Molesworth Mrs.

Uncanny Tales

Mrs. Molesworth

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Molesworth M.

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Содержание

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THE SHADOW IN THE MOONLIGHT

PART I

We never thought of Finster St. Mabyn's being haunted. We really never did.

This may seem strange, but it is absolutely true. It was such an extremely interesting and curious place in many ways that it required nothing extraneous to add to its attractions. Perhaps this was the reason.

Now-a-days, immediately that you hear of a house being "very old," the next remark is sure to be "I hope it is" – or "is not" – that depends on the taste of the speaker – "haunted".

But Finster was more than very old; it was *ancient* and, in a modest way, historical. I will not take up time by relating its history, however, or by referring my readers to the chronicles in which mention of it may be found. Nor shall I yield to the temptation of describing the room in which a certain royalty spent one night, if not two or three nights, four centuries ago, or the tower, now in ruins, where an even more renowned personage was imprisoned for several months. All these facts – or legends – have nothing to do with what I have to tell. Nor, strictly speaking, has Finster itself, except as a sort of prologue to my narrative.

We heard of the house through friends living in the same county, though some distance farther inland. They – Mr. and Miss Miles, it is convenient to give their name at once – knew that we had been ordered to leave our own home for some months, to get over the effects of a very trying visitation of influenza, and that sea-air was specially desirable.

We grumbled at this. Seaside places are often so dull and commonplace. But when we heard of Finster we grumbled no longer.

"Dull" in a sense it might be, but assuredly not "commonplace". Janet Miles's description of it, though she was not particularly clever at description, read like a fairy tale, or one of Longfellow's poems.

"A castle by the sea – how perfect!" we all exclaimed. "Do, oh, do fix for it, mother!"

The objections were quickly over-ruled. It was rather isolated, said Miss Miles, standing, as was not difficult to trace in its name, on a point of land – a corner rather – with sea on two sides. It had not been lived in, save spasmodically, for some years, for the late owner was one of those happy, or unhappy people, who have more houses than they can use, and the present one was a minor. Eventually it was to be overhauled and some additions and alterations made, but the trustees would be glad to let it at a moderate rent for some months, and had intended putting it into some agents' hands when Mr. Miles happened to meet one of them, who mentioned it to him. There was nothing against it; it was absolutely healthy. But the furniture was old and shabby, and there was none too much of it. If we wanted to have visitors we should certainly require to add to it. This, however, could easily be done, our informant went on to say. There was a very good upholsterer and furniture dealer at Raxtrew, the nearest town, who was in the habit of hiring out things to the officers at the fort. "Indeed," she added, "we often pick up charming old pieces of furniture from him for next to nothing, so you could both hire and buy."

Of course, we should have visitors – and our own house would not be the worse for some additional chairs and tables here and there, in place of some excellent monstrosities Phil and Nugent and I had persuaded mother to get rid of.

"If I go down to spy the land with father," I said, "I shall certainly go to the furniture dealer's and have a good look about me."

I did go with father. I was nineteen – it is four years ago – and a capable sort of girl. Then I was the only one who had not been ill, and mother had been the worst of all, mother and Dormy – poor little chap – for *he* nearly died.

He is the youngest of us – we are four boys and two girls. Sophy was then fifteen. My own name is Leila.

If I attempted to give any idea of the impression Finster St. Mabyn's made upon us, I should go on for hours. It simply took our breath away. It really felt like going back a few centuries merely to enter within the walls and gaze round you. And yet we did not see it to any advantage, so at least said the two Miles's who were our guides. It was a gloomy day, with the feeling of rain not far off, early in April. It might have been November, though it was not cold.

"You can scarcely imagine what it is on a bright day," said Janet, eager, as people always are in such circumstances, to show off her *trouvaille*. "The lights and shadows are so exquisite."

"I love it as it is," I said. "I don't think I shall ever regret having seen it first on a grey day. It is just perfect."

She was pleased at my admiration, and did her utmost to facilitate matters. Father was taken with the place, too, I could see, but he hummed and hawed a good deal about the bareness of the rooms – the bedrooms especially. So Janet and I went into it at once in a business-like way, making lists of the actually necessary additions, which did not prove very formidable after all.

"Hunter will manage all that *easily*," said Miss Miles, upon which father gave in – I believe he had meant to do so all the time. The rent was really so low that a little furniture-hire could be afforded, I suggested. And father agreed.

"It is extremely low," he said, "for a place possessing so many advantages."

But even then it did not occur to any of us to suggest "suspiciously low".

We had the Miles's guarantee for it all, to begin with. Had there been any objection they must have known it.

We spent the night with them and the next morning at the furniture dealer's. He was a quick, obliging little man, and took in the situation at a glance. And *his* terms were so moderate that father said to me amiably: "There are some quaint odds and ends here, Leila. You might choose a few things, to use at Finster in the first place, and then to take home with us."

I was only too ready to profit by the permission, and with Janet's help a few charmingly quaint chairs and tables, a three-cornered wall cabinet, and some other trifles were soon put aside for us. We were just leaving, when at one end of the shop some tempting-looking draperies caught my eye.

"What are these?" I asked the upholsterer. "Curtains! Why, this is real old tapestry!"

The obliging Hunter drew out the material in question.

"They are not exactly curtains, miss," he said. "I thought they would make nice *portières*. You see the tapestry is set into cloth. It was so frail when I got it that it was the only thing to do with it."

He had managed it very ingeniously. Two panels, so to say, of old tapestry, very charming in tone, had been lined and framed with dull green cloth, making a very good pair of *portières* indeed.

"Oh, papa!" I cried, "do let us have these. There are sure to be draughty doors at Finster, and afterwards they would make *perfect "portières"* for the two side doors in the hall at home."

Father eyed the tapestry appreciatively, but first prudently inquired the price. It seemed higher in proportion than Hunter's other charges.

"You see, sir," he said half apologetically, "the panels are real antique work, though so much the worse for wear."

"Where did they come from?" asked father.

Hunter hesitated.

"To tell you the truth, sir," he replied, "I was asked not to name the party that I bought it from. It seems a pity to part with *h*eir-looms, but – it happens sometimes – I bought several things together of a family quite lately. The *portières* have only come out of the workroom this morning. We hurried on with them to stop them fraying more – you see where they were before, they must have been nailed to the wall."

