, he wore a face of portentous gloom. When they seated themselves to the meal he made precisely the remark which they had expected him to make. He rested his hands on his knees, and he solemnly shook his head.

“This comes of your being alone in the house!”

Ella laughed.

“There! now you’ve started him on his own particular crotchet; he’ll never let you hear the last of this.”

Jack went on.

“I’ve said before, and I say again, and I shall keep on saying, that you two girls ought not to live alone by yourselves in a house in this out-of-the-way corner of the world.”

“Out-of-the-way corner of the world!—on Wandsworth Common!”

“For all practical intents and purposes you might as well be in the middle of the Desert of Sahara; you might shriek and shriek and I doubt if any one would hear you. This agreeable

visitor of Madge's might have cut her throat from ear to ear, or chopped her into mincemeat, and she would have been as incapable of summoning assistance as if she had been at the top of Mont Blanc."

"That's it, Jack—pile it on!"

"I don't think it's fair of you to talk like that, Ella; I'm not piling it on; I'm just speaking the plain and simple truth. Honestly, Madge, when you've been alone in the house all day long, haven't you felt that you were at the mercy of the first evil-disposed person who chose to come along; or, if you haven't felt it before, don't you think you'll feel it now?"

"No—to both your questions."

"Supposing this woman comes back again to-morrow?"

Madge had to bite her lip to repress a shudder; the idea was not a pleasant one.

"She won't come back."

"But suppose she does?—and from what you say I think it very probable that she will; if not to-morrow, then the day after."

"If she comes the day after to—morrow she'll find me out; I shall be out all day."

"There's a confession! It's only because you know that you will be out that you're able to face the prospect with equanimity."

"You are not entitled to infer anything of the kind."

Ella interposed, perceiving that the girl was made uncomfortable by the man's persistence.

"Don't do quite so much supposing, Jack; let me do a little for a change. Suppose we lived in one of those flats in the charming neighbourhood of Chancery Lane or Bloomsbury, after which—vicariously—your soul so hankers, how much better off should we be there?"

"You would, at any rate, be within the reach of assistance."

"No more so than we are now, because, quite probably, the kind of neighbours we should be likely to have in the sort of flat we should be able to afford would be worse—much worse—than none at all. The truth is that two lonely, hard—up girls—desperately hard-up girls—will be lonely wherever they are. We are quite prepared for that. Only we intend to choose the particular kind of loneliness which we happen to prefer—don't we, Madge?"

"Of course we do."

"It makes me wild to hear you say such things. Rather than you should feel like that, I'd marry on nothing."

"Thank you, but I wouldn't. I find it quite hard enough to be single on nothing."

"You know what I mean; I don't mean actually on nothing. I was reckoning it up the other night. My income—"

"Your income's like mine, Jack—capable of considerable increment. And would you be so kind as to change the subject?"

But the thing was easier said than done. Jack's thoughts had been started in a groove, and they kept in it; the conversation was continually reverting to the subject of the girls' loneliness. His last words as he left the room were on the familiar theme.

"I grant that there are advantages in having a pretty little place like this all to yourselves, especially when you get it at a peppercorn rent; and that it's nice to be your own mistresses, and all that kind of thing. But in the case of you two girls the disadvantages are so many and so serious, that I wonder you don't see them more clearly for yourselves. Anyhow, Madge has had her first peep at them to-day, and I sincerely hope it will be her last; though I am persuaded that before very long you will discover that, as a place of residence for two lone, loin young women, Clover Cottage has its drawbacks."

When Ella returned from saying farewell to Mr. Martyn in the hall, she glanced at Madge and laughed.

“Jack’s in his prophetic mood.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised if his prophecy’s inspired.”

Her tone was unexpectedly serious. Ella stared.

“What do you mean?”

“What I say.”

“You’re oracular, my dear. What do you say?”

“That I think it quite possible that we shall find that residence at Clover Cottage has its drawbacks; I’ve lighted on one or two of them already.”

Ella leaned against the edge of the table, regarding the speaker with twinkling eyes and smiling lips.

“My dear, you don’t mean to say that that crazy creature has left such an impression on your mind?”

