

The Woman's Ghost Story

By Algernon Blackwood

“Yes,” she said, from her seat in the dark corner, “I’ll tell you an experience if you care to listen. And, what’s more, I’ll tell it briefly, without trimmings—I mean without unessentials. That’s a thing story-tellers never do, you know,” she laughed. “They drag in all the unessentials and leave their listeners to disentangle; but I’ll give you just the essentials, and you can make of it what you please. But on one condition: that at the end you ask no questions, because I can’t explain it and have no wish to.”

We agreed. We were all serious. After listening to a dozen prolix stories from people who merely wished to “talk” but had nothing to tell, we wanted “essentials.”

“In those days,” she began, feeling from the quality of our silence that we were with her, “in those days I was interested in psychic things, and had arranged to sit up alone in a haunted house in the middle of London. It was a cheap and dingy lodging-house in a mean street, unfurnished. I had already made a preliminary examination in daylight that afternoon, and the keys from the caretaker, who lived next door, were in my pocket. The story was a good one—satisfied me, at any rate, that it was worth investigating; and I won’t weary you with details as to the woman’s murder and all the tiresome elaboration as to *why* the place was *alive*. Enough that it was.

“I was a good deal bored, therefore, to see a man, whom I took to be the talkative old caretaker, waiting for me on the steps when I went in at 11 P.M., for I had sufficiently explained that I wished to be there alone for the night.

“ ‘If I wished to show you *the* room,’ he mumbled, and of course I couldn’t exactly refuse, having tipped him for the temporary loan of a chair and table.

“ ‘Come in, then, and let’s be quick,’ I said.

“We went in, he shuffling after me through the unlighted hall up to the first floor where the murder had taken place, and I prepared myself to hear his inevitable account before turning him out with the half-crown his persistence had earned. After lighting the gas I sat down in the arm-chair he had provided—a faded, brown plush arm-chair—and turned for the first time to face him and get through with the performance as quickly as possible. And it was in that instant I got my first shock. The man was *not* the care-taker. It was not the old fool, Carey, I had interviewed earlier in the day and made my plans with. My heart gave a horrid jump.

“ ‘Now who are *you*, pray?’ I said. ‘You’re not Carey, the man I arranged with this afternoon. Who are you?’

I felt uncomfortable, as you may imagine. I was a ‘psychical researcher,’ and a young woman of new tendencies and proud of my liberty, but I did not care to find myself in an empty house with a stranger. Something of my confidence left me. Confidence with women, you know, is all humbug after a certain point. Or perhaps you don’t know, for most of you are men. But anyhow my pluck ebbed in a quick rush, and I felt afraid.

“ ‘Who are you?’ I repeated quickly and nervously. The fellow was well dressed, youngish and good-looking, but with a face of great sadness. I myself was barely thirty. I am giving you essentials, or I would not mention it. Out of quite ordinary things comes this story. I think that’s why it has value.

“ ‘No,’ he said; ‘I’m the man who was frightened to death.’

“His voice and his words ran through me like a knife, and I felt ready to drop. In my pocket was the book I had bought to make notes in. I felt the pencil sticking in the socket. I felt, too, the extra warm things I had put on to sit up in, as no bed or sofa was available—a hundred things dashed through my mind, foolishly and without sequence or meaning, as the way is when one is really frightened. Un. essentials leaped up and puzzled me, and I thought of what the papers might say if it came out, and what my ‘smart’ brother-in-law would think, and whether it would be told that I had cigarettes in my pocket, and was a free-thinker.

“ ‘The man who was frightened to death!’ I repeated aghast.

“ ‘That’s me,’ he said stupidly.

“I stared at him just as you would have done—any one of you men now listening to me—and felt my life ebbing and flowing like a sort of hot fluid. You needn’t laugh! That’s how I felt. Small things, you know, touch the mind with great earnestness when terror is there—real *terror*. But I might have been at a middle-class tea-party, for all the ideas I had: they were so ordinary!

“ ‘But I thought you were the caretaker I tipped this afternoon to let me sleep here!’ I gasped. ‘Did—did Carey send you to meet me?’

