

Wells Carolyn

The Room with the Tassels



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CHAPTER I

Wanted: A Haunted House

“But I *know* it’s so, – for Mrs. Fairbanks saw it herself, – and heard it, too!”

The air of finality in the gaze levelled at Braye defied contradiction, so he merely smiled at the girl who was doing the talking. But, talking or silent, Eve Carnforth was well worth smiling at. Her red hair was of that thin, silky, flat-lying sort, that spells temper, but looks lovely, and her white, delicate skin, – perhaps the least bit hand-painted, – showed temperament while her eyes, of the colour called beryl, – whatever that is, – showed all sorts of things.

Then from her canna-hued lips fell more wisdom. “And Professor Hardwick believes it, too, and he’s – ”

“A college professor,” broke in Landon, “don’t try to gild *his* refinement! But really, Eve, you mustn’t believe in spooks, – it isn’t done – ”

“Oh, but it is! You’ve no idea how many people, – scientific and talented people, – are leaning toward spiritualism just now. Why, Sir Oliver Lodge says that after the war great and powerful assistance will be given by spirit helpers in matters of reconstruction and great problems of science.”

Milly Landon’s laugh rang out, and she politely clapped a little, fat hand over her mouth to stifle it.

Milly Landon was an inveterate giggler, but don’t let that prejudice you against her. She was the nicest, dearest dumpling of a little woman who ever giggled her way through life. And as hostess on this present Sunday afternoon occasion, she sat, one foot tucked under her, on the davenport in her long, narrow parlour, on one of New York’s East Seventieth streets.

It was a parlour like thousands of others in the city, and the quartette of people talking there were much like the people talking in those other parlours, that Sunday afternoon. Their only superiority lay in the fact that they constitute part of the personnel of this absorbing tale, and the other people do not.

Milly and her very satisfactory husband, Wynne Landon, were affably entertaining Rudolph Braye and the herein-before described Eve Carnforth, two pleasing callers, and the talk had turned on psychological matters and then, by inevitable stages, to the supernatural and spiritualism.

“It is all coming in again,” Eve declared, earnestly. “You know it was taken very seriously about thirty or forty years ago, and then because of fake mediums and fraudulent séances, it fell into disrepute. But now, it’s being taken up in earnest, and I, for one, am terribly interested.”

“But it’s so old-fashioned, Eve,” and Milly looked at her guest in disdain.

“It’s gammon and spinach, that’s what it is,” declared Landon, “very rubbishy gammon and a poor quality of spinach!”

“Queen Victoria didn’t think so,” Eve informed them. “She may have been old-fashioned, but she believed thoroughly in the spiritual reappearance of her friends who died, and especially took comfort in the communion and visitation of her dead husband.”

“It’s this way, I think,” offered Braye; “it seems to me it’s like that old ‘Lady or the Tiger’ story, you believe or not, according to your character or disposition. You know, it depended on your own nature, whether you think the Lady came out of the door, or the Tiger. And so with spooks, if you want to believe in them, you do.”

“Don’t say spooks, please,” begged Eve; “say phantasms, or even ghosts.”

“Is that the usage in the best mediumistic circles?” and Braye smiled. “Well, I think I could more easily believe in a spook than a phantasm. The latter sounds so unreal, but a good honest Injun spook seems sort of plausible.”

“They’re all unreal,” began Landon, but Eve interrupted. “They’re not unreal, Wynne; they’re immaterial, of course, but that isn’t being unreal. You have a real soul, haven’t you, although it is immaterial? and I suppose you don’t call your mind material, even if your brain is.”

“Now you’re quibbling, Eve,” and Landon grew a bit more serious. “When I say unreal, I mean imperceptible to the senses. I hold that a departed spirit cannot return to earth and be seen, heard, or felt by mortal human beings. All the stories of such things to the contrary notwithstanding. If you or any one else has power to show me a visible spook, – I beg pardon, phantasm, – I’ll be glad to see it, but I’m from Missouri. I wouldn’t be a bit afraid of it, but I’d have to be jolly well convinced of its integrity. No faked-up spectres would go down with me!”

“But how can you know?” asked Milly. “I’d be scared to death of one, I’m sure, but if Wynne wants to see one, I do. Let’s all go to a séance, or whatever they call the things. Shall us?”

“No, indeed!” cried Eve. “Professional séances are always fakes. And I don’t aspire to *see* one. If we could get some messages from the beyond, that would satisfy me.”

“Get messages how?” asked Braye.

“Oh, by a Ouija board, or some such way.”

“Ouija!” derided Landon; “that’s the biggest fraud of all!”

“Only in the hands of frauds. If we tried it here by ourselves and if we all trusted each other not to stoop to deception of any sort that would be a fair test.”

“I’d like that,” and Milly giggled in pleased anticipation. “That wouldn’t frighten me, and I’d promise to play fair.”

“There’d be no reason for not playing fair,” said Eve, seriously. “We’re not a pack of silly children who want to trick one another. If we could get together some evening and have an earnest, serious test, I’d agree. But not if there’s to be the least suspicion of anybody trying trickery.”

At this point two more callers arrived, and Milly jumped up to greet them.

“Mr. Bruce!” she exclaimed, “how nice to see you! And Vernie, – my goodness, how you’ve grown!”

“Indeed, yes,” and Vernie Reid, a most lively and energetic sub-deb of sixteen, darted from one to another, greeting all with interest.

“Hello, Cousin Rudolph, what are *you* doing here? Mooning after Miss Carnforth, I s’pose. Dear Mrs. Landon, let me sit here by you. I want to show you my graduating gifts.”

“Oh, yes, you’ve just had commencement, haven’t you?”

“Yes, and Uncle Gifford gave me this heavenly wrist-watch, and my respected Cousin Rudolph, over there, sent me this pendant. Isn’t it stunning? Oh, I had beautiful presents. I’d like to graduate every year!”

“Aren’t you going to school any more at all?”

“Dunno yet. Uncle Gifford says I am, I say I’m not. It remains to be seen. Though I don’t mind confiding to you that I usually get my own way. And, too, out in Chicago, you know, we’re not such terrible highbrows. Something tells me my schooldays are over. I think Uncle Gif needs the pleasure of my society at home. And, too, I want to get acquainted with Cousin Rudolph. Until this week I haven’t seen him for years.”

“He isn’t your cousin, Vernie.”

“Same as. He’s a son of Uncle Gif’s half-brother, and I’m a daughter of Uncle’s own sister, so it sort of evens up. Anyway, I like Cousin Rudolph, because he’s such a good-looking young man, and he’s promised to take me round New York some. That’s why I’m so jealous of Miss Carnforth or any other girl.”

Vernie was so pretty that her chatter amused the whole crowd. She was brown-haired and brown-eyed, and somewhat of a browned complexion, by reason of much tennis and outdoor life at the school from which she had just been graduated. And after a summer spent among the Eastern resorts, she and her Uncle were to return to their Chicago home, where they had lived all of Vernie's orphaned life. Gifford Bruce idolized the girl and though often short and crabbed in his manner to others, he was never cross or stern to his dead sister's child.

"What were you talking about when we came in?" Vernie asked, smiling at Milly. "You were all so in earnest, it must have been something important."

"Of ghosts," answered Braye, looking at the pretty child. "Do you enjoy them?"

"Oh, don't I!" cried Vernie. "Why, at school we just ate 'em up! Table tippings and all such things, as soon as lights were out!"

"We don't mean that sort," said Eve. "We were talking seriously."

"Count me out, then," laughed Vernie. "Our ghosts weren't a bit real. I did most of 'em myself, jogging the table, when the others didn't know it!"

Eve's scarlet lips came together in a narrow line, but the others laughed at Vernie as she babbled on.

"Yes, and we tried the Ouija board. I can make it say anything I want to."

"Good for you, Kiddie," cried Braye, "I believe I like your notion of these things better than the ideas of the psychologists. It sounds a lot more fun!"

"And comes nearer the truth," declared Mr. Bruce. "I've looked up these matters and I've read all the best and most authoritative books on the subjects. There are many writers more diffuse and circumstantial, but Andrew Lang sums up the whole situation in his able way. He says there are no ghosts, but there are hallucinations. And that explains all."

"It doesn't to me," and Eve's beryl eyes took on a mystic, faraway look. "I, too, have read a lot of books –"

"Scientific or psychic?" interrupted Mr. Bruce, acidly.

"Psychical and Theosophic –"

"Rubbish! The Theosophic bunch have been in the discard for years."

"That's what I say," put in Milly, "the whole business is old-fashioned."

"It isn't a question of fashion," and Gifford Bruce spoke assuredly; "the subject is one that recurs in waves, as many such things do. Why, there have been ghosts and haunted houses in people's imagination ever since there has been man and a house for him to live in. Some are spoken of in the Bible, the primitive Australians had legions of ghosts, the awful Dyaks record them, and there is scarce a castle or palace of the middle ages that hasn't its Woman in White, or a Little Gray Lady or the Man in Black. And in an old Egyptian papyrus, there's an account of a defunct lady who insisted on haunting her husband to his great distaste."

"My goodness, Uncle Gif, you do know a lot about it!" and Vernie went over and sat on the arm of his chair. "Tell us more. I like this sort of ghost stories better than the fool stunts we did at school."