You see, my dear Ella, I haven’t told you all the story. I felt that I had given Mr. Martyn a sufficient handle against us as it was; so I refrained.”

“Pray what else is there to tell? To judge from your looks and manner one would think that there was something dreadful.”

“I don’t know about dreadful, but there certainly is something—odd. To begin with, that wretched woman was not my only visitor.”

Then the rest of the tale was told—and this time the whole of it. Ella heard of the stranger who had intruded on the pretence of seeking music lessons: of his fear of the seedy loafer in the street; of his undignified exit through the back door; and the whole of his singular behaviour.

“And you say he could play?”

“Play! He played like an—I was going to say an angel, but I’ll substitute artist.”

“And he looked like a gentleman?”

“Certainly, and spoke like one.”

“But he didn’t behave like one?”

“I won’t go so far as to say that. He said or did nothing that was positively offensive when he was once inside the house.”

“But you called him a thief?”

“Yes; but, mind you, I didn’t think he was one. I felt so angry.

“I should think you did. I should have felt murderous. And you don’t think the man in the road was a policeman?”

“Not he. He was as evil-looking a vagabond as ever I saw.”

“It doesn’t follow merely on that account, my dear, that he wasn’t a policeman.”

There was malice in the lady’s tones.

“Not at all; but even a policeman of that type would hardly have jumped out of his skin with fright at the sight of that horrible woman. He knew her, and she knew him. There’s a mystery somewhere.”

“How nice!”

“Nice? You think so? I wish you had interviewed her instead of me. My dear Ella, she—she was—beyond expression.”

Ella came and seated herself on a stool at Madge’s feet. Leaning her arms on her knees she looked up at her face.

“Poor old chap! It wasn’t an agreeable experience.”

Madge's answer was as significant as it was curt.

"It wasn't."

She gave further details of what the woman had said and done, and of how she had said and done it—details which she had omitted, for reasons of her own, in Mr. Martyn's presence. By the time she had finished the listener was as serious as the narrator.

"It makes me feel creepy to hear you."

"It would have made you creepy to have heard her. I felt as if the house was peopled with ghosts."

"Madge, don't! You'll make me want to sleep with you if you go on like that. Poor old chap! I'm sorry if I seemed to chaff you." She reflected before she spoke again. "I can see that it can't be nice for you to be alone in the house while I'm away in town all day, earning my daily bread—especially now that the days are drawing in. If you like, we'll clear out of this, this week—we could do it at a pinch—and we'll return to the seething masses."

Madge reflected, in her turn, before she answered.

"Nothing of the sort has happened before, and nothing may happen again. But I tell you frankly, that, if my experiences of to-day do recur, it won't take much to persuade me that I have an inclination towards the society of my fellows, and that I prefer even the crushes of Petticoat Lane to the solitudes of Wandsworth Common."

"Well, in that case, it shall be Petticoat Lane."

There was silence. Presently Madge stretched herself—and yawned.

"In the meantime," suggested Ella, putting her hand up to her own lips, "what do you say to bed?" And it was bed. "Would you like me to sleep with you," inquired Ella as they went upstairs; "because if you would like me to very much, I would."

"No," said Madge, "I wouldn't. I never did like to share my bed with any one, and I never shall. I like to kick about, and I like to have plenty of room to do it in."

"Very good—have plenty of room to do it in. Ungrateful creature! If you're haunted, don't call to me for aid."

As it happened, Madge did call to her for aid, after a fashion; though it was not exactly because she was haunted.

CHAPTER IV

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

Madge was asleep almost as soon as she was between the sheets, and it seemed to her that as soon as she was asleep she was awake again—waking with that sudden shock of consciousness which is not the most agreeable way of being roused from slumber, since it causes us to realise too acutely the fact that we have been sleeping. Something had woke her; what, she could not tell. She lay motionless, listening with that peculiar intensity with which one is apt to listen when woke suddenly in the middle of the night. The room was dark. There was the sound of distant rumbling: they were at work upon the line, where they would sometimes continue shunting from dusk to dawn. She could hear, faintly, the crashing of trucks as they collided the one with the other. A breeze was murmuring across the common. It came from Clapham Junction way—which was how she came to hear the noise of the shunting. All else was still. She must have been mistaken. Nothing had roused her. She must have woke of her own accord.

