

Victorian Secrets

The Last House in C—— Street by Mrs Craik (Dinah Mulock)

I am not a believer in ghosts in general; I see no good in them. They come — that is, are reported to come — so irrelevantly, purposelessly — so ridiculously, in short — that one's common sense as regards this world, one's supernatural sense of the other, are alike revolted. Then nine out of ten 'capital ghost stories' are so easily accounted for; and in the tenth, when all natural explanation fails, one who has discovered the extraordinary difficulty there is in all society in getting hold of that very slippery article called a *fact*, is strongly inclined to shake a dubious head, ejaculating, 'Evidence! a question of evidence!'

But my unbelief springs from no dogged or contemptuous scepticism as to the possibility — however great the improbability — of that strange impression upon or communication to, spirit in matter, from spirit wholly immaterialized, which is vulgarly called 'a ghost'. There is no credulity more blind, no ignorance more childish, than that of the sage who tries to measure 'heaven and earth and the things under the earth', with the small two-foot-rule of his own brains. Dare we presume to argue concerning any mystery of the universe, 'It is inexplicable, and therefore impossible'?

Premising these opinions, though simply as opinions, I am about to relate what I must confess is to me a thorough ghost story; its external and circumstantial evidence being indisputable, while its psychological causes and results, though not easy of explanation, are still more difficult to be explained away. The ghost, like Hamlet's, was 'an honest ghost'. From her daughter — an old lady, who, bless her good and gentle memory! has since learned the secrets of all things — I learnt this veritable tale.

'My dear,' said Mrs. MacArthur to me — it was in the early days of table-moving, when young folk ridiculed and elder folk were shocked at the notion of calling up one's departed ancestors into one's dinner-table, and learning the wonders of the angelic world by the bobbings of a hat or the twirlings of a plate; — 'My dear,' continued the old lady, 'I do not like playing at ghosts.'

'Why not. Do you believe in them?'

'A little.'

'Did you ever see one?'

'Never. But once I heard —'

She looked serious, as if she hardly liked to speak about it, either from a sense of awe or from fear of ridicule. But no one could have laughed at any illusions of the gentle old lady, who never uttered a harsh or satirical word to a living soul; and this evident awe was rather remarkable in one who had a large stock of common sense, little wonder, and no idealism.

I was rather curious to hear MacArthur's ghost story.

'My dear, it was a long time ago, so long that you may fancy I forget and confuse the circumstances. But I do not. Sometimes I think one recollects more clearly things that happened in one's teens — I was eighteen that year — than a great many nearer events. And besides, I had other reasons for remembering vividly everything belonging to this time, — for I was in love, you must know.'

She looked at me with a mild, deprecating smile, as if hoping my youthfulness would not consider the thing so very impossible or ridiculous. No; I was all interest at once.

‘In love with Mr. MacArthur,’ I said, scarcely as a question, being at that Arcadian time of life when one takes as a natural necessity, and believes as an undoubted truth, that everybody marries his or her first love.

‘No, my dear; not with Mr. MacArthur.’

I was so astonished, so completely dumb-founded — for I had woven a sort of ideal round my good old friend — that I suffered Mrs MacArthur to knit in silence for full five minutes. My surprise was not lessened when she said, with a little smile —

‘He was a young gentleman of good parts; and he was very fond of me. Proud, too, rather. For though you might not think it, my dear, I was actually a beauty in those days.’

I had very little doubt of it. The slight lithe figure, the tiny hands and feet, — if you had walked behind Mrs MacArthur you might have taken her for a young woman still. Certainly, people lived slower and easier in the last generation than in ours.

‘Yes, I was the beauty of Bath. Mr. Everest fell in love with me there. I was much gratified; for I had just been reading Miss Burney’s *Cecilia*, and I thought him exactly like Mortimer Delvil. A very pretty tale, *Cecilia*; did you ever read it?’

‘No.’ And, to arrive at her tale, I leaped to the only conclusion which could reconcile the two facts of her having had a lover named Everest, and being now Mrs MacArthur. ‘Was it *his* ghost you saw?’

‘No, my dear, no; thank goodness, he is alive still. He calls here sometimes; he has been a good friend to our family. Ah!’ with a slow shake of the head, half pleased, half pensive, ‘you would hardly believe, my dear, what a very pretty fellow he was.’