Janet Miles, who was something of a connoisseur, had been examining the tapestry.

"It is well worth what he asks," she said, in a low voice. "You don't often come across such tapestry in England."

So the bargain was struck, and Hunter promised to see all that we had chosen, both purchased and hired, delivered at Finster the week before we proposed to come.

Nothing interfered with our plans. By the end of the month we found ourselves at our temporary home – all of us except Nat, our third brother, who was at school. Dormer, the small boy, still did lessons with Sophy's governess. The two older "boys," as we called them, happened to be at home from different reasons – one, Nugent, on leave from India; Phil, forced to miss a term at college through an attack of the same illness which had treated mother and Dormy so badly.

But now that everybody was well again, and going to be very much better, thanks to Finster air, we thought the ill wind had brought us some very distinct good. It would not have been half such fun had we not been a large family party to start with, and before we had been a week at the place we had added to our numbers by the first detachment of the guests we had invited.

It was not a very large house; besides ourselves we had not room for more than three or four others. For some of the rooms – those on the top story – were really too dilapidated to suit any one but rats – "rats or ghosts," said some one laughingly one day, when we had been exploring them.

Afterwards the words returned to my memory.

We had made ourselves very comfortable, thanks to the invaluable Hunter. And every day the weather grew milder and more spring-like. The woods on the inland side were full of primroses. It promised to be a lovely season.

There was a gallery along one side of the house, which soon became a favourite resort; it made a pleasant lounging-place, in the day-time especially, though less so in the evening, as the fireplace at one end warmed it but imperfectly, and besides this it was difficult to light up. It was draughty, too, as there was a superfluity of doors, two of which, one at each end, we at once condemned. They were not needed, as the one led by a very long spiral staircase, to the unused attic rooms, the other to the kitchen and offices. And when we did have afternoon tea in the gallery, it was easy to bring it through the dining or drawing-rooms, long rooms, lighted at their extreme ends, which ran parallel to the gallery lengthways, both of which had a door opening on to it as well as from the hall on the other side. For all the principal rooms at Finster were on the first-floor, not on the ground-floor.

The closing of these doors got rid of a great deal of draught, and, as I have said, the weather was really mild and calm.

One afternoon – I am trying to begin at the beginning of our strange experiences; even at the risk of long-windedness it seems better to do so – we were all assembled in the gallery at tea-time. The "children," as we called Sophy and Dormer, much to Sophy's disgust, and their governess, were with us, for rules were relaxed at Finster, and Miss Larpent was a great favourite with us all.

Suddenly Sophy gave an exclamation of annoyance.

"Mamma," she said, "I wish you would speak to Dormer. He has thrown over my tea-cup – only look at my frock!" "If you cannot sit still," she added, turning herself to the boy, "I don't think you should be allowed to come to tea here."

"What is the matter, Dormy?" said mother.

Dormer was standing beside Sophy, looking very guilty, and rather white.

"Mamma," he said, "I was only drawing a chair out. It got so dreadfully cold where I was sitting, I really could not stay there," and he shivered slightly.

He had been sitting with his back to one of the locked-up doors. Phil, who was nearest, moved his hand slowly across the spot.

"You are fanciful, Dormy," he said, "there is really no draught whatever."

This did not satisfy mother.

"He must have got a chill, then," she said, and she went on to question the child as to what he had been doing all day, for, as I have said, he was still delicate.

But he persisted that he was quite well, and no longer cold.

"It wasn't exactly a draught," he said, "it was – oh! just icy, all of a sudden. I've felt it before – sitting in that chair."

Mother said no more, and Dormer went on with his tea, and when bed-time came he seemed just as usual, so that her anxiety faded. But she made thorough investigation as to the possibility of any draught coming up from the back stairs, with which this door communicated. None was to be discovered – the door fitted fairly well, and beside this, Hunter had tacked felt round the edges – furthermore, one of the thick heavy *portières* had been hung in front.

An evening or two later we were sitting in the drawing room after dinner, when a cousin who was staying with us suddenly missed her fan.

"Run and fetch Muriel's fan, Dormy," I said, for Muriel felt sure it had slipped under the dinner table. None of the men had as yet joined us.

"Why, where are you going, child?" as he turned towards the farther door. "It is much quicker by the gallery."

He said nothing, but went out, walking rather slowly, by the gallery door. And in a few minutes he returned, fan in hand, but by the *other* door.

He was a sensitive child, and though I wondered what he had got into his head against the gallery, I did not say anything before the others. But when, soon after, Dormy said "Good night," and went off to bed, I followed him.

"What do you want, Leila?" he said rather crossly.

"Don't be vexed, child," I said. "I can see there is something the matter. Why do you not like the gallery?"

He hesitated, but I had laid my hand on his shoulder, and he knew I meant to be kind.

"Leila," he said, with a glance round, to be sure that no one was within hearing – we were standing, he and I, near the inner dining-room door, which was open – "you'll laugh at me, but – there's something queer there – sometimes!"

"What? And how do you mean 'sometimes'?" I asked, with a slight thrill at his tone.

"I mean not always, I've felt it several times – there was the cold the day before yesterday, and besides that, I've felt a – a sort of *breaving*" – Dormy was not perfect in his "th's" – "like somebody very unhappy."

"Sighing?" I suggested.

"Like sighing in a whisper," he replied, "and that's always near the door. But last week – no, not so long ago, it was on Monday – I went round that way when I was going to bed. I didn't want to be silly. But it was moonlight – and – Leila, a shadow went all along the wall on that side, and stopped at the door. I saw it waggling about – its *hands*," and here he shivered – "on that funny curtain that hangs up, as if it were feeling for a minute or two, and then – "

"Well, – what then?"

"It just went out," he said simply. "But it's moonlight again to-night, sister, and I daren't see it again. I just *daren't*."

"But you did go to the dining-room that way," I reminded him.

"Yes, but I shut my eyes and ran, and even then I felt as if something cold was behind me."

"Dormy, dear," I said, a good deal concerned, "I do think it's your fancy. You are not *quite* well yet, you know."

"Yes, I am," he replied sturdily. "I'm not a bit frightened anywhere else. I sleep in a room alone you know. It's not *me*, sister, its somefing in the gallery."