"I'm not telling ghost stories, child, I'm only declaring that ghost stories are merely *stories*, and in no case a true relation of happenings. Lang investigated thousands of cases, and in ten out of every eleven, he states, fraud was proved."

"Quite so," said Eve, "and it is that eleventh case that interests the real thinker, the true inquirer."

"But the eleventh case was simply not proven, it never has been shown that it was really a ghostly visitation."

"But they do say, Uncle Gifford," observed Braye, "that the very fact of the frauds being perpetrated proves that there was something to imitate. If no spirit had ever returned to earth and made itself manifest, no one would have thought of pretending that one did."

"Nonsense and super-nonsense! Why, Rudolph, perpetual motion is not a real thing, but how many times has it been pretended! You don't remember the Keeley Motor, but that deceived thousands

into believing that perpetual motion was at last discovered, but it wasn't; and that fraud doesn't prove that perpetual motion, without adequate cause, exists."

"Here comes Professor Hardwick," exclaimed Milly, "splendid to have him come just now! Sit down, Professor, and get right into the game. You know all these people, except this angel child, Miss Vernie Reid."

"I am an angel," declared Vernie, "but I'm no child! I've just graduated with honours and diplomas and lots of presents. Now, I'm out in the great world, and glory, but I love it! But don't mind me, Professor, go right on and tell us all you know about ghosts and ghostesses."

"Bless my soul! I don't know anything about them."

"Well, do you believe in ghosts?"

"What do you mean by ghosts? How do you define a ghost?"

"Ah, there's the rub," said Landon. "These people are all talking at cross purposes. Mr. Bruce means a scarecrow phantom rigged up in sheets, Miss Carnforth means a supernatural being of some sort, but I take a ghost, in the proper sense, to mean the visible soul of some one who has died."

"What do you mean by visible soul? Disembodied?"

"No," considered Landon, "I suppose I mean clothed in a body, – that is an apparent body."

"And raiment?" asked the old Professor.

"Yes, certainly. I never heard of a nude spook!"

"Then your visible soul is concealed by a body of flesh, and clothes, of fabric, or, at least, apparently so. The soul, I take it, would show but low visibility."

"Good, Hardwick!" cried Mr. Bruce. "Give them a jolt, they need it, – talking such rubbish!"

"Rubbish, Bruce? What do you mean by rubbish?"

"Why, all this ghost gabble –"

"How do you know it's rubbish? Have you personally disproved it? Do you mean intentional rubbish? Are they talking deceptively, or are they themselves deceived?"

"By the Lord Harry, Hardwick, I had forgotten you were such a stickler for words! I must choose my diction carefully. Do you, then, believe that so-called supernatural appearances are caused by physical influences or are hallucinations of the senses? There, I think I've put it clearly."

"Fairly so. But I can't answer clearly. I never express an opinion on a grave question –"

Milly's hand flew up to her mouth to repress an involuntary giggle. "A *grave* question!" she exploded. "It surely is."

The Professor looked at her thoughtfully. "It is," he went on, "and it is no laughing matter. As I was saying, I never state an opinion without being sure of my facts. Now, I've had no experience, personally, with supernatural matters, and so am unfit to discuss them. But, I admit I should be very glad to have some such experience. Yes, I certainly should."

"Really," and Eve Carnforth looked interested. "I can arrange it for you, Professor Hardwick."

"No, no, my dear lady, I do not mean that I want to go to a séance, where the so-called medium throws flowers and things out of a cabinet, or toots trumpets and bangs cymbals! No, thank you, I've seen such often."

"What would you choose as an experience?" asked Landon.

"I'd like to go to a house that is reputed haunted, and in circumstances that preclude all possibility of fraud, see the haunting spirits or hear them, for myself."

"Me, too!" cried Vernie. "Oh, I do think that would be the rippingest fun! If you ever do it, Professor, mayn't I go with you?"

"I'll go along," said Eve. "Wouldn't that be a splendid proof! To have such a scientific and open-minded man as the Professor, and a few others who are in earnest and anxious to learn. You couldn't go, Mr. Bruce. You are too sceptical."

“I’m just the one you need,” he laughed. “A balance wheel to keep you enthusiasts straight. But haunted houses are not to be found on every bush in America. If we were in England now, – or Scotland.”

“They do have some over here,” Landon asserted. “I read of one recently, and I’ve heard of others.”

“Let’s find one,” suggested Eve, “and spend our summer vacation in it! Wouldn’t that be a lark?”

“Oh, do!” exclaimed Vernie. “I’d just love it! May I go, Uncle Gifford? Oh, please let me.”

“Only if I go myself, child. The spooks, – I beg their pardon, phantasms, might carry you off. I’ll have to go along to rescue you.”

“Phantasms don’t carry people off,” said Eve, contemptuously. “And though I’d like to consider this plan, I’d only do so, if we were all in earnest as investigators, whatever our opinions may be.”

“Come on, let’s go,” said Landon. “I think it a great little old scheme. Make up a party, you know, but every one who joins must promise to be earnest and honest. Must promise to do nothing to fool or mislead the others, but keep a fair and open mind for any developments. Of course, there won’t be any developments, but we can have a jolly time and we can have wild discussions.”

“Wynne would rather have a discussion than eat,” said his wife. “I’ll go, and I’ll be the housekeeper and chaperon of the crowd, if, as Wynne says, there’ll be no developments. I’d love the outing, and I think this a splendid party to belong to. And let’s take Norma Cameron. She’s a sensitive, or whatever you call it, and she’ll help you out, Eve.”

“Why make the party any larger?” asked Eve, a little petulantly. “The crowd here now seems just right and congenial and all that.”

“Why lug in Norma?” said Braye, smiling. “I don’t know said Norma, but I agree with Eve that the party here is just sort of complete.”

“Yes, I will take Norma. The poor child never gets an outing, and she’d just love this chance.”

“You talk as if we were going to a summer resort,” said Landon. “In the first place, Milly, I doubt if we can find a properly haunted house in a pleasant locality, that is for rent.”

“Of course we can’t,” declared Mr. Bruce. “The whole scheme is idiotic. But if you can work it out, Landon, I’ll go along, and take this little piece of property.” He looked smilingly at the eager-eyed Vernie. “She’s due for some fun after her school work, and if she likes this stunt, let’s try to put it over.”

“How would you set out to find a house?” asked Braye.

“Advertise,” said Landon, promptly. “I know a firm of real estate agents, that I’ll bet could manage it in short order. Say we try it?”

“I’m going to take Norma,” insisted Milly. “Mayn’t I, Wynne?”

“Take anything or anybody you wish, my cherished one. But then, oughtn’t we to have another man?”

“Yes,” said Milly, decidedly. “I hate a bunch of hens, without plenty of menfolks about. Who knows a nice, good-natured, all round adaptable dinner man?”

“I know just the chap,” said Braye, “but he’s a minister. Or, at least, he used to be. But he’s an awfully good fellow, and most agreeable parlour company.”

“What’s his name?” asked Landon.

“Tracy. I met him first in Chicago, some years ago, and I’ve always liked him.”

“All right, if Milly asks Norma, you ask your friend, but it’s a case of first catch your house!”

“It’s got to be a nice house, and fairly comfortable,” Milly stipulated, “or I won’t go.”

“It’s got to have a well-authenticated ghost, or I won’t go,” laughed Braye. “I don’t believe in the things, but I’d like to have a chance to hear their clanking chains, or whatever they perform on.”

“I’ll go just for the fun of the thing,” said Vernie, “and if we do catch a ghost, so much the better!”

CHAPTER II

The Old Montgomery Place

At the Fisher and Hibbard Real Estate and Country House Agency, Wynne Landon had a spirited interview with their Mr. Fisher, and finally induced that somewhat unwilling gentleman to advertise for a haunted house.

“It’s a purely business matter,” Landon argued, “and if you’re any sort of a live agency you ought to do your best to get for your clients any such peculiar domiciles as they may desire.”

“I understand that,” patiently explained Mr. Fisher, “but it’s such a crazy thing to do. How would a dignified firm like ours look advertising for a house warranted haunted?”

“Don’t use your own firm name, then. Have answers sent to a fictitious address. Oh, you can manage it, Fisher. I don’t mean you can surely get one, but you can manage to try. And if the house is pleasant and attractive, it doesn’t matter, between you and me, if there isn’t any ghost, after all. But I want a *bona fide* story. I mean, I don’t want a house that the owner pretends is haunted, just so he can rent it. It must be a well-known legend or ghost story connected with the place.”

“There are plenty of such,” and Fisher laughed. “I’ve struck them occasionally, and because of that well-authenticated story, known to all the neighbours, I couldn’t rent them. To have one asked for is a new experience here.”

“Well, I’ve told you the whole state of the case. You see why we want it, and though the ghost part is the primary factor with some of us, my wife and I care more about a pleasant setting for a month’s house party.”

Landon’s personality went far toward gaining his end, and Mr. Fisher promised to do what he could. As a lawyer of fine standing, and a man of ample means, Wynne Landon was a desirable man to please, and the order was taken.

And when, a few weeks later, word came that a possible opportunity had offered, Landon telephoned for Braye to go with him, and they went to investigate it at once.