Stay!—what was that? Her keen set ears caught some scarcely uttered sound. Was it the creaking of a board? Well, boards will creak at night, when they have a trick of being as audible as if they were exploding guns. It came again—and again. It was unmistakably a board that creaked—down-stairs. Why should a board creak like that downstairs, unless—it was being stepped upon? As Madge strained her hearing, she became convinced that there were footsteps down below—stealthy, muffled footsteps, which would have been inaudible had it not been for the tell-tale boards. Some one was creeping along the passage. Suddenly there was a noise as if a coin, or a key, or some small object, had fallen to the floor. Possibly it was something of the kind which had roused her. It was followed by silence—as if the person who had caused the noise was waiting to learn if it had been overheard. Then once more the footsteps—she heard the door of the sitting-room beneath her open, and shut, and knew that some one had entered the room.

In an instant she was out of bed. She hurried on a pair of bedroom slippers which she kept beside her on the floor, and an old dressing-gown which was handy on a chair, moving as quickly and as noiselessly as the darkness would permit. Snatching up her candlestick, with its box of matches, she passed, without a moment's hesitation, as noiselessly as possible from the room. On the landing without she stood, for a second or two, listening. There could be no doubt about it—some one was in the sitting-room. Someone who wished to make himself or herself as little conspicuous as possible; but whose presence was still sufficiently obvious to the keen-eared auditor.

Madge went to Ella's room, and, turning the handle, entered. As she did so, she could hear Ella start up in bed.

"Who's there?" she cried.

"Hush! It's I. There's some one in the sitting-room."

Lighting a match, Madge applied it to the candle. Ella was sitting up in bed, staring at her, with tumbled hair and sleepy eyes, apparently only half awake.

"Madge!—what do you mean?"

"What I say. We're about to experience another of the drawbacks of rural residence. There's some one in the sitting-room—another uninvited guest."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite. If you care to go downstairs and look, you'll be sure."

"Whatever shall we do?"

“Do!—I’ll show you what we’ll do. Where’s that revolver of Jack Martyn’s, which he lent you?”

“It’s in my handkerchief drawer—but it’s loaded.”

“All the better. I’ve fired off a revolver before to-day, and I am quite willing, at a pinch, to fire off another one to-night. I’ll show you what we’ll do.” While she spoke, Madge had been searching the drawer in question. Now she stood with the weapon in her hand. “Perhaps you’ll be so good as to get out of bed, and put something on, unless you prefer to go downstairs as the Woman in White. I suppose you’re not afraid?”

Ella had got so far out of bed as to sit on the side, with her feet dangling over the edge.

“Well—I don’t know that I am exactly afraid, but if you ask me if being woke in the middle of the night, to be told there’s burglars in the house, is the kind of thing I’m fond of, I’ll admit it isn’t.”

Madge laughed. Ella’s tone, and air of exceeding ruefulness, apparently struck her as comical.

“It occurs to me, Miss Duncan, that it won’t be long before Mr. Martyn makes a convert of you. As for me, now my blood’s getting up—and it is getting up—I am beginning to think that it is rather fun.”

“Are you? Then I’m afraid your sense of humour must be keener than mine.” She followed Madge’s example—putting on a pair of slippers and a dressing-gown. “Now, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going down to ask our guest to show me his card of invitation.”

“Madge! Hadn’t we better open the window and scream? Or you might fire into the air—if you’re sure you do know how to fire a revolver.”

“I’ll soon show you if I know—and I’ll show our visitor too. And I don’t think we’d better open the window and scream. Are you coming?”

Madge moved out of the room, Ella going after her with a rush.

“Madge!—don’t leave me!”

The two girls stood listening at the top of the stairs—Madge with the candlestick in one hand, and the revolver in the other.

“It strikes me that we sha’n’t be able to inquire for that card of invitation, because he doesn’t mean to stay for us to ask him. His intention is not to stand upon the order of his going, but to go at once.”