"Would you be frightened to go there with me now? We can run through the dining-room; there's no one to see us," and I turned in that direction as I spoke.

Again my little brother hesitated.

"I'll go with you if you'll hold hands," he said, "but I'll shut my eyes. And I won't open them till you tell me there's no shadow on the wall. You must tell me truly."

"But there must be some shadows," I said, "in this bright moonlight, trees and branches, or even clouds scudding across – something of that kind is what you must have seen, dear."

He shook his head.

"No, no, of course I wouldn't mind that. I know the difference. No – you couldn't mistake. It goes along, right along, in a creeping way, and then at the door its hands come farther out, and it *feels*."

"Is it like a man or a woman?" I said, beginning to feel rather creepy myself.

"I think it's most like a rather little man," he replied, "but I'm not sure. Its head has got something fuzzy about it – oh, I know, like a sticking out wig. But lower down it seems wrapped up, like in a cloak. Oh, it's *horrid*."

And again he shivered – it was quite time all this nightmare nonsense was put out of his poor little head.

I took his hand and held it firmly; we went through the dining-room. Nothing could have looked more comfortable and less ghostly. For the lights were still burning on the table, and the flowers in their silver bowls, some wine gleaming in the glasses, the fruit and pretty dishes, made a pleasant glow of colour. It certainly seemed a curiously sudden contrast when we found ourselves in the gallery beyond, cold and unillumined, save by the pale moonlight streaming through the unshuttered windows. For the door closed with a bang as we passed through – the gallery *was* a draughty place.

Dormy's hold tightened.

"Sister," he whispered, "I've shut my eyes now. You must stand with your back to the windows – between them, or else you'll think it's our own shadows – and watch."

I did as he said, and I had not long to wait.

It came – from the farther end, the second condemned door, whence the winding stair mounted to the attics – it seemed to begin or at least take form there. Creeping along, just as Dormy said – stealthily but steadily – right down to the other extremity of the long room. And then it grew blacker – more concentrated – and out from the vague outline came two bony hands, and, as the child had said, too, you could see that they were *feeling*– all over the upper part of the door.

I stood and watched. I wondered afterwards at my own courage, if courage it was. It was the shadow of a small man, I felt sure. The head seemed large in proportion, and – yes – it – the original of the shadow – was evidently covered by an antique wig. Half mechanically I glanced round – as if in search of the material body that *must* be there. But no; there was nothing, literally *nothing*, that could throw this extraordinary shadow.

Of this I was instantly convinced; and here I may as well say once for all, that never was it maintained by any one, however previously sceptical, who had fully witnessed the whole, that it could be accounted for by ordinary, or, as people say, "natural" causes. There was this peculiarity at least about our ghost.

Though I had fast hold of his hand, I had almost forgotten Dormy – I seemed in a trance.

Suddenly he spoke, though in a whisper.

"You see it, sister, I know you do," he said.

"Wait, wait a minute, dear," I managed to reply in the same tone, though I could not have explained why I waited.

Dormer had said that after a time – after the ghastly and apparently fruitless *feeling* all over the door – "it" – "went out".

I think it was this that I was waiting for. It was not quite as he had said. The door was in the extreme corner of the wall, the hinges almost in the angle, and as the shadow began to move on again, it *looked* as if it disappeared; but no, it was only fainter. My eyes, preternaturally sharpened by my intense gaze, still saw it, working its way round the corner, as assuredly no *shadow* in the real sense of the word ever did nor could do. I realised this, and the sense of horror grew all but intolerable; yet I stood still, clasping the cold little hand in mine tighter and tighter. And an instinct of protection of the child gave me strength. Besides, it was coming on so quickly – we could not have escaped – it was coming, nay, it *was behind* us.

"Leila!" gasped Dormy, "the cold – you feel it now?"

Yes, truly – like no icy breath that I had ever felt before was that momentary but horrible thrill of utter cold. If it had lasted another second I think it would have killed us both. But, mercifully, it passed, in far less time than it has taken me to tell it, and then we seemed in some strange way to be released.

"Open your eyes, Dormy," I said, "you won't see anything, I promise you. I want to rush across to the dining-room."

He obeyed me. I felt there was time to escape before that awful presence would again have arrived at the dining-room door, though it was *coming*– ah, yes, it was coming, steadily pursuing its ghastly round. And, alas! the dining-room door was closed. But I kept my nerve to some extent. I turned the handle without over much trembling, and in another moment, the door shut and locked behind us, we stood in safety, looking at each other, in the bright cheerful room we had left so short a time ago.

Was it so short a time? I said to myself. It seemed hours!

And through the door open to the hall came at that moment the sound of cheerful laughing voices from the drawing-room. Some one was coming out. It seemed impossible, incredible, that within a few feet of the matter-of-fact pleasant material life, this horrible inexplicable drama should be going on, as doubtless it still was.

Of the two I was now more upset than my little brother. I was older and "took in" more. He, boy-like, was in a sense triumphant at having proved himself correct and no coward, and though he was still pale, his eyes shone with excitement and a queer kind of satisfaction.

But before we had done more than look at each other, a figure appeared at the open doorway. It was Sophy.

"Leila," she said, "mamma wants to know what you are doing with Dormy? He is to go to bed at once. We saw you go out of the room after him, and then a door banged. Mamma says if you are playing with him it's very bad for him so late at night."

Dormy was very quick. He was still holding my hand, and he pinched it to stop my replying.

"Rubbish!" he said. "I am speaking to Leila quietly, and she is coming up to my room while I undress. Good night, Sophy."

"Tell mamma Dormy really wants me," I added, and then Sophy departed.

"We musn't tell *her*, Leila," said the boy. "She'd have 'sterics."

"Whom shall we tell?" I said, for I was beginning to feel very helpless and upset.

"Nobody, to-night," he replied sensibly. "You *mustn't* go in there," and he shivered a little as he moved his head towards the gallery; "you're not fit for it, and they'd be wanting you to. Wait till the morning and then I'd – I think I'd tell Philip first. You needn't be frightened to-night, sister. It won't stop you sleeping. It didn't me the time I saw it before."

He was right. I slept dreamlessly. It was as if the intense nervous strain of those few minutes had utterly exhausted me.