“It’s this way,” said Mr. Fisher to the listening men. “There’s a big house up in Vermont, – in the Green Mountain region, not so very far from Manchester. But it’s a lonely locality, quite high up, and near a lake.”

“Sounds fine so far,” commented Landon; “go on.”

“A man named Stebbins is the owner. I haven’t seen him, but here’s his letter. Read it, you’ll get the idea better than I can tell you.” So they read:

“Fisher and Hibbard:

“Dear sirs:

“I’ve got a house, and it sure is haunted. It’s up here in the mountains, and it’s a good house, and a big one, but in some disrepair. Leastways, things is old-fashioned, and not, as you may say, up to date. But nothing ornery. All high-toned and proper, only old and somewhat wore out. It’s the old Montgomery mansion, built along about 1700 and something. But it’s been added to since, and it’s a sort of mixed up architecture. About forty rooms into it, I should judge, though I ain’t never counted them. And most of them haunted. But they ain’t no use going into particulars unless somebody really wants to rent it. I’ve tried nineteen years, and nobody’ll take it, cause it’s so lonesome like. It’s called Black Aspens, mostly I guess, cause the thick groves of aspen trees all around look black at night, and Lord knows it’s a fit place for ghosts. Anyway it’s haunted and I can swear to that. But the story of

the haunt I won't set down until I hear from you again. But you can take my affydvay it's a real haunt and there's a real reason for it.

*"Yours truly,
"Elijah Stebbins."*

"Sounds good to me; what do you think, Rudolph?" said Landon.

"All right, if it's genuine. Some of us ought to go up there and size it up before the whole crowd goes. Think so?"

"Yes, unless we can get a photograph, or some sort of a plan of the place. And, you know, Braye, I don't care such a lot about a ghost, if we can get a good intelligent crowd of people together. That's the only sort of vacation I care for. I wouldn't give a picayune for a month in a big summer hotel, or a little summer boarding-house, where you may meet good talkers and you may not. But with Eve Carnforth and Norma Cameron and the Professor and, pardon the bouquet, you, I foresee some good old chin-chins. And, add to this, picturesque, even wild mountain scenery, I somehow think we're in for a good time."

"I agree. Wish Uncle Gif and Vernie weren't going, though. He's a dictatorial old chap, though a good sport, and as to Vernie, I don't think it's the right place for a flapper."

"Oh, it won't hurt the kiddie. She's a mighty sensible little piece and she's ready to eat up experiences. She may as well be with her own people."

"That's just it. She's lived nearly all her life alone with Uncle, and he isn't enough people for her. She ought to have a woman to look after her, now she's out of school."

"Well, what's the matter with Milly? For this trip at least. Milly loves the little girl, and will have a good influence over her."

"That's right as rain, but I'm not sure Eve Carnforth is desirable company for Vernie."

"Oh, Eve isn't a bad sort. And with her strict Uncle, and you and Milly and me to look after the child, Eve can't do much to counteract."

"She probably won't do anything. It's all right, Wynne. Now shall we decide to take this Montgomery place?"

"Oh, no, we can't decide positively. I'm pretty sure we shall take it, but I think we ought to call a confab of the whole bunch to discuss it."

Meantime, Eve Carnforth was talking it over with Milly Landon.

"I adore the plan," Eve said, "except your insistence on taking Norma Cameron. I don't like her, Milly, and you know it."

"Now, Eve, cunnin' little cherub child, don't let the greeny-weeny-eyed monster claim you for his own! You know perf'ly well," Milly giggled, "that you don't want Norma along, because you think she will attract Friend Braye."

"Why, Milly Landon! What nonsense! I don't care two cents for Rudolph Braye –"

"Oh, I don't mean romantically, but I do know you want to be top of the psychic heap, up there, and you think little Norma will get ahead of you in phantasmagoria, or whatever you call it."

"No, it isn't that; but Norma does think she knows it all, and she puts on such airs about her clairvoyance, and calls herself a sensitive and all that."

"Well, let her. You can hold your own; and, too, Eve, if we carry out this scheme, I think we ought all to pull together, and help each other. And we can't do that, if there's antagonism or rivalry. Now, can we? And if you're in earnest, as you've always insisted you are, you ought to be glad of any help Norma can give. She feels that way about you. When I asked her to go, she was delighted that you were to be in the party, because, she said, you were so interested and so well up in all these things we're going to discover."

"I suppose I am silly. I may as well confess I'm not sure of Norma. She wouldn't be above pretending she heard or saw things, even if she didn't."

“Fiddlesticks! There won’t be any pretending! Or, if there is, it’ll be discovered right straight off. Why, Wynne is terribly in earnest, – about having it all fair and square, I mean, – and so is the Professor, and I’d like to see any one fool Gifford Bruce! And little Vernie is a real wideawake. There won’t be anything doing that that child doesn’t know, if it’s fraud or foolery! Don’t you believe it, my dear. Norma Cameron won’t pull any wool over anybody’s eyes in our party. No, siree!”

The crowd came together that night to discuss the house that had been offered, and to come to a decision.

Norma Cameron was present, and her manner and appearance were so exactly opposite to those of Eve Carnforth, that it was small wonder the girls were not congenial.

Norma was blonde, and had what her friends called a seraphic countenance and her enemies, a doll-face. For Norma had enemies. She was prominent in war relief work and public charities of many kinds, and it is seldom possible for such a one to go through the world entirely peaceably. But all conceded that her doll-face was a very pretty one, and few who criticized it, would not have been glad to wear it.

Her golden hair was softly curly, and her sky blue eyes big and expressive. But her complexion was her greatest beauty; soft as a rose petal, the pink and white were so delicately blended as to make a new observer suspect art’s assistance. A second glance, however, removed all such suspicion, for no hare’s foot could ever have produced that degree of perfection. Her softly rounded chin, and creamy throat were exquisitely moulded, and her usual expression was gentle and amiable.

But Norma was no namby-pamby character, and her eyes could turn to deep violet, and her pink cheeks flush rosily if she ran up against injustice or meanness. That was why her career of philanthropy was not always a serene path, for she never hesitated to speak her mind and her mind was of a positive type.

Always outspoken, though, was Norma. No slyness or deceit marked her procedure, never did she say behind any one’s back what she would not say to his face.

And this was the principal reason why Norma and Eve could never hit it off. For Eve frequently carried tales, and sometimes denied them later. Milly, however, was friends with both girls, and secretly hoped that if they could all get away together, the two warring natures might react on each other for good. Then, too, both were immensely interested in psychics, and if they were rivals in this field, so much better chance for all concerned, to find out the things they were to look for.

“I think,” said Norma, at the confab, “it would be better for two of the crowd, say, Mr. and Mrs. Landon, to go up first and look at the house. It sounds fine, but it may be impossible. So, why get us all up there, only to come home again?”

“I don’t think so,” said Eve, promptly, while Milly giggled to hear the two begin to disagree at once. “I think it would be a lot more fun for us all to go and see it for the first time together. Then, if it isn’t livable, we can all come back, but we shall have had a sort of picnic out of it, at least.”

“Yes, I think that, too!” put in Vernie, who was beside herself with joy at the outlook. “Oh, what a gorgeous party it will be! Do we go in the train, or motors or what?”

“Hush, Vernie,” said her Uncle, “we haven’t decided to go at all, yet. Where is this place, Landon?”

“The post-office is East Dryden. The house is about a mile further up the mountain. I fancy it’s a picturesque sort of a place, though with few modern appointments. Fisher got a little more data, somehow, and he says it’s a hodge-podge old pile, as to architecture, as it’s been rebuilt, or added to several times. But I don’t care about all that, I mean, if we don’t like the appointments we needn’t stay. What I want is the ghost story. Shall we send to Stebbins for that before we take the place, or go on a wild goose chase entirely?”

“Oh, let’s start off without knowing anything about it,” and old Mr. Bruce’s eyes twinkled like a boy’s at thought of an escapade.

“Good for you, Uncle!” and Vernie shouted with glee. “I didn’t know you were such an old top, did you, Cousin Rudolph?”

“Well, I’ve known him longer than you have, Flapper, and I’m not so surprised at his wanting a sporting proposition. But, I say, Milly, if we’re going to take Tracy, you people ought to see him and give him the once over first. Maybe you won’t like him at all.”

“Oh, your friends are sure to be our friends, Rudolph,” said Landon, “but telephone him to run up here, can’t you? It’s only fair to let him in on the planning.”

Tracy came, and he made good at once. His ministerial air was softened by a charming smile and a certain chivalry of address that pleased the women and satisfied the men.

“What about servants?” he asked, after the main details had been explained to him.

“That’s what I’m thinking about,” said Milly. “I don’t want to take our servants, they’d be scared to death in such a place, and, too, we can’t go ghost hunting under Charles’ nose! He’d sniff at us!”

“Right you are!” agreed Landon. “Charles is one estimable and valuable butler, but he’s no sort to take on the picnic we’re out for.”

“Don’t let’s take any servants,” suggested Eve, “but get some up there. Natives, you know.”

“That would be better,” said Mr. Bruce. “Then, they’ll be used to the place, and can tell us of the legends and traditions, you see.”