One could scarcely smile at the odd phrase, pertaining to last-century novels and to the loves of our great-grandmothers. I listened patiently to the wandering reminiscences which still further delayed the ghost-story.

‘But, Mrs. MacArthur, was it in Bath that you saw or heard what I think you were going to tell me? The ghost, you know?’

‘Don’t call it *that*; it sounds as if you were laughing at it. And you must not, for it is really true; as true as that I sit here, an old lady of seventy-five; and that then I was a young gentlewoman of eighteen. Nay, my dear, I will tell you all about it.’

‘We had been staying in London, my father and mother, Mr. Everest, and I. He had persuaded them to take me; he wanted to show me a little of the world, though it was but a narrow world, my dear — for he was a law student, living poorly and working hard. He took lodgings for us near the Temple; in C— street, the last house there, looking on to the river. He was very fond of the river; and often of evenings, when his work was too heavy to let him take us to Ranelagh or to the play, he used to walk with my father and mother and me, up and down the Temple Gardens. Were you ever in the Temple Gardens? It is a pretty place now — a quiet, grey nook in the midst of noise and bustle; the stars look wonderful through those great trees; but still it is not like what it was then, when I was a girl.’

Ah! no; impossible.

‘It was in the Temple Gardens, my dear, that I remember we took our last walk — my mother, Mr. Everest, and I — before she went home to Bath. She was very anxious and restless to go, being too delicate for London gaieties. Besides, she had a large family at home, of which I was the eldest; and we were anxiously expecting the youngest in a month or two. Nevertheless, my dear mother had gone about with me, taken me to all the shows and sights that I, a hearty and happy girl, longed to see, and entered into them with almost as great enjoyment as my own.

‘But tonight she was pale, rather grave, and steadfastly bent on returning home.

‘We did all we could to persuade her to the contrary, for on the next night but one was to have been the crowning treat of all our London pleasures: we were to see *Hamlet* at Drury

Lane, with John Kemble and Sarah Siddons! Think of that, my dear. Ah! you have no such sights now. Even my grave father longed to go, and urged in his mild way that we should put off our departure. But my mother was determined.

‘At last Mr. Everest said — (I could show you the very spot where he stood, with the river — it was high water — lapping against the wall, and the evening sun shining on the Southwark houses opposite.) He said — it was very wrong, of course, my dear; but then he was in love, and might be excused, —

“Madam,” said he, “it is the first time I ever knew you think of yourself alone.”

“Myself, Edmond?”

“Pardon me, but would it not be possible for you to return home, leaving behind, for two days only, Mr. Thwaite and Mistress Dorothy?”

“Leave them behind — leave them behind!” She mused over the words. “What say you, Dorothy?”

I was silent. In very truth, I had never been parted from her in all my life. It had never crossed my mind to wish to part from her, or to enjoy any pleasure without her, till — till within the last three months. “Mother, don’t suppose I...”

‘But here I caught sight of Mr. Everest, and stopped.

“Pray continue. Mistress Dorothy.”

‘No, I could not. He looked so vexed, so hurt; and we had been so happy together. Also, we might not meet again for years, for the journey between London and Bath was then a serious one, even to lovers; and he worked very hard — had few pleasures in his life. It did indeed seem almost selfish of my mother.

‘Though my lips said nothing, perhaps my sad eyes said only too much, and my mother felt it.

‘She walked with us a few yards, slowly and thoughtfully. I could see her now, with her pale, tired face, under the cherry-coloured ribbons of her hood. She had been very handsome as a young woman, and was most sweet-looking still — my dear, good mother!

“Dorothy, we will no more discuss this. I am very sorry, but I must go home. However, I will persuade your father to remain with you till the week’s end. Are you satisfied?”

“No,” was the first filial impulse of my heart; but Mr. Everest pressed my arm with such an entreating look, that almost against my will I answered “Yes.”

‘Mr. Everest overwhelmed my mother with his delight and gratitude. She walked up and down for some time longer, leaning on his arm — she was very fond of him; then stood looking on the river, upwards and downwards.

“I suppose this is my last walk in London. Thank you for all the care you have taken of me. And when I am gone home — mind, oh mind, Edmond, that you take special care of Dorothy.”