PART II

Phil is our soldier brother. And there is nothing fanciful about *him*! He is a rock of sturdy common-sense and unfailing good nature. He was the very best person to confide our strange secret to, and my respect for Dormy increased.

We did tell him – the very next morning. He listened very attentively, only putting in a question here and there, and though, of course, he was incredulous – had I not been so myself? – he was not mocking.

"I am glad you have told no one else," he said, when we had related the whole as circumstantially as possible. "You see mother is not very strong yet, and it would be a pity to bother father, just when he's taken this place and settled it all. And for goodness' sake, don't let a breath of it get about among the servants; there'd be the – something to pay, if you did."

"I won't tell anybody," said Dormy.

"Nor shall I," I added. "Sophy is far too excitable, and if she knew, she would certainly tell Nannie." Nannie is our old nurse.

"If we tell any one," Philip went on, "that means," with a rather irritating smile of self-confidence, "if by any possibility I do not succeed in making an end of your ghost and we want another opinion about it, the person to tell would be Miss Larpent."

"Yes," I said, "I think so, too."

I would not risk irritating him by saying how convinced I was that conviction awaited *him* as surely it had come to myself, and I knew that Miss Larpent, though far from credulous, was equally far from stupid scepticism concerning the mysteries "not dreamt of" in ordinary "philosophy".

"What do you mean to do?" I went on. "You have a theory, I see. Won't you tell me what it is?"

"I have two," said Phil, rolling up a cigarette as he spoke. "It is either some queer optical illusion, partly the effect of some odd reflection outside – or it is a clever trick."

"A trick!" I exclaimed; "what *possible* motive could there be for a trick?"

Phil shook his head.

"Ah," he said, "that I cannot at present say."

"And what are you going to do?"

"I shall sit up to-night in the gallery and see for myself."

"Alone?" I exclaimed, with some misgiving. For big, sturdy fellow as he was, I scarcely liked to think of him – of *any one*– alone with that awful thing.

"I don't suppose you or Dormy would care to keep me company," he replied, "and on the whole I would rather not have you."

"I wouldn't do it," said the child honestly, "not for – for nothing."

"I shall keep Tim with me," said Philip, "I would rather have him than any one."

Tim is Phil's bull-dog, and certainly, I agreed, much better than nobody.

So it was settled.

Dormy and I went to bed unusually early that night, for as the day wore on we both felt exceedingly tired. I pleaded a headache, which was not altogether a fiction, though I repented having complained at all when I found that poor mamma immediately began worrying herself with fears that "after all" I, too, was to fall a victim to the influenza.

"I shall be all right in the morning," I assured her.

I knew no further details of Phil's arrangements. I fell asleep almost at once. I usually do. And it seemed to me that I had slept a whole night when I was awakened by a glimmering light at my door, and heard Philip's voice speaking softly.

"Are you awake, Lel?" he said, as people always say when they awake you in any untimely way. Of course, *now* I was awake, very much awake indeed.

"What is it?" I exclaimed eagerly, my heart beginning to beat very fast.

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all," said my brother, advancing a little into the room. "I just thought I'd look in on my way to bed to reassure you. I have seen *nothing*, absolutely nothing."

I do not know if I was relieved or disappointed.

"Was it moonlight?" I asked abruptly.

"No," he replied, "unluckily the moon did not come out at all, though it is nearly at the full. I carried in a small lamp, which made things less eerie. But I should have preferred the moon."

I glanced up at him. Was it the reflection of the candle he held, or did he look paler than usual?

"And," I added suddenly, "did you *feel* nothing?"

He hesitated.

"It – it was chilly, certainly," he said. "I fancy I must have dosed a little, for I did feel pretty cold once or twice."

"Ah, indeed!" thought I to myself. "And how about Tim?"

Phil smiled, but not very successfully.

"Well," he said, "I must confess Tim did not altogether like it. He started snarling, then he growled, and finished up with whining in a decidedly unhappy way. He's rather upset – poor old chap!"

And then I saw that the dog was beside him – rubbing up close to Philip's legs – a very dejected, reproachful Tim – all the starch taken out of him.

"Good-night, Phil," I said, turning round on my pillow. "I'm glad you are satisfied. To-morrow morning you must tell me which of your theories holds most water. Good-night, and many thanks."

He was going to say more, but my manner for the moment stopped him, and he went off.

Poor old Phil!

We had it out the next morning. He and I alone. He was *not* satisfied. Far from it. In the bottom of his heart I believe it was a strange yearning for a breath of human companionship, for the sound of a human voice, that had made him look in on me the night before.

For he had felt the cold passing him.

But he was very plucky.

"I'll sit up again to-night, Leila," he said.

"Not to-night," I objected. "This sort of adventure requires one to be at one's best. If you take my advice you will go to bed early and have a good stretch of sleep, so that you will be quite fresh by to-morrow. There will be a moon for some nights still."

"Why do you keep harping on the moon?" said Phil rather crossly, for him.

"Because – I have some idea that it is only in the moonlight that – that anything is to be *seen*."

"Bosh!" said my brother politely – he was certainly rather discomposed – "we are talking at cross-purposes. You are satisfied – "

"Far from satisfied," I interpolated.

"Well, convinced, whatever you like to call it – that the whole thing is supernatural, whereas I am equally sure it is a trick; a clever trick I allow, though I haven't yet got at the motive of it."

"You need your nerves to be at their best to discover a trick of this kind, if a trick it be," I said quietly.

Philip had left his seat, and walked up and down the room; his way of doing so gave me a feeling that he wanted to walk off some unusual consciousness of irritability. I felt half provoked and half sorry for him.

At that moment – we were alone in the drawing-room – the door opened, and Miss Larpent came in.

"I cannot find Sophy," she said, peering about through her rather short-sighted eyes, which, nevertheless, see a great deal sometimes; "do you know where she is?"

"I saw her setting off somewhere with Nugent," said Philip, stopping his quarter-deck exercise for a moment.

"Ah, then it is hopeless. I suppose I must resign myself to very irregular ways for a little longer," Miss Larpent replied with a smile.

She is not young, and not good looking, but she is gifted with a delightful way of smiling, and she is – well, the dearest and almost the wisest of women.

She looked at Philip as he spoke. She had known us nearly since our babyhood.