“You’re poking fun,” said Eve, reproachfully, “but it’s true, all the same. Do we go in motors?”

“I think so,” said Landon. “Two big cars would take us all, and we can leave our luggage to be sent up if we stay.”

“Of course we’ll stay,” asserted Milly. “I love that old house already, and if there’s no ghost at all, I’ll be just as well pleased, and I’ll stay the month out, with whoever wants to stay with me.”

“I’ll stand by you,” said Norma, “and I’ll own up that I don’t really expect any spectral manifestations up there, anyway.”

“It matters little what you expect,” and Professor Hardwick looked at her thoughtfully. “We’re going investigating, not expecting.”

“Don’t you expect anything, Prof?” asked Vernie, gaily.

“What do you mean by expect, child? Do you mean wish or think?”

“Gracious, goodness, Professor! I never know what I mean by the words I use, and I never care!”

Professor Hardwick’s hobby was the use of words, and rarely did he fail to question it, if a word was misused or uncertainly used in his presence. But he smiled benignly on the pretty child, and didn’t bother her further.

Finally, the men drew together to make up the budget of necessary expenses and the women talked clothes.

“Smocks all round,” said Norma, who loved the unconventional in dress.

“Not for me!” said Eve, who didn’t.

Milly giggled. “Let every one wear just what she chooses,” she settled it. “I’m at my best in white linen in the summer time, but what about laundry? Well, I shall leave two sets of things packed, and then send for whichever I want.”

Norma, uninterested in clothes, edged over toward the men. Though a friend of the Landons and acquainted with Professor Hardwick, she had never met Braye or Tracy before.

Both succumbed to her sure-fire smile, but Tracy showed it and Braye didn’t.

“Sit here, Miss Cameron,” and Tracy eagerly made a place for her at his side; “we need a lady assistant. How much do you think it ought to cost to provision nine people and two or three natives for a month?”

“It isn’t a question of what it *ought* to cost,” returned Norma, “but what it *will* cost. But in any case it will be less than most of us would spend if we went to the average summer hotel. So why not just put down some round numbers, divide ’em by nine and let it go at that?”

“Fine!” approved Landon. “No food dictator could beat that scheme! I wonder if ghost-hunters are as hungry as other hunters, or if we’ll be so scared we’ll lose our appetites.”

“I have a profound belief in ghosts,” Norma asserted, “but I shall only indulge in it between meals. Count me in for all the good things going, three times a day.”

“What do you mean by profound?” asked the Professor; “deep-seated or widely informed?”

“Both,” answered Norma, flashing her pretty smile at the serious old man. “Profundity of all kinds is my happy hunting-ground, and on this trip I expect to get all the profundity I want.”

“And I’m the girl to put the fun in profundity,” cried Vernie, coming over to them. “My mission is to keep you serious people joyed up. Mr. Tracy, your profession won’t interfere with your having a jolly time, will it? No, I see it won’t, by that twinkly little smile.”

“You may count on me,” said the clergyman a bit stiffly, but with a cordial glance at the girl.

“And I can wind Professor Hardwick round my finger,” Vernie went on, “for a companion on a gay lark, I don’t know any one better than a dry-as-dust old college professor!”

The object of this encomium received it with a benignant smile, but Gifford Bruce reproved his saucy niece.

“I’ll leave you at home, miss, if you talk impertinences,” he declared.

“Not much you won’t, my bestest, belovedest Uncle! Why, I’m the leading lady of this troupe. And I expect the spectre will appear to me first of all. That’s my motto: ‘Spect the Spectre! How’s that? Then the rest of you can inspect the spectre!’”

“Vernie! don’t be so excruciatingly funny,” begged Braye, while Milly Landon giggled at the pretty child, whose charm and sweetness took all rudeness from her foolery.

“Perhaps we ought to call in an inspector to inspect the spectre,” contributed Landon.

“There, there, Wynne,” said Braye, “we’ll take such stuff from an ignorant little girl but not from a grown-up man.”

“Ignorant, huh!” scorned Vernie. “I’ll bet *you* couldn’t have passed my examination in psychology!”

“Perhaps not,” admitted Braye, “but after this trip of ours, we’ll all be honour men.”

“I want it thoroughly understood,” said Mr. Bruce, “that I range myself on the side of the sceptics. I don’t want to sail under false colours and I wish to state positively that there are no ghosts or phantasms or any such things. Moreover, I announce my intention of fooling you gullible ones, if I can.”

“Oh, that isn’t fair!” exclaimed Landon. “I don’t believe in the things either, but I want an honest test. Why, you take away the whole point of the experiment if you’re going to put up a trick on us!”

“No, no, Bruce,” said the Professor, “that won’t do. Come, now, give me your word there’ll be no hocus-pocus or I refuse to go at all.”

“If it’s any sort of a real test, Hardwick, it oughtn’t to be possible to fool you.”

“That’s true,” said Eve; “and I’m not afraid of any tricks. If they are tricks, I’ll know it – ”

“I too,” said Norma. “I’m sensitive to all psychical manifestations and if I can’t tell a real phantasm from Mr. Bruce’s tricks, I deserve to be fooled.”

“I think it’s a good thing that Mr. Bruce warned us,” observed John Tracy. “It puts us on our guard. But I think the rest of us ought to agree not to do anything of that sort. We can expect and discount Mr. Bruce’s little game, but if others are going to do the same, it seems to me the game isn’t worth playing.”

“Right you are!” declared Landon, and forthwith everybody present except Gifford Bruce solemnly pledged his or her word to do nothing tricky or fraudulent, and to preserve an open-minded, honest attitude toward any developments they might experience.

“And with eight argus-eyed inquirers watching him, Mr. Bruce can’t put anything over,” opined Landon, and the others agreed.

CHAPTER III

Black Aspens

Though mid-July, it was a chilly dusk through which the two motor cars ascended the last stretch of mountain road toward the old Montgomery mansion. The sun set early behind the Green Mountains and the house, half-way up an eastern slope, appeared faintly through the shadows.

To the right, tall forest trees waved their topmost branches with an eerie, southing sound, or stood, menacingly silent, in black, sullen majesty. Beneath them a tangled underbrush gave forth faint, rustling hints of some wild life or suddenly ceased to a grim stillness.

Then the road lay through a thick grove of aspens, close, black and shivering as they stood, sentinel like and fearsome, only dimly outlined against the dark, clouded sky. Once in the grove, the shadows were dense, and the quivering sounds seemed intensified to a muttered protest against intrusion. A strange bird gave forth a few raucous notes, and then the dread silence returned.

A quick, damp chill foreboded still water and the road followed the margin of a small lake or pond, sinister in its inky depths, which mirrored the still blacker aspen trees.

Suddenly, in a small clearing, they came upon the house. In the uncertain light it seemed enormous, shapeless and beyond all words repelling. It seemed to have a personality, defiant and forbidding, that warned of mystery and disaster. Aspen trees, tall and gaunt, grew so close that their whispering leaves brushed the windows, and crowded in protecting, huddled clumps to ward off trespassers.

No lights showed through the deep caverns of the windows, but one faint gleam flickered above the entrance door.

“Whew!” cried Landon, jumping from his seat with a thud on the stone terrace, “I won’t go through that woods again! I’ll go home in an aeroplane, – and I’m ready to go now!”

“So am I,” said Milly, in a quivering, tearful voice. “Oh, Wynne, why did we ever come?”

“Now, now,” cheered Braye, “keep your heads, it’s all right. Only these confounded shadows make it impossible to know just where we’re at. Here’s the house, and by jinks, it’s built of marble!”

“Of course,” said the Professor, who was curiously feeling of the old ivy-grown stone, “this is the marble country, you know. Vermont marble was plenty enough when this house was put up.”

“Let’s get in,” begged Vernie. “It isn’t as much fun as I thought it would be.”

They went, in a close group, up a short flight of broad marble steps and reached a wide portico, in the centre of which was a spacious vestibule indented into the building, and which stood within the main wall. Though the walls of the house were of marble, those of this vestibule were of panelled mahogany, and the entrance doorway was flanked on either side by large bronze columns, which stood half within and half without the mahogany wall.

“Some house!” exclaimed Tracy, in admiration of the beautiful details, which though worn and blackened by time, were of antique grandeur. “These bronze doors must have come from Italy. They’re marvellous. I’m glad I came.”

“Oh, do get in, Wynne,” wailed Milly. “You can examine the house to-morrow. I *wish* we hadn’t come!”

Landon was about to make search for knocker or bell, when one of the big bronze doors swung open, and a man peered out.

“You folks here?” he said, a bit unnecessarily. “Bring another lamp, Hester.”

“Yes, we’re here,” Landon assured him, “and we want to get in out of the wet!”

“Rainin’?” and the man stepped out of the door to look, blocking all ingress.

“No! that’s a figure of speech!” Landon’s nerves were on edge. “Open that door, – the other one, – let us in!”

“Go on in, who’s henderin’ you?” and the indifferent host stepped out of the way.

Landon went in first and Braye followed, as the others crowded after. At first they could see only a gloomy cavernous hall, its darkness accentuated by one small lamp on a table.