“ ‘No,’ he replied in a voice that touched my boots somehow. ‘I am the man who was frightened to death. And what is more, I am frightened *now!*’

“ ‘So am I!’ I managed to utter, speaking instinctively. ‘I’m simply terrified.’

“ ‘Yes,’ he replied in that same odd voice that seemed to sound within me. ‘But you are still in the flesh, and I—*am not!*’

“I felt the need for vigorous self-assertion. I stood up in that empty, unfurnished room, digging the nails into my palms and clenching my teeth. I was determined to assert my individuality and my courage as a new woman and a free soul.

“ ‘You mean to say you are not in the flesh!’ I gasped. ‘What in the world are you talking about?’

“The silence of the night swallowed up my voice. For the first time I realized that darkness was over the city; that dust lay upon the stairs; that the floor above was untenanted and the floor below empty. I was alone in an unoccupied and haunted house, unprotected, and a woman. I chilled. I heard the wind round the house, and knew the stars were hidden. My thoughts rushed to policemen and omnibuses, and everything that was useful and comforting. I suddenly realized what a fool I was to come to such a house alone. I was icily afraid. I thought the end of my life had come. I was an utter fool to go in for psychical research when I had not the necessary nerve.

“ ‘Good God!’ I gasped. ‘If you’re not Carey, the man I arranged with, who are you?’

“I was really stiff with tenor. The man moved slowly towards me across the empty room. I held out my arm to stop him, getting up out of my chair at the same moment, and he came to halt just opposite to me, a smile on his worn, sad face.

“ ‘I told you who I am,’ he repeated quietly with a sigh, looking at me with the saddest eyes I have ever seen, ‘and I am frightened *still.*’

“By this time I was convinced that I was entertaining either a rogue or a madman, and I cursed my stupidity in brining the man in without having seen his face. My mind was quickly made up, and I knew what to do. Ghosts and psychic phenomena flew to the winds. If I angered the creature my life might pay the price. I must humor him till I got to the door, and then race for the street. I stood bolt upright and faced him. We were about of a height, and I was a strong, athletic woman who played hockey in winter and climbed Alps in summer. My hand itched for a stick, but I had none.

“ ‘Now, of course, I remember,’ I said with a sort of stiff smile that was very hard to force. ‘Now I remember your case and the wonderful way you behaved. . . .’

“The man stared at me stupidly, turning his head to watch me as I backed more and more quickly to the door. But when his face broke into a smile I could control myself no longer. I reached the door in a run, and shot out on to the landing. Like a fool, I turned the wrong way, and stumbled over the stairs leading to the next story. But it was too late to change. The man was after me, I was sure, though no sound of footsteps came; and I dashed up the next flight, tearing my skirt and banging my ribs in the darkness, and rushed headlong into the first room I came to. Luckily the door stood ajar, and, still more fortunate there was a key in the lock. In a second I had slammed the door, flung my whole weight against it, and turned the key.

“I was safe, but my heart was beating like a drum. A second later it seemed to stop altogether, for I saw that there was some one else in the room besides myself. A man’s figure stood between me and the windows, where the street lamps gave just enough light to outline his shape against the glass. I’m a plucky woman, you know, for even then I didn’t give up hope, but I may tell you that I have never felt so vilely frightened in all my born days. I had locked myself in with him!

“The man leaned against the window, watching me where I lay in a collapsed heap upon the floor. So there were two men in the house with me, I reflected. Perhaps other rooms were occupied too! What could it all mean? But, as I stared something changed in the room, or in me—hard to say which—and I realized my mistake, so that my fear, which had so far been physical, at once altered its character and became *psychical*. I became afraid in my soul instead of in my heart, and I knew immediately who this man was.

“ ‘How in the world did you get up here?’ I stammered to him across the empty room, amazement momentarily stemming my fear.

“ ‘Now, let me tell you,’ he began, in that odd faraway voice of his that went down my spine like a knife. ‘I’m in different space, for one thing, and you’d find me in any room you went into; for according to your way of measuring, I’m *all over the house*. Space is a bodily condition, but I am out of the body, and am not affected by space. It’s my condition that keeps me here. I want something to change my condition for me, for then I could get away. What I want is sympathy. Or, really, more than sympathy; I want affection—I want *love!*’

“While he was speaking I gathered myself slowly upon my feet. I wanted to scream and cry and laugh all at once, but I only succeeded in sighing, for my emotion was exhausted and a numbness was coming over me. I felt for the matches in my pocket and made a movement towards the gas jet.