"Is there anything the matter?" she said suddenly. "You look fagged, Leila, and Philip seems worried."

I glanced at Philip. He understood me.

"Yes," he replied, "I am irritated, and Leila is – " he hesitated.

"What?" asked Miss Larpent.

"Oh, I don't know – obstinate, I suppose. Sit down, Miss Larpent, and hear our story. Leila, you can tell it."

I did so – first obtaining a promise of secrecy, and making Phil relate his own experience.

Our new *confidante* listened attentively, her face very grave. When she had heard all, she said quietly, after a moment's silence: —

"It's very strange, very. Philip, if you will wait till to-morrow night, and I quite agree with Leila that you had better do so, I will sit up with you. I have pretty good nerves, and I have always wanted an experience of that kind."

"Then you don't think it is a trick?" I said eagerly. I was like Dormer, divided between my real underlying longing to explain the thing, and get rid of the horror of it, and a half childish wish to prove that I had not exaggerated its ghastliness.

"I will tell you that the day after to-morrow," she said. I could not repress a little shiver as she spoke.

She *had* good nerves, and she was extremely sensible.

But I almost blamed myself afterwards for having acquiesced in the plan. For the effect on her was very great. They never told me exactly what happened; "You *know*," said Miss Larpent. I imagine their experience was almost precisely similar to Dormy's and mine, intensified, perhaps, by the feeling of loneliness. For it was not till all the rest of the family was in bed that this second vigil began. It was a bright moonlight night – they had the whole thing complete.

It was impossible to throw off the effect; even in the daytime the four of us who had seen and heard, shrank from the gallery, and made any conceivable excuse for avoiding it.

But Phil, however convinced, behaved consistently. He examined the closed door thoroughly, to detect any possible trickery. He explored the attics, he went up and down the staircase leading to the offices, till the servants must have thought he was going crazy. He found *nothing*– no vaguest hint even as to why the gallery was chosen by the ghostly shadow for its nightly round.

Strange to say, however, as the moon waned, our horror faded, so that we almost began to hope the thing was at an end, and to trust that in time we should forget about it. And we congratulated ourselves that we had kept our own counsel and not disturbed any of the others – even father, who would, no doubt, have hooted at the idea – by the baleful whisper that our charming castle by the sea was haunted!

And the days passed by, growing into weeks. The second detachment of our guests had left, and a third had just arrived, when one morning as I was waiting at what we called "the sea-door" for some of the others to join me in a walk along the sands, some one touched me on the shoulder. It was Philip.

"Leila," he said, "I am not happy about Dormer. He is looking ill again, and – "

"I thought he seemed so much stronger," I said, surprised and distressed, "quite rosy, and so much merrier."

"So he was till a few days ago," said Philip. "But if you notice him well you'll see that he's getting that white look again. And – I've got it into my head – he is an extraordinarily sensitive child, that it has something to do with the moon. It's getting on to the full."

For the moment I stupidly forgot the association.

"Really, Phil," I said, "you are too absurd! Do you actually – oh," as he was beginning to interrupt me, and my face fell, I feel sure – "you don't mean about the gallery."

"Yes, I do," he said.

"How? Has Dormy told you anything?" and a sort of sick feeling came over me. "I had begun to hope," I went on, "that somehow it had gone; that, perhaps, it only comes once a year at a certain season, or possibly that newcomers see it at the first and not again. Oh, Phil, we *can't* stay here, however nice it is, if it is really haunted."

"Dormy hasn't said much," Philip replied. "He only told me he had *felt the cold* once or twice, 'since the moon came again,' he said. But I can see the fear of more is upon him. And this determined me to speak to you. I have to go to London for ten days or so, to see the doctors about my leave, and a few other things. I don't like it for you and Miss Larpent if – if this thing is to return – with no one else in your confidence, especially on Dormy's account. Do you think we must tell father before I go?"

I hesitated. For many reasons I was reluctant to do so. Father would be exaggeratedly sceptical at first, and then, if he were convinced, as I *knew* he would be, he would go to the other extreme and insist upon leaving Finster, and there would be a regular upset, trying for mother and everybody concerned. And mother liked the place, and was looking so much better!

"After all," I said, "it has not hurt any of us. Miss Larpent got a shake, so did I. But it wasn't as great a shock to us as to you, Phil, to have to believe in a ghost. And we can avoid the gallery while you are away. No, except for Dormy, I would rather keep it to ourselves – after all, we are not going to live here always. Yet it is so nice, it seems such a pity."

It was such an exquisite morning; the air, faintly breathing of the sea, was like elixir; the heights and shadows on the cliffs, thrown out by the darker woods behind, were indeed, as Janet Miles had said, "wonderful".

"Yes," Phil agreed, "it is an awful nuisance. But as for Dormy," he went on, "supposing I get mother to let me take him with me? He'd be as jolly as a sand-boy in London, and my old landlady would look after him like anything if ever I had to be out late. And I'd let my doctor see him – quietly, you know – he might give him a tonic or something."

I heartily approved of the idea. So did mamma when Phil broached it – she, too, had thought her "baby" looking quite pale lately. A London doctor's opinion would be such a satisfaction. So it was settled, and the very next day the two set off. Dormer, in his "old-fashioned," reticent way, in the greatest delight, though only by one remark did the brave little fellow hint at what was, no doubt, the principal cause of his satisfaction.

"The moon will be long past the full when we come back," he said. "And after that there'll only be one other time before we go, won't there, Leila? We've only got this house for three months?"

"Yes," I said, "father only took it for three," though in my heart I knew it was with the option of three more – six in all.

And Miss Larpent and I were left alone, not with the ghost, certainly, but with our fateful knowledge of its unwelcome proximity.

We did not speak of it to each other, but we tacitly avoided the gallery, even, as much as possible, in the daytime. I felt, and so, she has since confessed, did she, that it would be impossible to endure *that cold* without betraying ourselves.

And I began to breathe more freely, trusting that the dread of the shadow's possible return was really only due to the child's overwrought nerves.

Till – one morning – my fool's paradise was abruptly destroyed.

Father came in late to breakfast – he had been for an early walk, he said, to get rid of a headache. But he did not look altogether as if he had succeeded in doing so.