“Thought I wouldn’t light up till you got here,” and the man who had admitted them came in and closed the door. “I’m Stebbins, and here’s the keys. This is the house you’ve took, and Hester here will look after you. I’ll be goin’.”

“No, you won’t!” and Landon turned on him. “Why, man, we know nothing of this place. You stay till I dismiss you. I want a whole lot of information, but not till after we get lights and make the ladies comfortable.”

“Comfortable! At Black Aspens! Not likely.” The mocking laugh that accompanied these words struck terror to most of his hearers. “Nobody told me that you folks came up here to be comfortable.”

“Shut up!” Landon’s temper was near the breaking point. “Where’s that woman with the lamps? Where’s the man I engaged to look after things?”

“Hester, she’s here. She’ll be in in a minute. Thorpe, that’s her husband, he’s goin’ to be a sort of butteler for you, he can’t come till to-morrow. But Hester, she’s got supper ready, or will be, soon’s you can wash up and all.”

Hester came in then, a gaunt, hard-featured New England woman, who looked utterly devoid of any emotion and most intelligence.

Stebbins, on the other hand, was apparently of keen perceptions and average intellect. His small blue eyes roved from one face to another, and though he looked sullen and disagreeable of disposition, he gave the effect of one ready to do his duty.

“All right,” he said, as if without interest, “I’ll set in the kitchen and wait. Hester here, she’ll take the ladies to their rooms, and then after you get your supper, I’ll tell you all you ask me. But I rented this place to you, I didn’t agree to be a signboard and Farmers’ Almanac.”

“All right, old chap,” and Landon smiled faintly, “but don’t you get away till I see you. Now, girls, want to select your rooms?”

“Y-Yes,” began Eve, bravely, and then a glance up the dark staircase made her shudder.

“What we want is light, – and plenty of it,” broke in Braye. “Here you, Hester, I’ll relieve you of that lamp you’re holding, and you hop it, and get more, – six more, – twelve more – hear me?”

“We haven’t that many in the house.” Dull-eyed the woman looked at him with that sublime stolidity only achieved by born New Englanders.

“Oh, you haven’t! Well, bring all you have and to-morrow you manage to raise a lot more. How many have you, all told?”

“Four, I think.”

“Four! For a party of nine! Well, have you candles?”

“Half a dozen.”

“And three candlesticks, I suppose! Bring them in, and if you’re shy of candlesticks, bring old bottles, – or anything.”

“Good for you, Braye, didn’t know you had so much generalship,” and Gifford Bruce clapped his nephew on the shoulder. “I’m glad I don’t believe in ghosts, for every last one of you people are shaking in your shoes this minute! What’s the matter with you? Nothing has happened.”

“It was that awful ride through the woods,” said Vernie, cuddling into her uncle’s arm. “I I-like it, – I like it all, – but, the local colour is so – so dark!”

“That’s it, Kiddie,” said Braye, “the local colour is about the murkiest I ever struck. But here are our lights, hooray!”

Hester brought two more small hand lamps, and after another trip to the kitchen brought six candles and six battered but usable candlesticks.

A candle was given to each of the four women, and Norma politely selected the oldest and most broken holder.

“Land sake!” exclaimed Stebbins, coming in, “you goin’ to use *that* candlestick? That’s the very one the murderin’ woman used!”

With a scream, Norma dropped it and no one moved to pick it up.

“Get out, Stebbins!” roared Landon, “you queer the whole business.”

“I’ll take this one,” and Mr. Bruce picked up the old brass affair; “I’m not afraid of such things. Here, Miss Cameron, take mine, it’s new and commonplace, I assure you.”

White-faced and trembling, Norma took the cheap crockery thing, and shortly they all followed Hester up the stairs to the shadows of the floor above.

The place was silent as the grave. Hester’s slippered feet made no sound, and a voluntary scraping of Tracy’s shoes stopped as soon as he realized its enormous sound in those empty halls. A multitude of doors led to rooms in all directions, there seemed to be no plan or symmetry of any sort. The candle flames flickered, the small lamps burned with a pale sickly light.

Hester paused midway of the main corridor.

“What rooms you want?” she asked, uninterestedly.

“Give me a cheerful one,” wailed Milly. “Oh, Wynne, let us take a little, cozy one.”

“Of course you shall,” said Braye, kindly. “Hester, which is the pleasantest room in the house? Give that to Mr. and Mrs. Landon! And then we’ll put all you girls near them. The rest of us will camp anywhere.”

“Let’s all pretty much camp anywhere till to-morrow,” suggested the Professor. “I’d like to select my room by daylight.”

“I’ve made up some of the rooms, and some I ain’t,” volunteered Hester.

“Then, for Heaven’s sake, show us the made-up rooms, and get out!” burst forth Landon. “I wish we’d brought our maids, Milly; that woman affects me like fever and ague.”

But after a time they were assigned to various more or less inhabitable bedrooms, and as quickly as possible, all reappeared in the great hall below, ready for supper.

The dining room, toward the back of the house, was not half bad, after all the available lights had been commandeered for the table.

“You knew there were no electrics,” said Braye to Eve, who was bewailing the fact.

“Of course I did, and I thought candles would be lovely and picturesque and all that; and kerosene gives a good soft light, but – well, somehow, – do you know what I thought as we came through that dreadful wood?”

“What?”

“Only one sentence rang through my mind, – and that was, – The Powers of Darkness!”

“That isn’t a sentence,” objected the Professor, a little querulously, and everybody laughed. Also, everybody blessed the occasion for laughter.

But Eve went on. “I don’t care if it’s a sentence or a syllogism, or what it is! It just rang in my ears. And I tell you this whole place is under the Powers of Darkness – ”

“Do hush, Eve,” pleaded Milly. “I was just beginning to pull myself together, and now you’ve upset me again!”

“But Milly, – ”

“Let up, Eve! For the love of Mike, let up! You’re enough to give anybody the creeps.” Landon glared at her.

“It’s only a question of light,” Tracy broke in, in his pleasant way. “Now, we’ve light enough for the moment, and to-morrow we’ll make this the house of a thousand candles and a hundred lamps, and a few lanterns if you like. Incidentally, Friend Hester makes first-rate doughnuts.”

“Aren’t they bully!” chimed in Vernie. “I’ve eaten six, and here goes for another.”

“Lucky they’re small,” said her uncle. “But seven doughnuts are enough to make you see the ghost of old Montgomery himself!”

“And all the Green Mountain boys,” added Tracy, who was determined to keep conversation away from fearsome subjects.

By the time they had finished the meal, every one felt more at ease, Landon had recovered his poise, and Milly her cheerfulness.

“Now, then,” the Professor asked, as they left the table, “shall we explore the house to-night – ”

“Lord, no!” cried Braye. “Leave it lay till daylight. Also, don’t quiz old Stebbins as to who’s who in Black Aspens! Let’s turn on the Victrola and dance, or let’s play poker or sing glees, or anything that’s a proper parlour trick. But nothing, I insist, pertaining to our mission up here. That’ll keep.”

“As you like,” and now Landon could smile. “And you mollycoddles may pursue those light-minded pleasures. But I’m going to have it out with Steb, because I want to know some several Laws for Beginners. But, don’t let me interfere with your plans. Go ahead, and have play ‘Hide and Seek All Over the House,’ if you choose. That used to be my favourite indoor game.”

“Oh!” squealed Vernie, “what an awful suggestion! In this house!”

“I move we hear the story of the house to-night. – right now,” said Eve.

Milly clasped her hands over her ears, instead of, as usual, over her mouth, and cried, “No! I forbid it! Don’t let ’em, will you, Wynne?”

“Seems to me,” remarked Mr. Stebbins, “you folks don’t know your own minds! You want a ha’nted house, then when you git it, you’re too scared to hear the story of the ha’nt.”

“I’m not scared,” asserted Norma, “but somehow, a ha’nt sounds so much worse than a haunt. Doesn’t it, now?”

“It sure does,” agreed Braye. “A ha’nt is concrete, while a haunt is abstract.”

“Good!” and Hardwick nodded approval. “Now, I suggest that we look around a bit, get the general lay of the house and then all go to bed early. A good night’s sleep will put our nerves and muscles in condition again. I’m delighted with the place, and I foresee a first-class vacation ahead of us.”

“I wish it was behind us, and we were just starting for home,” murmured Milly, but Eve reprimanded her.

“Don’t be a spoilsport! I like the place too, Professor, and I’m going to investigate a little. What room is this?”

Eve’s graceful figure crossed the great square hall, where they were all standing about, and paused at the closed door of a room just at the right hand as one entered the house.

“Why, it’s locked!” she exclaimed. “That won’t do, Mr. Stebbins! This whole domain is ours, now, you know. Open this door, please.”

Eve wore the light gray skirt of her travelling costume, and a thin sheer white silk blouse, whose V’d neck fell away from her long, slender throat. Her hand on the door knob, she suddenly turned her strange beryl eyes toward Stebbins, her face turning whiter and her thin lips redder as she gazed.

“This is the room – isn’t it?” she breathed, and her hand slowly fell from the knob and hung loosely at her side.

“Yes, ma’am,” replied Stebbins, stolidly. “How’d you know?”

“How could I help knowing!” and Eve’s voice rang out like a clarion. “I see it! I see it all!”