‘These words, and the tone in which they were spoken, fixed themselves on my mind — first, from gratitude, not unmingled with regret, as if I had not been so considerate to her as she to me; *afterwards* — But we often err, my dear, in dwelling too much on that word. We finite creatures have only to deal with “now” — nothing whatever to do with “afterwards”. In this case, I have ceased to blame myself or others. Whatever was, being past, was right to be, and could not have been otherwise.

‘My mother went home next morning, alone. We were to follow in a few days, though she would not allow us to fix any time. Her departure was so hurried that I remember nothing about it, save her answer to my father’s urgent desire — almost command — that if anything was amiss she would immediately let him know.

“Under all circumstances, wife,” he reiterated, “this you promise?”

“I promise.”

‘Though when she was gone he declared she need not have said it so earnestly, since we should be at home almost as soon as the slow Bath coach could take her and bring us a letter. And besides, there was nothing likely to happen. But he fidgeted a good deal, being unused to her absence in their happy wedded life. He was, like most men, glad to blame anybody but himself; and the whole day, and the next, was cross at intervals with both Edmond and me; but we bore it — and patiently.

“It will be all right when we get him to the theatre. He has no real cause for anxiety about her. What a dear woman she is, and a precious — your mother, Dorothy!”

I rejoiced to hear my lover speak thus, and thought there hardly ever was young gentlewoman so blessed as I.

‘We went to the play. Ah, you know nothing of what a play is, now-a-days. You never saw John Kemble and Mrs Siddons. Though in dresses and shows it was far inferior to the *Hamlet* you took me to see last week, my dear — and though I perfectly well remember being on the point of laughing when in the most solemn scene, it became clearly evident that the Ghost had been drinking. Strangely enough, no after events connected therewith — nothing subsequent ever drove from my mind the vivid impression of this my first play. Strange, also, that the play should have been *Hamlet*. Do you think that Shakespeare believed in — in what people call “ghosts”?’

I could not say; but I thought Mrs MacArthur’s ghost very long in coming.

‘Don’t, my dear — don’t; do anything but laugh at it.’

She was visibly affected, and it was not without an effort that she proceeded in her story.

‘I wish you to understand exactly my position that night — a young girl, her head full of the enchantment of the stage — her heart of something not less engrossing. Mr. Everest had supped with us, leaving us both in the best of spirits; indeed my father had gone to bed, laughing heartily at the remembrance of the antics of Mr. Grimaldi, which had almost obliterated the queen and Hamlet from his memory, on which the ridiculous always took a far stronger hold than the awful or sublime.

‘I was sitting — let me see — at the window, chatting with my maid Patty, who was brushing the powder out of my hair. The window was open half-way, and looking out on the Thames; and the summer night being very warm and starry, made it almost like sitting out of doors. There was none of the awe given by the solitude of a midnight closed room, when every sound is magnified, and every shadow seems alive.

‘As I said, we had been chatting and laughing; for Patty and I were both very young, and she had a sweetheart, too. She, like every one of our household, was a warm admirer of Mr. Everest. I had just been half scolding, half smiling at her praises of him, when St Paul’s great clock came booming over the silent river.

“Eleven,” counted Patty. “Terrible late we be, Mistress Dorothy: not like Bath hours, I reckon.”

“Mother will have been in bed an hour ago,” said I, with a little self-reproach at not having thought of her till now.

‘The next minute my maid and I both started up with a simultaneous exclamation.

“Did you hear that?”

“Yes, a bat flying against the window.”

“But the lattices are open, Mistress Dorothy.”

‘So they were; and there was no bird or bat or living thing about — only the quiet summer night, the river, and the stars.

“I be certain sure I heard it. And I think it was like — just a bit like — somebody tapping.”

“Nonsense, Patty!” But it *had* struck me thus — though I said it was a bat. It was exactly

like the sound of fingers against a pane — very soft, gentle fingers, such as, in passing into her flower-garden, my mother used often to tap outside the school-room casement at home.

“I wonder, did father hear anything. It — the bird, you know, Patty — might have flown at his window, too?”

“Oh, Mistress Dorothy!” Patty would not be deceived. I gave her the brush to finish my hair, but her hand shook too much. I shut the window, and we both sat down facing it.

‘At that minute, distinct, clear, and unmistakable, like a person giving a summons in passing by, we heard once more the tapping on the pane. But nothing was seen; not a single shadow came between us and the open air, the bright starlight.