"Leila," he said, as I was leaving the room after pouring out his coffee – mamma was not yet allowed to get up early – "Leila, don't go. I want to speak to you."

I stopped short, and turned towards the table. There was something very odd about his manner. He is usually hearty and eager, almost impetuous in his way of speaking.

"Leila," he began again, "you are a sensible girl, and your nerves are strong, I fancy. Besides, you have not been ill like the others. Don't speak of what I am going to tell you."

I nodded in assent; I could scarcely have spoken. My heart was beginning to thump. Father would not have commended my nerves had he known it.

"Something odd and inexplicable happened last night," he went on. "Nugent and I were sitting in the gallery. It was a mild night, and the moon magnificent. We thought the gallery would be pleasanter than the smoking-room, now that Phil and his pipes are away. Well – we were sitting quietly. I had lighted my reading-lamp on the little table at one end of the room, and Nugent was half lying in his chair, doing nothing in particular except admiring the night, when all at once he started violently with an exclamation, and, jumping up, came towards me. Leila, his teeth were chattering, and he was *blue* with cold. I was very much alarmed – you know how ill he was at college. But in a moment or two he recovered.

"'What on earth is the matter?' I said to him. He tried to laugh.

"'I really don't know,' he said; 'I felt as if I had had an electric shock of *cold*– but I'm all right again now.'

"I went into the dining-room, and made him take a little brandy and water, and sent him off to bed. Then I came back, still feeling rather uneasy about him, and sat down with my book, when, Leila – you will scarcely credit it – I myself felt the same shock exactly. A perfectly *hideous* thrill of cold. That was how it began. I started up, and then, Leila, by degrees, in some instinctive way, I seemed to realise what had caused it. My dear child, you will think I have gone crazy when I tell you that there was a shadow – a shadow in the moonlight —*chasing* me, so to say, round the room, and once again it caught me up, and again came that appalling sensation. I would not give in. I dodged it after that, and set myself to watch it, and then – "

I need not quote my father further; suffice to say his experience matched that of the rest of us entirely – no, I think it surpassed them. It was the worst of all.

Poor father! I shuddered for him. I think a shock of that kind is harder upon a man than upon a woman. Our sex is less sceptical, less entrenched in sturdy matters of fact, more imaginative, or whatever you like to call the readiness to believe what we cannot explain. And it was astounding to me to see how my father at once capitulated – never even *alluding* to a possibility of trickery. Astounding, yet at the same time not without a certain satisfaction in it. It was almost a relief to find others in the same boat with ourselves.

I told him at once all *we* had to tell, and how painfully exercised we had been as to the advisability of keeping our secret to ourselves. I never saw father so impressed; he was awfully kind, too, and so sorry for us. He made me fetch Miss Larpent, and we held a council of – I don't know what to call it! – not "war," assuredly, for none of us thought of fighting the ghost. How could one fight a shadow?

We decided to do nothing beyond endeavouring to keep the affair from going further. During the next few days father arranged to have some work done in the gallery which would prevent our sitting there, without raising any suspicions on mamma's or Sophy's part.

"And then," said father, "we must see. Possibly this extraordinary influence only makes itself felt periodically."

"I am almost certain it is so," said Miss Larpent.

"And in this case," he continued, "we may manage to evade it. But I do not feel disposed to continue my tenancy here after three months are over. If once the servants get hold of the story, and they are sure to do so sooner or later, it would be unendurable – the worry and annoyance would do your mother far more harm than any good effect the air and change have had upon her."

I was glad to hear this decision. Honestly, I did not feel as if I could stand the strain for long, and it might kill poor little Dormy.

But where should we go? Our own home would be quite uninhabitable till the autumn, for extensive alterations and repairs were going on there. I said this to father.

"Yes," he agreed, "it is not convenient," – and he hesitated. "I cannot make it out," he went on, "Miles would have been *sure* to know if the house had a bad name in any way. I think I will go over and see him to-day, and tell him all about it – at least I shall inquire about some other house in the neighbourhood – and *perhaps* I will tell him our reason for leaving this."

He did so – he went over to Raxtrew that very afternoon, and, as I quite anticipated would be the case, he told me on his return that he had taken both our friends into his confidence.

"They are extremely concerned about it," he said, "and very sympathising, though, naturally, inclined to think us a parcel of very weak-minded folk indeed. But I am glad of one thing – the Rectory there, is to be let from the first of July for three months. Miles took me to see it. I think it will do very well – it is quite out of the village, for you really can't call it a town – and a nice little place in its way. Quite modern, and as unghost-like as you could wish, bright and cheery."

"And what will mamma think of our leaving so soon?" I asked.

But as to this father reassured me. He had already spoken of it to her, and somehow she did not seem disappointed. She had got it into her head that Finster did not suit Dormy, and was quite disposed to think that three months of such strong air were enough at a time.

"Then have you decided upon Raxtrew Rectory?" I asked.

"I have the refusal of it," said my father. "But you will be almost amused to hear that Miles begged me not to fix absolutely for a few days. He is coming to us to-morrow, to spend the night."

"You mean to see for himself?"

Father nodded.

"Poor Mr. Miles!" I ejaculated. "You won't sit up with him, I hope, father?"

"I offered to do so, but he won't hear of it," was the reply. "He is bringing one of his keepers with him – a sturdy, trustworthy young fellow, and they two with their revolvers are going to nab the ghost, so he says. We shall see. We must manage to prevent our servants suspecting anything."

This *was* managed. I need not go into particulars. Suffice to say that the sturdy keeper reached his own home before dawn on the night of the vigil, no endeavours of his master having succeeded in persuading him to stay another moment at Finster, and that Mr. Miles himself looked so ill the next morning when he joined us at the breakfast-table that we, the initiated, could scarcely repress our exclamations, when Sophy, with the curious instinct of touching a sore place which some people have, told him that he looked exactly "as if he had seen a ghost".

His experience had been precisely similar to ours. After that we heard no more from him – about the pity it was to leave a place that suited us so well, etc., etc. On the contrary, before he left, he told my father and myself that he thought us uncommonly plucky for staying out the three months, though at the same time he confessed to feeling completely nonplussed.