She rushed across the hall and fell trembling on a settee. Tracy flew to her side, and took her hand.

“There, there, Miss Carnforth, brace up! We’re all right here. Nothing can hurt you.”

“Beats all how she knew!” muttered Stebbins. “You see that’s the room – ”

A cry from Milly stirred Landon to action.

“Drop it, Stebbins,” he said, and took a step toward him. “None of that to-night. We do want your haunted house, but the long journey up here, and your confounded negligence in the matter of lights and servants and general good will, has got on the ladies’ nerves. Beat it now, to the kitchen,

or wherever your quarters are, but you stay here to-night and be ready to report in the morning. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir," and shrugging his shoulders, the man disappeared among the shadows in the back of the hall.

The great main hall was so large that the lights they had were all insufficient for illumination. There seemed to be innumerable doors and openings of side corridors, also a second staircase, far behind the main one.

"Here's a good-looking room, let's go in here," said Tracy, stepping through some old, faded draperies to the room on the left of the hall as one entered the house.

Hardwick followed, and the others with lamps and candles pushed in. It was a large, dignified apartment, evidently a parlour or ballroom of the old mansion. The furniture was of old, carved rosewood, its upholstery worn, but fairly decent. Oil portraits were on the walls and massive ornaments of imitation bronze stood about, showing white here and there where the coating was chipped off.

Yellowish onyx vases graced the mantels, and the windows were hung with heavy rep curtains which, however, veiled no lighter ones.

"Ghastly!" cried Norma.

"What do you mean by ghastly?" began the Professor, and Tracy laughed.

"She didn't mean it at all, Professor," he said, "Miss Cameron meant to say hideous. Now, don't ask me what I mean by hideous, just look at the interior decorations here and draw your own conclusions as to my meaning. But though not to be called æsthetic, this furniture is fairly comfy. The springs of this sofa are intact, – come sit by my side, little darling." This last to Vernie, who was wide-eyed and alert, lapping up these strange, new impressions.

"All right," and she flung herself down beside him. "You're a real comfort, Mr. Tracy, – you're so, – so – unministerial!"

"Thank you, my child. One needn't carry one's pulpit voice into social life."

"Oh, I don't mean you do or say anything that a man of your calling oughtn't to, but you're so nice about it."

"I think so too," chattered Milly, "I do think a clergyman with a sense of humour makes a fine combination."

The mental atmosphere gradually lightened and when Landon suggested they all retire, it was a composed and merry hearted group that obeyed the summons.

When twelve sonorous strokes boomed from the tall clock in the upper hall, the men beneath the roof of Black Aspens were all sleeping more or less soundly.

Milly, with only occasional little quivering shudders, slumbered in Landon's arms. Vernie slept with the sound dreamless sleep of youth.

But Eve and Norma were wide awake, and unable to close their eyes.

In adjoining rooms, the communicating door ajar, they could hear one another toss restlessly, but they said no words.

Norma's blue eyes were wide open, her thoughts rambling over the strange surroundings in which she found herself, and her mind leaping forward, speculating on what might happen.

Eve, her long, glittering eyes half closed, listened for any sound; her nerves alert, her thoughts darting from material things to the supernatural, every muscle tense with a nameless apprehension.

More hours were rung out by the old clock, and at last dawn began to creep in at the deep narrow windows of the old house.

With a shrug and a stretch Vernie awoke. Drowsily, in the half light she tried to make out her surroundings, and then, suddenly remembering where she was, she dove her head under her blanket, in a quick rush of fear. Then curiosity conquered, and she came to the surface again, and looked about. The light, growing gradually stronger, showed the appointments of the room, the ugly old four-poster bedstead, of light wood, – apple or hickory, – the heavy rep lambrequins, that seemed to be

a feature of the house, and the scantily appointed dresser, on which, the night before, she had set her extinguished candle.

Shadows still lurked in the corners of the room, still hung round the draperies and furniture, yet through the gloom Vernie saw something that made her eyes stare and her flesh creep. Clenching her hands till her sharp nails bit into her palms, she gave a shriek that rang through the silent house.

CHAPTER IV

The Story of the House

From their nearby rooms Eve and Norma rushed to Vernie's room.

The child was huddled beneath the bed clothes and at their entrance shot her head out, crying wildly, "Look! look! the old candlestick!"

Milly came running, in dressing-gown and slippers, and from distant regions came the voices of the men.

"What's the matter?" asked Gifford Bruce. "Wasn't that Vernie's voice?"

"Yes, Uncle Gif," Vernie called out. "Oh, did you do it?"

"Do what?" and in his hastily donned bath robe, old Mr. Bruce appeared.

"Why," and Vernie was calm now, "there's that old candlestick, the one the – the murderer used – on my dresser! Last night I had a little china one!"

"What are you talking about – a murderer! Wake up, child!"

"I'm not asleep. But I see, now. You had this old one, Uncle Gif, and, you know you said you were going to fool us if you could, and so you sneaked it in here to pretend the haunt did it!"

"What! What nonsense! I did nothing of the sort!"

"Who did, then? You know you had this one last night."

"I certainly did. Wonder what's in my room now."

Mr. Bruce ran back to his room and returned with the little china candlestick Vernie had carried to her room the night before. They had certainly been exchanged during the night.

Everybody stared at the two candles, so worthless in themselves, but so inexplicably transferred, if, as he declared, Gifford Bruce had not exchanged them.

"Of course I didn't do it," he repeated, angrily. "I did say, in fun, that I meant to trick you, but when I saw how nervous and wrought up all you women were last night, I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing! Why, Vernie, I think too much of you, dear, to add to your fear or discomfort in any way."

At last everybody concluded it was the work of some one of their number, and there were varying opinions as to the identity of the perpetrator of what must have been meant for a joke.

But at breakfast time the matter was discussed very seriously and each avowed in all honour that he or she knew nothing of it.

"I can speak not only for myself," said Professor Hardwick, gravely, "but for Mr. Tracy and Mr. Braye. They would have had to pass my door to move around the halls, and I was awake all night, looking and listening, and I know they did not leave their rooms."

"I speak for myself," said Gifford Bruce, haughtily. "I declare on my oath that I did not leave my bed. Somebody exchanged those candles, – but it was not I."

The Landons spoke for each other, and no one, of course, could suspect Wynne or Milly. And naturally, the two girls, Eve and Norma, would not go to Mr. Bruce's room to play a trick like that.

"I don't mind now," said Vernie, "when it's all light and cheerful and you're all around me, and the breakfast is so good and all. I think it's the beginning of these experiences we came up here to look for. Why are you all so surprised? Because I had the first party?"

The merry-eyed girl was unafraid now, but Hardwick shook his head.

"I don't like it," he said. "We can't investigate if there's a trickster among us. You didn't do it yourself, did you, Vernie?"

"No, Professor," and the pure truthful gaze of the brown eyes left no room for disbelief. "Honest, I didn't. But," she laughed mischievously, "if I had, I should *say* I hadn't!"

"Vernie! This won't do!" and Eve glared at her, "You little minx, I believe you did do it!"

“Don’t you look at me like that, Eve Carnforth! Stop it! You scare me.” Vernie fairly cowered before Eve’s basilisk eyes. “I believe *you* did it!”

“There, there, girls,” broke in Tracy, with his gentle smile, “don’t get to hair-pulling. If we’ve all finished breakfast, let’s now hear the story of the house, and then we can tell if its patron ghost is the sort given to exchanging bedroom furniture o’ nights.”

“Yes,” agreed Norma, “I’m crazy to hear the story. Where’s Mr. Stebbins, does anybody know?”

“I’ll dig him up,” Landon assured them. “Where shall we congregate?”

“In the drawing room,” said Milly, “that’s the only room I’m not afraid of.”

“I’m fearfully afraid of that!” said Tracy, in mock terror. “Those rep lambrequins get on my nerves!”

“Aren’t they awful!” and Norma laughed. “They don’t frighten me, but they jar my æsthetics terribly.”

“No,” said Elijah Stebbins, firmly, as the conclave began, “not in that there parlour. Here in the hall. You folks want this house, you want the story of this house, now you sit here to hear it.”

“Very well,” said Braye, agreeably. “Just as you say, Mr. Stebbins. Now begin at the beginning, but don’t drool too long a spiel.”

The whole party grouped themselves in the great hall, and for the first time began to take in the details of its appointments. Though in disrepair as to walls and cornices, the lines of its architecture were fine and it was of noble proportions; the staircase was beautifully planned; and the wonderful bronze doors, which they had not examined the night before, were truly works of art.

“The old Montgomery who brought them doors from Italy, pretty much built the house behind ’em,” Stebbins volunteered, “and them colyums, of course, come with the doors. They’re some valu’ble, I’m told. You see, the doors is the same outside and in, and the colyums is, too. Well, then, he had the vestibule of murhoggany, to sort o’ set off the bronze, I s’pose, and the rest of the walls is marble, – solid old Vermont marble, which Lord knows was to be had for the pickin’, up here.”

“Get along to the story, Steb,” urged Landon.