Apparently the proceedings in Ella’s bedroom had been audible below. Evidently the person in the sitting-room had become startled. There was a stampede of heavy feet across the floor; the noise of furniture being hastily pushed aside; then they could hear the sound of the window being unlatched, and opened. It was plain that the intruder, whoever it was, was bent on showing a clean pair of heels.

It seemed as if the certitude of this fact had inspired Ella with sudden courage. Any-how, she there and then shouted, with the full force of her lungs, as if she all at once had found her voice.

“Who’s that downstairs?”

“Speak!” exclaimed Madge, with a nearly simultaneous yell, “or I fire!”

And she did fire—though no one spoke; or, for the matter of that, had a chance of speaking; for the words and the shot came both together. What she fired at was not quite plain, since, if appearances could be trusted, the bullet lodged in the ceiling; for, at the same moment, a small shower of planer came tumbling down.

“Madge!” cried Ella. “I believe you’ve sent the bullet right through the roof! How you frightened me!”

“It was rather a startler,” admitted Madge, in whose voice there seemed a slight tendency to tremor. “I’d no idea it would make such a noise—the other revolver I fired didn’t. Ella!—what are you doing?”

The question was induced by the fact that Ella had rushed to the landing window, thrown the sash up, thrust her head out, and was shouting as loudly as she could:

“Thieves! thieves!—help!”

Madge came up and put her head out beside her.

“Can you see him? Has he gone?”

“Of course he’s gone—there he is, running down the road.”

“Are you sure it’s a man?”

“A man! It’s a villain!—Help! thieves! help!”

“Don’t make that noise. What’s the use? No one can hear you, and it only gives him the impression that we’re afraid of him, which we’re not; as, if he comes back again, we’ll show him. There’s more bullets in this revolver than one—I remember Jack saying so; and I’m not forced to send them all through the roof.”

Ella drew her head inside. There was colour in her cheeks, and fire in her eyes. Now that the immediate danger seemed past her humour was a ferocious one.

“I wish you’d shot him.”

Madge was calmer, though still sufficiently sanguinary.

“Well—I couldn’t very well shoot him if I never caught a glimpse of him, could I? But we’ll do better next time.”

Ella clenched her fists, and her teeth too.

“Next time!—Oh, I think a burglar’s the most despicable wretch on the face of the earth, and, if I had my way, I’d send every one caught in the act right straight to the gallows.”

“Precisely—when caught. But you can scarcely effect a capture by standing on the top of the stairs, and inquiring of the burglar if he’s there.”

“I know I behaved like a coward—you needn’t remind me. But that was because I was taken by surprise. If he were to come back—”

“Yes—if he were to come back?” Madge looked out of the window—casually. “I fancy there’s some one coming down the road—it may be he returning.”

Ella clutched at her arm.

“Madge!”

“You needn’t be alarmed, my dear, I was mistaken; it’s no one after all. Suppose, instead of breathing threatenings and slaughters ‘after the battle is over,’ we go down and see what mementoes of his presence our visitor has left behind—or, rather, what mementoes he has taken with him.”

“Are you sure he was alone?”

“We shall be able to make sure by going down to see.”

“Oh, Madge, do you think—”

“No, my dear, I don’t, or I should be no more desirous of going down than you. I’m only willing to go and see if there is some one there because I’m sure there isn’t.”

There was not—luckily. There was little conspicuously heroic about the bearing of the young ladies as they descended the stairs to suggest that they would have made short work of any ruthless ruffian who might have been in hiding. About halfway down, Madge gave what was perhaps an involuntary little cough; at which Ella started as if the other had been guilty of a crime; and both paused as if fearful that something dreadful might ensue. The sitting-room door

was closed. They hung about the handle as if it had been the entrance to some Bluebeard's den, and unimaginable horrors were concealed within. When Madge, giving the knob a courageous twist, flung the door wide open, Ella's face was pasty white. Both perceptibly retreated, as if expecting some monster to spring out on them. But no one sprang—apparently because there was no one there.

A current of cold air came from the room.

“The window's open.”

Ella's voice was tremulous. Her tremor had the effect of making Madge sarcastic.