"I have lived near Finster St. Mabyn's all my life," he said, "and my people before me, and *never*, do I honestly assure you, have I heard one breath of the old place being haunted. And in a shut-up neighbourhood like this, such a thing would have leaked out."

We shook our heads, but what could we say?

PART III

We left Finster St. Mabyn's towards the middle of July.

Nothing worth recording happened during the last few weeks. If the ghostly drama were still re-enacted night after night, or only during some portion of each month, we took care not to assist at the performance. I believe Phil and Nugent planned another vigil, but gave it up by my father's expressed wish, and on one pretext or another he managed to keep the gallery locked off without arousing any suspicion in my mother or Sophy, or any of our visitors.

It was a cold summer, – those early months of it at least – and that made it easier to avoid the room.

Somehow none of us were sorry to go. This was natural, so far as several were concerned, but rather curious as regarded those of the family who knew no drawback to the charms of the place. I suppose it was due to some instinctive consciousness of the influence which so many of the party had felt it impossible to resist or explain.

And the Rectory at Raxtrew was really a dear little place. It was so bright and open and sunny. Dormy's pale face was rosy with pleasure the first afternoon when he came rushing in to tell us that there were tame rabbits and a pair of guinea-pigs in an otherwise empty loose box in the stable-yard.

"Do come and look at them," he begged, and I went with him, pleased to see him so happy.

I did not care for the rabbits, but I always think guinea-pigs rather fascinating, and we stayed playing with them some little time.

"I'll show you another way back into the house," said Dormy, and he led me through a conservatory into a large, almost unfurnished room, opening again into a tiled passage leading to the offices.

"This is the Warden boys' playroom," he said. "They keep their cricket and football things here, you see, and their tricycle. I wonder if I might use it?"

"We must write and ask them," I said. "But what are all these big packages?" I went on. "Oh, I see, its our heavy luggage from Finster. There is not room in this house for our odds and ends of furniture, I suppose. It's rather a pity they have put it in here, for we could have had some nice games in this big room on a wet day, and see, Dormy, here are several pairs of roller skates! Oh, we must have this place cleared."

We spoke to father about it – he came and looked at the room and agreed with us that it would be a pity not to have the full use of it. Roller skating would be good exercise for Dormy, he said, and even for Nat, who would be joining us before long for his holidays.

So our big cases, and the chairs and tables we had bought from Hunter, in their careful swathings of wisps and matting, were carried out to an empty barn – a perfectly dry and weather-tight barn – for everything at the Rectory was in excellent repair. In this, as in all other details, our new quarters were a complete contrast to the picturesque abode we had just quitted.

The weather was charming for the first two or three weeks – much warmer and sunnier than at Finster. We all enjoyed it, and seemed to breathe more freely. Miss Larpent, who was staying through the holidays this year, and I congratulated each other more than once, when sure of not being overheard, on the cheerful, wholesome atmosphere in which we found ourselves.

"I do not think I shall ever wish to live in a very old house again," she said one day. We were in the play-room, and I had been persuading her to try her hand – or feet – at roller skating. "Even now," she went on, "I own to you, Leila, though it may sound very weak-minded, I cannot think of that horrible night without a shiver. Indeed, I could fancy I feel that thrill of indescribable cold at the present moment."

She *was* shivering – and, extraordinary to relate, as she spoke, her tremor communicated itself to me. Again, I could swear to it, again I felt that blast of unutterable, unearthly cold.

I started up. We were seated on a bench against the wall – a bench belonging to the play-room, and which we had not thought of removing, as a few seats were a convenience.

Miss Larpent caught sight of my face. Her own, which was very white, grew distressed in expression. She grasped my arm.

"My dearest child," she exclaimed, "you look blue, and your teeth are chattering! I do wish I had not alluded to that fright we had. I had no idea you were so nervous."

"I did not know it myself," I replied. "I often think of the Finster ghost quite calmly, even in the middle of the night. But just then, Miss Larpent, do you know, I really *felt* that horrid cold again!"

"So did I – or rather my imagination did," she replied, trying to talk in a matter-of-fact way. She got up as she spoke, and went to the window. "It can't be *all* imagination," she added. "See, Leila, what a gusty, stormy day it is – not like the beginning of August. It really is cold."

"And this play-room seems nearly as draughty as the gallery at Finster," I said. "Don't let us stay here – come into the drawing-room and play some duets. I wish we could quite forget about Finster."

"Dormy has done so, I hope," said Miss Larpent.

That chilly morning was the commencement of the real break-up in the weather. We women would not have minded it so much, as there are always plenty of indoor things we can find to do. And my two grown-up brothers were away. Raxtrew held no particular attractions for them, and Phil wanted to see some of our numerous relations before he returned to India. So he and Nugent started on a round of visits. But, unluckily, it was the beginning of the public school holidays, and poor Nat – the fifteen-year-old boy – had just joined us. It was very disappointing for him in more ways than one. He had set his heart on seeing Finster, impressed by our enthusiastic description of it when we first went there, and now his anticipations had to come down to a comparatively tame and uninteresting village, and every probability – so said the wise – of a stretch of rainy, unsummerlike weather.

Nat is a good-natured, cheery fellow, however – not nearly as clever or as impressionable as Dormy, but with the same common sense. So he wisely determined to make the best of things, and as we were really sorry for him, he did not, after all, come off very badly.

His principal amusement was roller-skating in the play-room. Dormy had not taken to it in the same way – the greater part of *his* time was spent with the rabbits and guinea-pigs, where Nat, when he himself had had skating enough, was pretty sure to find him.

I suppose it is with being the eldest sister that it always seems my fate to receive the confidences of the rest of the family, and it was about this time, a fortnight or so after his arrival, that it began to strike me that Nat looked as if he had something on his mind.

"He is sure to tell me what it is, sooner or later," I said to myself. "Probably he has left some small debts behind him at school – only he did not look worried or anxious when he first came home."

The confidence was given. One afternoon Nat followed me into the library, where I was going to write some letters, and said he wanted to speak to me. I put my paper aside and waited.

"Leila," he began, "you must promise not to laugh at me."

This was not what I expected.

"Laugh at you – no, certainly not," I replied, "especially if you are in any trouble. And I have thought you were looking worried, Nat."

"Well, yes," he said, "I don't know if there is anything coming over me – I feel quite well, but – Leila," he broke off, "do you believe in ghosts?"