“Yes, sir. Well, the Montgomery that built this house, – though, it was part built before, he added on to his father’s house, – well, he was a daredevil, and a tyrant. Little mite of a man, but full of the old Nick. And, as those little men will do, he married a reg’lar Hessian of a woman. Big, sort o’ long and gaunt, they say she was, and a termagant for sure! She led him a life, and also, he led her one. For he was a terror and so was she. What he lacked in size he made up in temper, and she had both. Well, here’s the story.

“He took sick, and she nursed him. They didn’t have trained nurses and specialists in them days. Now some says, he was jest naturally took sick and some says, that she give him slow poison. But, be that as it may, one night, she give him prussic acid, and he died. She threw a shawl over her head, and ran screamin’ to the village for the doctor. I s’pose remorse got her, for she confessed, and said ‘I killed him! I killed him! At four o’clock I killed him!’

“She went crazy, they say, then and there. Well, the doctor he said he’d come right away, but she ran home first. And he followed’s fast’s he could, and – when he come, here was the woman, – and she was a washin’ the dead man’s lips, – she said, to get the smell of the bitter ammonds off, – you know, prussic acid is for all the world the smell of bitter almonds. The doctor, he found the man was really dead, and he was for havin’ her arrested, but she was so plumb crazy, he decided to take her to an asylum instead.

“He had to go off to get help, and he left her, – here alone in this house with the body. They was in that room,” Stebbins pointed to the room with the locked door, at the right hand of the hall as one entered, “the room with the tassels, it’s called.”

“Why is it called that?” broke in Eve, whose piercing eyes were fairly glittering with excitement, “what sort of tassels?”

“Great heavy tassels on the curtains and lambaquins, ma’am, – want to see it?”

“Not now,” ordained Landon, “the story first.”

“Well,” resumed Stebbins, “they was in that room, the dead husband and the live wife, when the doctor went away, and because he knew she was out of her head, he locked ’em in. And when he came back – she was setting there, just where he’d left her, still in a dazed sort o’ stupor, and – the corpse was gone.”

“Gone! where?” rasped out the Professor.

“Nobody knows. Nobody ever knew. It had just disappeared from off the face of the earth. The doctor and the village folks all agreed that it was sperrited away. ’Cause that woman, – she couldn’t get out o’ the doors to cart it off, and she couldn’t ’a’ got out of a winder with it, without showin’ some signs, and if she had, what in the world could she ’a’ done with it? It wasn’t buried nowhere around, and if she’d ’a’ threw it in the lake, s’posin’ she’d got out a winder, how’d she got in again? Anyhow, that’s the story, and they all said she was a witch and she bewitched the body away, so’s the doctor and sheriff couldn’t smell the prussic acid on it and hang her for murder. They searched and searched but they couldn’t find no signs of her havin’ even moved outen her chair. She sat there like a dead woman herself, when the doctor left her and likewise when he come back.”

“The tale is very circumstantial,” observed Gifford Bruce, a bit drily.

“I’m tellin’ it as I’ve many a time heard it, sir,” said Stebbins, a little resentfully. “This here story’s been common talk around these parts a many years, and I ain’t one to add to nor take from it.”

“Go on,” commanded Landon, briefly.

“They put her away, in a loonytic asylum, and she died in it. They never found hide nor hair of the dead man, and the place fell to some kin that lived down Pennsylvania way. They come up here for a while, I b’lieve, but the ha’nt scared ’em off. It’s been sold some several times and at last it fell to my father’s family. Now it’s mine, and it’s a white elephant to me. I can’t sell or rent it, and so you folks may well believe I jumped at the chance to have you take it for a spell.”

“We haven’t heard about the haunt yet,” said Norma. She spoke quietly, but her lips quivered a little, and her fingers were nervously picking at her handkerchief.

“That,” and Stebbins looked even more sombre than he had, “that’s my own experience, so I can give it to you first hand.

“I come here to live, ’bout ten years ago, and I was plucky enough to hoot at ghost stories and tales o’ ha’nts.

“So I set out to sleep in that – that room with the tassels, – out o’ sheer bravado. But I got enough of it.”

The man’s head fell on his breast and he paused in his narrative.

“Go on,” said Landon, less brusquely than before.

Milly stirred nervously. “Don’t let him tell the rest, Wynne,” she said.

“Oh, yes, dear. Remember, this is what we’re here for.”

Most of the men shifted their positions; Hardwick leaned forward, both hands on his knees. Gifford Bruce sat with one arm flung carelessly over his chair back, a slight smile on his face.

Braye was beside Norma, and watched alternately her face and Eve’s, while Tracy was holding Vernie’s hand, and his gentle calm kept the volatile child quiet.

“I see it all so plainly, – that first night – ” Stebbins said, slowly. “*First* night! Land! there never was another! Not for me. I’d sooner ’a’ died than slep’ in that room again!”

“See a ghost?” asked Bruce, flippantly.

“Yes, sir,” and Stebbins looked straight at him. “I seen a ghost. I’m a sound sleeper, I am, and I went to sleep quiet and ca’m as a baby. I woke as the big clock there was a strikin’ four. It was that what woke me – I hope.”

“Is there – is there a bed in that room?” asked the Professor.

“Lord, yes, it was them folkses bedroom. In them days, people most always slep’ downstairs. I come awake suddenly, and the room was full of an icy chill. Not just coldness, but a damp chill – like undertakers’ iceboxes.”

Vernie shuddered and Tracy held her hand more firmly. Landon slipped his arm round Milly, and Eve and Norma glanced at each other.

Gifford Bruce replaced his sneering smile, which had somehow disappeared.

“It was winter, and plumb dark at four o’clock in the morning, but the room was full of an unearthly light, – a sort of frosty, white glow, like you see in a graveyard sometimes.

“And comin’ toward me was a tall, gaunt figure, with a shawl over its head, a white, misty shape, that had a sort of a halting step but was comin’ straight and sure toward that bed I was lyin’ on. I tried to scream, I tried to move, but I couldn’t, – I was paralyzed. On and on came the thing – halting at every step, but gettin’ nearer and nearer. As she – oh, I knew it was that woman – ”

“I thought it was a man who was murdered,” put in Mr. Bruce, in his most sardonic tones.

“So it was, sir,” Stebbins spoke mildly, “but it was the murderess doin’ the ha’ntin’. I s’pose she can’t rest quiet in her grave for remorse and that. She came nearer and – and I saw her face – and – ”

“Well?”

“And it was a skull! A grinning skull. And her long bony hand held a glass – a glass of poison – for me.”

“Er – did you take it?” This from Bruce.

“No, sir. I swooned away, or whatever you may call it. I lost all consciousness, and when I come to, the thing was gone.”

“Ever see her again?” inquired Mr. Bruce, conversationally.

“No, sir,” and Stebbins eyed him uninterestedly. It was impossible to annoy the story teller. “No, I never *seen* her.”

“Heard her?” asked Braye.

“Yes; many’s the time. But – I ain’t never slept in that room since.”

“I should say not!” cried Eve. “But I will! I’ll brave the phantasm. I’d be glad to see her. I’m not afraid.”

“You needn’t be,” said Mr. Bruce, with a short laugh. “You won’t see anything, Miss Carnforth. I’d be willing to try it, too.”

“What other manifestations have you experienced?” asked Braye. “What have you heard?”

“Mostly groans – ”

“And hollow laughter,” interrupted Bruce. “Those are the regulation sounds, I believe.”

“Oh, hush!” cried Eve. “Mr. Bruce, you drive me frantic! I wish you hadn’t come!”

“I don’t,” declared Bruce. “I think it’s most interesting. And do I understand, Mr. Stebbins, that this charming lady of large size and hard heart, carried usually that candlestick that I made use of last night?”

At last Stebbins resented Bruce’s chaff.

“So the story goes, sir,” he said, curtly. “And many’s the time I’ve known that candlestick to be moved during the night, by no mortal hand.”

“Look here, Uncle Gif,” said Braye, good-naturedly, “you don’t want to get yourself disliked, do you? Now, let up on your quizzing, and let’s get down to business. We set out for a haunted house. I, for one, think we’ve got all we came after, and then some! If the ha’nt began moving her candlestick around the first night, what may she not do next? You didn’t do it, did you, Uncle?”

“I’ve told you I didn’t, Rudolph, and I again repeat my word. But it was scarcely necessary for me to do it, when such a capable spook, – I mean, phantasm is regularly in attendance.”

“Now, I’ve told you the tale,” and Stebbins rose, and shook himself as if he had done his duty. “I ain’t nowise responsible for your believin’ it. What I’ve told you is true, so far’s my own experience

goes; and what I've told you hearsay, is the old story that's been told up in these parts by one generation after another, since old Montgomery's day. Now do you want to see the room with the tassels?"

"I don't!" cried Milly, "I can't stand any more."

"You needn't, dear," said Landon; "suppose you go out on the terrace and walk about in the sunlight. You go with her, Vernie, you can see the room, later on."

"I'll go too," and Tracy tactfully offered his escort. "The tassels will keep. Come on, Braye?"

"No; I'll see the show through. You can look after the ladies, Tracy."

So the others crowded round Stebbins, as he prepared to unlock the door of the fatal room.

"Tain't no great sight," he said, almost apologetically. "But it's the ha'nted room."

Slowly he turned the key and they all filed in.