“ ‘I should be much happier if you didn’t light the gas,’ he said at once, ‘for the vibrations of your light hurt me a good deal. You need not be afraid that I shall injure you. I can’t touch your body to begin with, for there’s a great gulf fixed, you know; and really this half-light suits me best. Now, let me continue what I was trying to say before. You know, so many people have come to this house to see me, and most of them have seen me, and one and all have been terrified. If only, oh, if only some one would be *not* terrified, but kind and loving to me! Then, you see, I might be able to change my condition and get away.’

“His voice was so sad that I felt tears start somewhere at the back of my eyes; but fear kept all else in check, and I stood shaking and cold as I listened to him.

“ ‘Who are you then? Of course Carey didn’t send you, I know now,’ I managed to utter. My thoughts scattered dreadfully and I could think of nothing to say. I was afraid of a stroke.

“ ‘I know nothing about Carey, or who he is,’ continued the man quietly, ‘and the name my body had I have forgotten, thank God; but I am the man who was frightened to death in this

house ten years ago, and I have been frightened ever since, and am frightened still; for the succession of cruel and curious people who come to this house to see the ghost and thus keep alive its atmosphere of terror, only helps to render my condition worse. If only some one would be kind to me—*laugh*, speak gently and rationally with me, cry if they like, pity, comfort, soothe me—anything but come here in curiosity and tremble as you are now doing in that corner. Now, madam, won't you take pity on me?" His voice rose to a dreadful cry. "Won't you step out into the middle of the room and try to love me a little?"

A horrible laughter came gurgling up in my throat as I heard him, but the sense of pity was stronger than the laughter, and I found myself actually leaving the support of the wall and approaching the center of the floor.

"By God!" he cried, at once straightening up against the window, "you have done a kind act. That's the first attempt at sympathy that has been shown me since I died and I feel better already. In life, you know, I was a misanthrope. Everything went wrong with me, and I came to hate my fellow men so much that I couldn't bear to see them even. Of course, like begets like, and this hate was returned. Finally I suffered from horrible delusions, and my room became haunted with demons that laughed and grimaced and one night I ran into a whole cluster of them near the bed—and the fright stopped my heart and killed me. It's hate and remorse, as much as terror, that clogs me so thickly and keeps me here. If only some one could feel pity, and sympathy, and perhaps a little love for me, I could get away and be happy. When you came this afternoon to see over the house I watched you, and a little hope came to me for the first time. I saw you had courage, originality, resource—*love*. If only I could touch your heart, without frightening you, I knew I could perhaps tap that love you have stored up in your being there, and thus borrow the wings for my escape!"

"Now I must confess my heart began to ache a little, as fear left me and the man's words sank their sad meaning into me. Still, the whole affair was so incredible, and so touched with unholy quality, and the story of a woman's murder I had come to investigate had so obviously nothing to do with this thing, that I felt myself in a kind of wild dream that seemed likely to stop at any moment and leave me somewhere in bed after a nightmare.

"Moreover, his words possessed me to such an extent that I found it impossible to reflect upon anything else at all, or to consider adequately any ways or means of action or escape.

"I moved a little nearer to him in the gloom, horribly frightened, of course, but with the beginnings of a strange determination in my heart.

"'You women,' he continued, his voice plainly thrilling at my approach, 'you wonderful women, to whom life often brings no opportunity of spending your great love, oh, if you only could know how many of *us* simply yearn for it! It would save our souls, if but you knew. Few might find the chance that you now have, but if you only spent your love freely, without definite object, just letting it flow openly for all who need, you would reach hundreds and thousands of souls like me, and *release us!* Oh, madam, I ask you again to feel with me, to be kind and gentle—and if you can to love me a little!"