‘Startled I was, and awed, but I was not frightened. The sound gave me even an inexplicable delight. But I had hardly time to recognize my feelings, still less to analyse them, when a loud cry came from my father’s room.

“Dolly, — Dolly!”

‘Now my mother and I had both one name, but he always gave her the old-fashioned pet name — I was invariably Dorothy. Still I did not pause to think, but ran to his locked door, and answered.

‘It was a long time before he took any notice, though I heard him talking to himself, and moaning. He was subject to bad dreams, especially before his attacks of gout. So my first alarm lightened. I stood listening, knocking at intervals, until at last he replied.

“What do’ee want, child?”

“Is anything the matter, father?”

“Nothing. Go to thy bed, Dorothy.”

“Did you not call? Do you want any one?”

“Not thee. O Dolly, my poor Dolly,” — and he seemed to be almost sobbing, “Why did I let thee leave me!”

“Father, you are not going to be ill? It is not the gout, is it?” (for that was the time when he wanted my mother most, and indeed, when he was wholly unmanageable by any one but her.)

“Go away. Get to thy bed, girl; I don’t want ’ee.”

‘I thought he was angry with me for having been in some sort the cause of our delay, and retired very miserable. Patty and I sat up a good while longer, discussing the dreary prospect of my father’s having a fit of the gout here in London lodgings, with only us to nurse him, and my mother away. Our alarm was so great that we quite forgot the curious circumstance which had first attracted us, till Patty spoke up, from her bed on the floor.

“I hope master beant going to be very ill, and that — you know — came for a warning. Do ’ee think it *was* a bird, Mistress Dorothy?”

“Very likely. Now, Patty, let us go to sleep.”

‘But I did not, for all night I heard my father groaning at intervals. I was certain it was the gout, and wished from the bottom of my heart that we had gone home with mother.

‘What was my surprise when, quite early, I heard him rise and go down, just as if nothing was ailing him! I found him sitting at the breakfast-table in his travelling coat, looking very haggard and miserable, but evidently bent on a journey.

“Father, you are not going to Bath?”

“Yes, I be.”

“Not till the evening coach starts,” I cried, alarmed. “We can’t, you know?”

“I’ll take a post-chaise, then. We must be off in an hour.”

‘An hour! The cruel pain of parting — (my dear, I believe I used to feel things keenly when I was young) — shot through me — through and through. A single hour, and I should have said goodbye to Edmond — one of those heart-breaking farewells when we seem to

leave half of our poor young life behind us, forgetting that the only real parting is when there is no love left to part from. A few years, and I wondered how I could have crept away and wept in such intolerable agony at the mere bidding goodbye to Edmond — Edmond, who loved me.

‘Every minute seemed a day till he came in, as usual, to breakfast. My red eyes and my father’s corded trunk explained all.

“Doctor Thwaite, you are not going?”

“Yes, I be,” repeated my father. He sat moodily leaning on the table — would not taste his breakfast.

“Not till the night coach, surely? I was to take you and Mistress Dorothy to see Mr. Benjamin West, the king’s painter.”

“Let kings and painters alone lad; I be going home to my Dolly.”

‘Mr. Everest used many arguments, gay and grave, upon which I hung with earnest conviction and hope. He made things so clear always; he was a man of much brighter parts than my father, and had great influence over him.

“Dorothy,” he whispered, “help me to persuade the Doctor. It is so little time I beg for, only a few hours; and before so long a parting.” Ay, longer than he thought, or I.

“Children,” cried my father at last, “you are a couple of fools. Wait till you have been married twenty years. I must go to my Dolly. I know there is something amiss at home.”

‘I should have felt alarmed, but I saw Mr. Everest smile; and besides, I was yet glowing under his fond look, as my father spoke of our being “married twenty years”.

“Father, you have surely no reason for thinking this? If you have, tell us.”

‘My father just lifted his head, and looked me woefully in the face.

“Dorothy, last night, as sure as I see you now, I saw your mother.”

“Is that all?” cried Mr. Everest, laughing; “why, my good sir, of course you did; you were dreaming.”

“I had not gone to sleep.”

“How did you see her?”

“Coming into the room just as she used to do in the bedroom at home, with the candle in her hand and the baby asleep on her arm.”