“That's probably because our visitor opened it. You could hardly expect him to stop to close it, could you?”

She went boldly into the room—Ella hard on her heels. She held the candle above her head—to have it almost blown out by the draught. She placed it on the table.

“If we want to have a light upon the subject, we shall have to shut that window.”

She did so. Then looked about her.

“Well, he doesn't seem to have left many tokens of his presence. There's a chair knocked over, and he's pushed the cloth half off the table, but I don't see anything else.”

“He seems to have taken nothing.”

“Probably that was because there was nothing worth his taking. If he came here in search of plunder, he must have gone away a disgusted man.”

“If he came here in search of plunder?—what else could he have come for?”

“Ah! that's the question.”

“What's this?” Stooping, Ella picked up something off the floor. “Here's something he's left behind, at any rate.”

She was holding a scrap of paper.

“What is it—a *pièce de conviction* of the first importance the button off the coat by means of which the infallible detective hunts down the callous criminal?”

“I don't know what it is. It's a sort of hieroglyphic—if it isn't—nonsense.”

Madge went and looked over her shoulder.

Ella was holding half a sheet of dirty white notepaper, on which was written, with very bad ink and a very bad pen, in a very bad hand:—

“TOM OSSINGTON'S GHOST.”

“Right—straight across—three—four—up.

“Right—cat—dog—cat—dog—cat—dog—cat—dog—left eye—push.”

The two girls read to the end—then over again. Then they looked at each other—Madge with smiling eyes.

“That's very instructive, isn't it?”

“Very. There seems to be a good deal of cat and dog about it.”

“There does. I wonder what it means.”

“If it means anything.”

Madge, taking the paper from Ella's hand, went with it closer to the candle. She eyed it very shrewdly, turning it over and over, and making as if she were endeavouring to read between the lines.

“Do you know, Ella, that there is something curious about this.”

“I suppose there is, since it’s gibberish and gibberish is curious.”

“No, I’m not thinking of that. I’m thinking of the heading—‘Tom Ossington’s Ghost.’ Do you know that that enterprising stranger, who came in search of music lessons he didn’t want, asked me if my name was Ossington, and if no one of that name lived here.”

“Are you sure Ossington was the name he mentioned? It’s an unusual one.”

“Certain; it was because it was an unusual one that I particularly noticed it. Then that dreadful woman was full of her ghosts, even claiming, as you heard, to be the ghost’s wife. Doesn’t it strike you, under the circumstances, as odd that the paper the burglar has left behind him, should be headed ‘Tom Ossington’s Ghost’?”

“It does seem queer—though I don’t know what you are driving at.”

“No; I don’t know what I am driving at either. But I do know that I am driving at something. I’m beginning to think that I shall see a glimmer of light somewhere soon—though at present I haven’t the faintest notion where.”

“Do you think it was either of your visitors who has paid us another call to-night?”

“No; but I tell you what I do think.”

“What?”

“I shouldn’t be surprised if we’ve been favoured with a call from the individual who wasn’t one of my visitors; the man in the road, who took to his heels in such a hurry at the sight of the woman.”

“What cause have you to suppose that?”

“None whatever, I admit it frankly; but I do suppose it all the same. In the first place the man was burning to be one of my visitors, of that I’m persuaded and he would have been if the woman hadn’t come along. And in the second, he looked a burglar every inch of him. Ella, I’ll tell you what!” She brought her hand on to the table with a crash which made Ella start. “There’s a mystery about this house—you mark my words and see. It’s haunted—in one sense, if it isn’t in another.”

Ella cast furtive glances over her shoulder, which were suggestive of anything but a mind at ease.

“You’ve a comfortable way of talking, upon my word.”

Madge threw her arms out in front of her.

“There is a mystery about the house; it’s one of these old, ramshackle sort of places in which there is that kind of thing—I’m sure of it. Aren’t you conscious of a sense of mystery about the place, and don’t you feel it’s haunted?”

“Madge, if you don’t stop talking like that, I’ll leave the house this instant.”

“The notion is not altogether an agreeable one, I’ll allow; but facts are—”

“What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

Ella, clutching at Madge’s arm, stared over her shoulder with a face white as a sheet.