"My heart did leap within me and this time the tears did come, for I could not restrain them. I laughed too, for the way he called me 'madam' sounded so odd, here in this empty room at midnight in a London street, but my laughter stopped dead and merged in a flood of weeping when I saw how my change of feeling affected him. He had left his place by the window and was kneeling on the floor at my feet, his hands stretched out towards me, and the first signs of a kind of glory about his head.

“ ‘Put your arms round me and kiss me, for the love of God!’ he cried. ‘Kiss me, oh, kiss me, and I shall be freed! You have done so much already—now do this!’

“I stuck there, hesitating, shaking, my determination on the of action, yet not quite able to compass it. But the terror had almost gone.

“ ‘Forget that I’m a man and you’re a woman,’ he continued in the most beseeching voice I ever heard. ‘Forget that I’m a ghost, and come out boldly and press me to you with a great kiss, and let your love flow into me. Forget yourself just for one minute and do a brave thing! Oh, love me, *love me*, LOVE ME! and I shall be free!’

“The words, or the deep force they somehow released in the center of my being, stirred me profoundly, and an emotion infinitely greater than fear surged up over me and carried me with it across the edge of action. Without hesitation I took two steps forward towards him where he knelt, and held out my arms. Pity and love were in my heart at that moment, genuine pity, I swear, and genuine love. I forgot myself and my little tremblings in a great desire to help another soul.

“ ‘I love you! poor, aching, unhappy thing! I love you,’ I cried through hot tears; ‘and I am not the least bit afraid in the world.’

“The man uttered a curious sound, like laughter, yet not laughter, and turned his face up to me. The light from the street below fell on it, but there was another light, too, shining all round it that seemed to come from the eyes and skin. He rose to his feet and met me, and in that second I folded him to my breast and kissed him full on the lips again and again.”

All our pipes had gone out, and not even a skirt rustled in that dark studio as the story-teller paused a moment to steady her voice, and put a hand softly up to her eyes before going on again.

“Now, what can I say, and how can I describe, to you, all you skeptical men sitting there with pipes in your mouths, the amazing sensation I experienced of holding an intangible, impalpable thing so closely to my heart that it touched my body with equal pressure all the way down, and then melted away somewhere into my very being? For it was like seizing a rush of cool wind and feeling a touch of burning fire the moment it had struck its swift blow and passed on. A series of shocks ran all over and all through me; a momentary ecstasy of flaming sweetness and wonder thrilled down into me; my heart gave another great leap—and then I was alone.

“The room was empty. I turned on the gas and struck a match to prove it. All fear had left me, and something was singing round me in the air and in my heart like the joy of a spring morning in youth. Not all the devils or shadows or hauntings in the world could then have caused me a single tremor.

“I unlocked the door and went all over the dark house, even into kitchen and cellar and up among the ghostly attics. But the house was empty. Something had left it. I lingered a short hour, analyzing, thinking, wondering—you can guess what and how, perhaps, but I won’t detail, for I promised only essentials, remember—and then went out to sleep the remainder of the night in my own flat, lock’ lug the door behind me upon a house no longer haunted.

“But my uncle, Sir Henry, the owner of the house, required an account of my adventure, and of course I was in duty bound to give him some kind of a true story. Before I could begin, however, he held up his hand to stop me.

‘First,’ he said, ‘I wish to tell you a little deception I ventured to practice on you. So many people have been to that house and seen the ghost that I came to think the story acted on their imaginations, and I wished to make a better test. So I invented for their benefit another story,

with the idea that if you did see anything I could be sure it was not due merely to an excited imagination.'

" 'Then what you told me about a woman having been murdered, and all that, was not the true story of the haunting?'

" 'It was not. The true story is that a cousin of mine went mad in that house, and killed himself in a fit of morbid terror following upon years of miserable hypochondriasis. It is his figure that investigators see.'

" 'That explains, then,' I gasped—

" 'Explains what?'

" 'I thought of that poor struggling soul, longing all these years for escape, and determined to keep my story for the present to myself.'

" 'Explains, I mean, why I did not see the ghost of the murdered woman,' I concluded.

" 'Precisely,' said Sir Henry, 'and why, if you had seen anything, it would have had value; inasmuch as it could not have been caused by the imagination working upon a story you already knew.' "