“Did she speak?” asked Mr. Everest, with another and rather satirical smile; “remember, you saw *Hamlet* last night. Indeed, sir — indeed, Dorothy — it was a mere dream. I do not believe in ghosts; it would be an insult to common sense, to human wisdom — nay, even to Divinity itself.”

‘Edmond spoke so earnestly, so justly, so affectionately, that perforce I agreed; and even my father became to feel rather ashamed of his own weakness. He, a physician, the head of a family, to yield to a mere superstitious fancy, springing probably from a hot supper and an overexcited brain! To the same cause Mr. Everest attributed the other incident, which somewhat hesitatingly I told him.

“Dear, it was a bird; nothing but a bird. One flew in at my window last spring; it had hurt itself, and I kept it, and nursed it, and petted it. It was such a pretty, gentle little thing, it put me in mind of Dorothy.”

“Did it?” said I.

“And at last it got well and flew away.”

“Ah! that was not like Dorothy.”

‘Thus, my father being persuaded, it was not hard to persuade me. We settled to remain till evening. Edmond and I, with my maid Patty, went about together, — chiefly in Mr. West’s Gallery, and in the quiet shade of our favourite Temple Gardens. And if for those four stolen hours, and the sweetness in them, I afterwards suffered untold remorse and

bitterness, I have entirely forgiven myself, as I know my dear mother would have forgiven me, long ago.’

Mrs. MacArthur stopped, wiped her eyes, and then continued — speaking more in the matter-of-fact way that old people speak than she had been lately doing.

‘Well, my dear, where was I?’

‘In the Temple Gardens.’

‘Yes, yes. Well, we came home to dinner. My father always enjoyed his dinner, and his nap afterwards; he had nearly recovered himself now: only looked tired from loss of rest. Edmond and I sat in the window, watching the barges and wherries down the Thames; there were no steam-boats then, you know.

‘Some one knocked at the door with a message for my father, but he slept so heavily he did not hear. Mr. Everest went to see what it was; I stood at the window. I remember mechanically watching the red sail of a Margate hoy that was going down the river, and thinking with a sharp pang how dark the room seemed, in a moment, with Edmond not there.

‘Re-entering, after a somewhat long absence, he never looked at me, but went straight to my father.

“‘Sir, it is almost time for you to start” (oh! Edmond). “There is a coach at the door; and, pardon me, but I think you should travel quickly.”

‘My father sprang to his feet.

“‘Dear sir, indeed there is no need for anxiety now; but I have received news. You have another little daughter, sir, and —”

“‘Dolly, my Dolly!” Without another word my father rushed away without his hat, leaped into the post-chaise that was waiting, and drove off.

“‘Edmond!” I gasped.

“‘My poor little girl — my own Dorothy!”

‘By the tenderness of his embrace, not lover-like, but brotherlike — by his tears, for I could feel them on my neck — I knew, as well as if he had told me, that I should never see my dear mother any more.’

‘She had died in childbirth,’ continued the old lady after a long pause — ‘died at night, at the very hour and minute when I had heard the tapping on the window-pane, and my father had thought he saw her coming into his room with a baby on her arm.’

‘Was the baby dead, too?’

‘They thought so then, but it afterwards revived.’

‘What a strange story!’

‘I do not ask you to believe in it. How and why and what it was I cannot tell; I only know that it assuredly was so.’

‘And Mr. Everest?’ I enquired, after some hesitation.

The old lady shook her head. ‘Ah, my dear, you will soon learn how very, very seldom one marries one’s first love. After that day, I did not see Mr. Everest for twenty years.’

‘How wrong — how —’

‘Don’t blame him; it was not his fault. You see, after that time my father took a prejudice against him — not unnatural, perhaps; and she was not there to make things straight. Besides, my own conscience was very sore, and there were the six children at home, and the little baby had no mother: so at last I made up my mind. I should have loved him just the same if we had waited twenty years: but he could not see things so. Don’t blame him — my dear — don’t blame him. It was as well, perhaps, as things turned out.’

‘Did he marry?’

‘Yes, after a few years; and loved his wife dearly. When I was about one-and-thirty, I

married Mr. MacArthur. So neither of us was unhappy, you see — at least, not more so than most people; and we became sincere friends afterwards. Mr. and Mrs Everest come to see me, almost every Sunday.

‘Why you foolish child, you are not crying?’

Ay, I was — but scarcely at the ghost story.

THE END



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