“Did—didn’t I hear s—something in the kitchen?”

“Something in the kitchen? If you did hear something in the kitchen, I’ll shoot that something as dead as a door nail.”

Madge caught up the revolver, which she had placed on the table.

“Madge, for goodness sake don’t do anything rash!”

“I will do something rash—if you call it rash to shoot at sight any scoundrel who ventures to intrude on my premises at this hour of the night!—and I’ll do it quickly! Do you think I’m going

to be played the fool with because I'm only a woman! I'll soon prove to you I'm not—that is, if it is to be proved by a little revolver practice.”

Madge spoke at the top of her voice, her words seeming to ring through the house with singular clearness. But whether this was done for the sake of encouraging herself and Ella, or with the view of frightening a possible foe, was an open question. She strode out of the room with an air of surprising resolution. Ella clinging to her skirts and following her, simply because she dare not be left behind. As it chanced, the kitchen door was open. Madge marched bravely into the room—only to find that her display of courage was thrown away, since the room was empty.

Having made sure of this, Madge turned to Ella with a smile on her face—though her cheeks, like her friend's, were whiter than they were wont to be.

“You see, we are experiencing some of the disadvantages of two lone, lorn young women being the solitary inhabitants of a rural residence—Jack Martyn scores.

For answer Ella burst into tears. Madge took her in her arms—as well as she could, for the candle in one hand and the revolver in the other.

“Don't cry, girl; there's nothing to cry at. You'll laugh at and be ashamed of yourself in the morning. I'll tell you what—I'll make an exception!—you shall have half my bed, and for the rest of the night we'll sleep together.”

CHAPTER V

A REPRESENTATIVE OF LAW AND ORDER

The next morning, information was given to a passing policeman of the events of the night, and in the course of the day an officer came round from the local station to learn particulars. Madge received him in solitary state; she had refused Ella's offer to stop away from business to keep her company, declaring that for that day, at any rate, she would be safe from undesirable intruders.

The officer was a plain-clothes man, middle-aged, imperfectly educated, with the stolid, matter-of-fact, rather stupid-looking countenance which one is apt to find an attribute of the detective of fact, rather than fiction.

“You say you didn't see him?”

“I saw the back of him.”

“Hum!” This stands for a sort of a kind of a sniff.

“Would you know him if you saw him again?”

“From the glimpse which I caught of him last night I certainly shouldn't. It was pretty dark, and he was twenty or thirty yards down the road when I first caught sight of his back.”

“You didn't follow him?”

“We did not.”

Madge smiled as she thought of how such a suggestion would have been received had it been made at the time.

“He came in through the back window and left through the front?”

“That's it.”

“And he took nothing?”

“No—but he left something behind him—he left this.”

Madge produced the half-sheet of paper which Ella had picked up from the floor.

“You're sure this was his property?”

“I'm sure it isn't ours, and I'm sure we found it in this room just after he left it.”

The officer took the paper; read it, turned it over and over; looked it up and down; read it again. Then he gave his mouth a rather comical twist; then he looked at Madge with eyes which he probably intended to be pregnant with meaning.

“Hum!” He paused to cogitate. “I suppose you know there’s been a burglary here before?”

“I know nothing of the kind. We have only been here six weeks, and are quite strangers to the place.”

“There was. Something more than a year ago. The house was empty at the time. The man who did it was caught at the job—and our chap got pretty well knocked about for his pains. But that wasn’t the only time we’ve had business at this house; our fellows have been here a good many times.”

“Neither my friend or I had the slightest notion that the house had such a reputation.”

“I daresay not. It’s been empty a good long time. I expect the stories which were told about it were against its letting.”

“What sort of stories?”

“All sorts—nonsense, most of them.”

“Were the people who lived here named Ossington?”

“Ossington?” The officer screwed his mouth up into the comical twist which it seemed he had a trick of giving it. “I believe it was, or, at any rate, something like it. A queer lot they were—very.”

“Do you see what’s written as a heading on that piece of paper?”

The officer’s glance returned to the writing.

“‘Tom Ossington’s Ghost!’—yes, I noticed it, but I don’t know what it means—do you?”