I started.

"Has any one – " I was beginning rashly, but the boy interrupted me.

"No, no," he said eagerly, "no one has put anything of the kind into my head – no one. It is my own senses that have seen – felt it – or else, if it is fancy, I must be going out of my mind, Leila – I do believe there is a ghost here *in the play-room*."

I sat silent, an awful dread creeping over me, which, as he went on, grew worse and worse. Had the thing – the Finster shadow – attached itself to us – I had read of such cases – had it journeyed

with us to this peaceful, healthful house? The remembrance of the cold thrill experienced by Miss Larpent and myself flashed back upon me. And Nat went on.

Yes, the cold was the first thing he had been startled by, followed, just as in the gallery of our old castle, by the consciousness of the terrible shadow-like presence, gradually taking form in the moonlight. For there had been moonlight the last night or two, and Nat, in his skating ardour, had amused himself alone in the play-room after Dormy had gone to bed.

"The night before last was the worst," he said. "It stopped raining, you remember, Leila, and the moon was very bright – I noticed how it glistened on the wet leaves outside. It was by the moonlight I saw the – the shadow. I wouldn't have thought of skating in the evening but for the light, for we've never had a lamp in there. It came round the walls, Leila, and then it seemed to stop and fumble away in one corner – at the end where there is a bench, you know."

Indeed I did know; it was where our governess and I had been sitting.

"I got so awfully frightened," said Nat honestly, "that I ran off. Then yesterday I was ashamed of myself, and went back there in the evening with a candle. But I saw nothing: the moon did not come out. Only – I felt the cold again. I believe it was there – though I could not see it. Leila, what *can* it be? If only I could make you understand! It is so *much* worse than it sounds to tell."

I said what I could to soothe him. I spoke of odd shadows thrown by the trees outside swaying in the wind, for the weather was still stormy. I repeated the time-worn argument about optical illusions, etc., etc., and in the end he gave in a little. It *might* have been his fancy. And he promised me most faithfully to breathe no hint – not the very faintest – of the fright he had had, to Sophy or Dormy, or any one.

Then I had to tell my father. I really shrank from doing so, but there seemed no alternative. At first, of course, he pooh-poohed it at once by saying Dormy must have been talking to Nat about the Finster business, or if not Dormy, *some one*– Miss Larpent even! But when all such explanations were entirely set at nought, I must say poor father looked rather blank. I was sorry for him, and sorry for myself – the idea of being *followed* by this horrible presence was too sickening.

Father took refuge at last in some brain-wave theory – involuntary impressions had been made on Nat by all of us, whose minds were still full of the strange experience. He said he felt sure, and no doubt he tried to think he did, that this theory explained the whole. I felt glad for him to get any satisfaction out of it, and I did my best to take it up too. But it was no use. I felt that Nat's experience had been an "objective" one, as Miss Larpent expressed it – or, as Dormy had said at the first at Finster: "No, no, sister – it's something *there*– it's nothing to do with *me*."

And earnestly I longed for the time to come for our return to our own familiar home.

"I don't think I shall ever wish to leave it again," I thought.

But after a week or two the feeling began to fade again. And father very sensibly discovered that it would not do to leave our spare furniture and heavy luggage in the barn – it was getting all dusty and cobwebby. So it was all moved back again to the play-room, and stacked as it had been at first, making it impossible for us to skate or amuse ourselves in any way there, at which Sophy grumbled, but Nat did not.

Father was very good to Nat. He took him about with him as much as he could to get the thought of that horrid thing out of his head. But yet it could not have been half as bad for Nat as for the rest of us, for we took the greatest possible precautions against any whisper of the dreadful and mysterious truth reaching him, that the ghost had *followed us* from Finster.

Father did not tell Mr. Miles or Jenny about it. They had been worried enough, poor things, by the trouble at Finster, and it would be too bad for them to think that the strange influence was affecting us in the *second* house we had taken at their recommendation.

"In fact," said father with a rather rueful smile, "if we don't take care, we shall begin to be looked upon askance as a haunted family! Our lives would have been in danger in the good old witchcraft days."

"It is really a mercy that none of the servants have got hold of the story," said Miss Larpent, who was one of our council of three. "We must just hope that no further annoyance will befall us till we are safe at home again."

Her hopes were fulfilled. Nothing else happened while we remained at the Rectory – it really seemed as if the unhappy shade was limited locally, in one sense. For at Finster, even, it had never been seen or felt save in the one room.

The vividness of the impression of poor Nat's experience had almost died away when the time came for us to leave. I felt now that I should rather enjoy telling Phil and Nugent about it, and hearing what *they* could bring forward in the way of explanation.

We left Raxtrew early in October. Our two big brothers were awaiting us at home, having arrived there a few days before us. Nugent was due at Oxford very shortly.

It was very nice to be in our own house again, after several months' absence, and it was most interesting to see how the alterations, including a good deal of new papering and painting, had been carried out. And as soon as the heavy luggage arrived we had grand consultations as to the disposal about the rooms of the charming pieces of furniture we had picked up at Hunter's. Our rooms are large and nicely shaped, most of them. It was not difficult to make a pretty corner here and there with a quaint old chair or two and a delicate spindle-legged table, and when we had arranged them all – Phil, Nugent, and I, were the movers – we summoned mother and Miss Larpent to give their opinion.

They quite approved, mother even saying that she would be glad of a few more odds and ends.

"We might empower Janet Miles," she said, "to let us know if she sees anything very tempting. Is that really all we have? They looked so much more important in their swathings."

The same idea struck me. I glanced round.

"Yes," I said, "that's all, except – oh, yes, there are the tapestry "*portières*" – the best of all. We can't have them in the drawing-room, I fear. It is too modern for them. Where shall we hang them?"

"You are forgetting, Leila," said mother. "We spoke of having them in the hall. They will do beautifully to hang before the two side doors, which are seldom opened. And in cold weather the hall is draughty, though nothing like the gallery at Finster."

Why did she say that? It made me shiver, but then, of course, she did not know.

Our hall is a very pleasant one. We sit there a great deal. The side doors mother spoke of are second entrances to the dining-room and library – quite unnecessary, except when we have a large party, a dance or something of that sort. And the "*portières*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.