“Except that if the name of the people who lived here last was Ossington, it would seem as if last night’s affair had some reference to the house’s former occupants.”

“Yes—it would look as if it had—when you come to look at it in that way.” He was studying it as if now he had made up his mind to understand it clearly. “It looks as if it was some sort of cryptogram, and yet it mightn’t be—it’s hard to tell.” He wagged his head. “I’ll take it to our chaps, and see what they can make of it. Some men are better at this sort of thing than others.” Folding up the paper he placed it in his pocket-book. “Am I to understand that you can give no description of the burglar—that there’s no one you suspect?”

“I don’t know that it amounts to suspicion—but there was a man hanging about here in rather a singular fashion whom I can’t help thinking might have had a finger in the pie.”

“Can you describe him?”

“He was about my height—I’m five feet six and a half—thick set, and I noticed he walked in a sort of rolling way; I thought he was drunk at first, but I don’t believe he was. He kept his hands in his trousers pockets, and he was very shabbily dressed, in an old black coat—I believe you call them Chesterfields—which was buttoned down the front right up to the chin—I doubt if he had a waistcoat; a pair of old patched trousers—and I’m under the impression that his boots were odd ones. He had an old black billycock hat, with no band on, crammed over his eyes, iron—grey hair, and a fortnight’s growth of whiskers on his cheeks and chin. He had a half impudent, half hang-dog air—altogether just the sort of person to try his hand at this sort of thing.”

“I’ll take down that description, if you’ll repeat it.”

She did repeat it—and he did take it down, with irritating slowness. When she had finished he read what he had written, tapping his teeth with the end of his pencil and looking most important.

“I shouldn’t be surprised if you’ve laid your finger on the very man—and if we lay our fingers on him before the day is over. You will excuse my saying, miss, that you’ve got the faculty of

observation—marked. I couldn't have given a better description of a chap myself—and I've been a bit longer at the game than you have. Now I'll just go through the place once more, and then I'll go; and then in due course you'll hear from us again."

He did go through the place once more—and he did go.

"Now," observed Madge to herself, as she watched him going down the road, "all that remains, is for us in due course to hear from you again—to some effect—and that, if you're the sort of blunderbuss I take you to be, will be never."

Turning from the window, she looked about the room, speaking half in jest and half in earnest.

"This is a delightful state of things—truly It seems as if we couldn't have found a more undesirable habitation, if we had tried Petticoat Lane. Not the first burglar that's been in the place! And the house well known to the police—not to speak of a sinister reputation in all the country side! Charming! Clover Cottage seems to be an ideal place of residence for two lone, loin young women. The abode of mystery, and, so far as I can make out, a sink of crime, one wonders if it still waits to become the scene of some ghastly murder to give to the situation its crowning touches. I shiver—or, at any rate, I ought to shiver—when I reflect on the horrors with which I may be, and probably am, surrounded!"

Ella returned earlier than the day before, and, this time, she came alone. The question burst from her lips the instant she was in the house.

"Well, has anything happened?"

"Nothing—of importance. It's true the police have been, but as it appears that they've been here over and over again before, that's a trifle. There's been at least one previous burglar upon the premises, and it seems that the house has been known to the police—and to the whole neighbourhood—for years, in the most disreputable possible sense."

Ella could but gasp.

"Madge!"

The statements which the officer had made were retailed, with comments and additions—and, it may be added, interpolations. Ella was more impressed even than Madge had been—being divided between concern and indignation. "To think that we should have been inveigled into taking such a place! We ought to claim damages from those scamps of agents who let it us without a word of warning. You can't think how I have been worrying about you the whole day long; the idea of our being together in the place is bad enough, but the idea of your being alone in it is worse. What that policeman has said, settles it. Jack may laugh if he likes, but my mind is made up that I won't stop a moment longer in the house than I can help; the notion of your being all those hours alone here would worry me into the grave if nothing else did—and so I shall tell him when he comes."

Madge's manner was more equable.

"He will laugh at you, you'll find; and, unless I'm in error, here he is to do it."

As she spoke there was a vigorous knock at the front door.