The room was dark, save for what light came in from the hall. All blinds were closed, and over the windows hung heavy curtains of rep that had once been red but was now a dull, nondescript colour. There were more of these heavy, long curtains, evidently concealing alcoves or cupboards, and over each curtain was a "lambrequin" edged with thick twisted woolen fringe, and at intervals, tassels, – enormous, weighty tassels, such as were once used in church pulpits and other old-fashioned upholstery. Such quantities of these there were, that it is small wonder the room received its name.

And the tassels had a sinister air. Motionless they hung, dingy, faded, but still of an individuality that seemed to say, "we have seen unholy deed, – we cry out mutely for vengeance!"

"It was them tassels that scared me most," Stebbins said, in an awed tone. "I mean before — *she* come. They sort of swayed, – when they wasn't no draught nor anything."

"I don't wonder!" said Braye, "they're the ghostliest things I ever saw! But the whole room is awful! It – oh I say! put up a window!"

"I can't," said Stebbins simply. "These here windows ain't been up for years and years. The springs is all rusted and won't work."

"There's something in the room!" cried Eve, hysterically, "I mean – something – besides us – something alive!"

"No, ma'am," said Stebbins, solemnly, "what's in here ain't alive, ma'am. I ain't been in here myself, since that night I slep' here, and I wouldn't be now, only to show you folks the room. I sort of feel 's if I'd shifted the responsibility to you folks now. I don't seem to feel the same fear of the ha'nt, like I was here alone."

"*Don't* say ha'nt! Stop it!" and Eve almost shrieked at him.

"Yes, ma'am. Ghost, ma'am. But ha'nt it is, and ha'nt it will be, till the crack o' doom. Air ye all satisfied with your bargain?"

No one answered, for every one was conscious of a subtle presence and each glanced fearfully, furtively about, nerves shaken, wills enfeebled, vitality low.

"What is it?" whispered Eve.

"Imagination!" declared Mr. Bruce, but he shook his shoulders as he spoke, as if ridding himself of an incubus.

There was a chilliness that was not like honest cold, there was a stillness that was not an ordinary silence, and there was an impelling desire in every heart to get out of that room and never return.

But all were game, and when at last Stebbins said, "Seen enough?" they almost tumbled over one another in a burst of relief at the thought of exit.

The great hall seemed cheerful by contrast, and Landon, in a voice he strove to make matter-of-fact, said, "Thank you, Stebbins, you have certainly given us what we asked for."

"Yes, sir. Did you notice it, sir?"

"What?"

"The smell – the odour – in that room?"

"I did," said Eve, "I noticed the odour of prussic acid."

"Yes, ma'am," said Stebbins, "that's what I meant."

CHAPTER V

Eve's Experience

The investigators had investigated for a week. They were now having tea in the great hall, to whose shadowy distances and shabby appointments they had become somewhat accustomed.

Kept up to the mark by the Landons, old Jed Thorpe had developed positive talents as a butler, and with plenty of lamps and candles, and a couple of willing, if ignorant maids, the household machinery ran fairly smoothly. Supplies were procured in East Dryden or sent up from New York markets and by day the party was usually a gay-hearted, merry-mannered country house group.

Every day at tea-time, they recounted any individual experiences that might seem mysterious, and discussed them.

"It's this way," Professor Hardwick summed up; "the determining factor is the dark. Ghosts and haunted houses are all very well at night, but daylight dispels them as a sound breaks silence."

"What about my experience when I slept in the Room with the Tassels," growled Gifford Bruce.

Braye laughed. "You queered yourself, Uncle Gif, when you announced before we started, that you were not bound to good faith. *Your* ghost stories are discounted before you tell 'em!"

"But I did see a shape, – a shadowy form, like a tall woman with a shawl over her head –"

"You dreamed it," said Milly, smiling at him. "Or else –"

"Milly daren't say it," laughed Eve, "but I will. Or else, you invented the yarn."

"If I'm to be called a –"

"Tut, tut, Mr. Bruce," intervened Tracy, "nobody called you one! Playful prevarication is all right, especially as you warned us you'd fool us if you could. Now I can tell an experience and justly expect to be believed."

"But you haven't had any," and Eve's translucent eyes turned to him.

"I have," began Tracy, slowly, "but they've been a bit indefinite. It's unsatisfactory to present only an impression or a suggestion, where facts are wanted. And the Professor says truly that hints and haunts are convincing at night, but repeated, at a pleasant, comfortable tea hour, they sound flimsy and unconvincing."

"What did you think you saw or heard?" asked Norma, with a reminiscent, far-off look in her eyes.

"Every morning, or almost every morning, at four o'clock, I seem to hear the trailing robes of a presence of some sort. I seem to hear a faint moaning sound, that is like nothing human."

"That's imagination," said Braye, promptly.

"It is, doubtless," agreed Hardwick, "but it is due to what may be called 'expectant attention.' If we had not connected four o'clock with the story of this house, Mr. Tracy would not have those hallucinations at that time."

"Perhaps so," the clergyman looked thoughtful. "But it seems vivid and real at the time. Then, in the later morning, it is merely a hazy memory."

"You know Mr. Stebbins said that every one who died in this house always died at four o'clock."

"I know he *said* so," and Braye looked quizzical.

"Oh, come now, don't doubt honest old Stebbins!" and Eve frowned. "We must believe *his* tales or we'll never get anywhere. I'm going over to East Dryden to see him to-morrow, I want a few more details. And, it seems to me, we're getting nowhere, – with our imaginations and hallucinations. Now, to-night, I'm going to sleep in the Room with the Tassels. I've no fear of it, and I have a deep and great curiosity."

"Oh, let me sleep there with you! Mayn't I, Eve? Oh, please let me!" Vernie danced about in her eagerness, and knelt before Eve, pleading.

“No, Vernie, I forbid it,” said her uncle, decidedly. “If Miss Carnforth wants to do this thing, I have nothing to say, but you must not, my child. I know you people don’t believe me, but I surely saw an apparition the night I slept there, and it was no human trickster. Neither was it hallucination. I was as wideawake as I am now – ”

“We know the rest, Uncle Gif,” and Braye laughingly interrupted the recital. “Stalking ghost, hollow groans, and – were there clanking chains?”

“There were not, but in its shrouded hand the spectre held a glass – ”

“Of prussic acid, of which you smelt the strong odour! Yes, I know, – but it won’t go down, old chap – ”

“The prussic acid won’t?” and Landon chuckled.

“Nor the tale either,” said the Professor. “It’s too true. The shawled woman filled the specifications too accurately to seem convincing.”

“You’re a nice crowd,” grumbled Mr. Bruce. “Come up here for experiences and then hoot at the first real thing that happens.”

“All your own fault,” retorted Norma. “If you hadn’t advertised your propensity for fooling us, your word would have carried weight.”

“All right, let somebody else sleep in that room, then. But not Miss Carnforth. Let one of the men try it.”

“Thank you, none for me,” said Braye. “I detest shawled women waking me up at four o’clock, to take my poison!”

“I’ll beg off, too,” said Tracy. “I wake at four every morning anyway, with those aspen boughs shivering against my windows. I’d trim them off, but that doesn’t seem like playing the game.”

“Wynne shan’t sleep there, and that settles *that*,” and Milly’s grasp on her husband’s coat sleeve was evidently sufficiently detaining.

“That leaves only me, of the men,” asserted the Professor. “I’m quite willing to sleep in that room. Indeed, I want to. I’ve only been waiting till I felt sure of the house, the servants and – excuse me, the members of our own party! Now, I’ve discovered that the servants’ quarters can be securely locked off, so that they cannot get in this part of the house; I’ve found that the outside doors and the windows can be fastened against all possibility of outside intrusion; and, I shall stipulate that our party shall so congregate in a few rooms, that no one can – ahem, – haunt my slumbers without some one else knowing it. I’ll ask you three young ladies to sleep in one room and allow me to lock you in. Or two adjoining rooms, to which I may hold all keys. Mr. Tracy, Mr. Bruce and Mr. Braye, I shall arrange similarly, while the Landons must also consent to be imprisoned by me. This is the only way I can make a fair test. Will you all agree?”

“Splendid!” cried Eve, “of course we will. But, Professor, let me try it first. If you should have a weird experience, it might scare me off, but now I am brave enough. Oh, please, do that! Let me lock you all in your rooms, and let me sleep in the Room with the Tassels to-night! Oh, please say yes, all of you! *I must*, I must try it!” The girl looked like a seeress, as, with glittering eyes and flushed cheeks she plead her cause.

“Why, of course, if you want to, Miss Carnforth,” said the Professor, looking at her admiringly. “I’ll be glad to have the benefit of your experience before testing myself. And there is positively no danger. As I’ve said, the locks, bolts, and bars are absolutely safe against outside intrusion, or visits from the servants. Though we know *they* are not to be suspected. And as you are not afraid of the supernatural, I can see no argument against your plan.”

“Suppose I go with you,” suggested Norma, her large blue eyes questioning Eve Carnforth’s excited face.

“No, Norma, not this time. I prefer to be alone. I’ll lock you and Vernie in your room; I’ll lock Milly and Wynne in their room; I’ll lock you four men in two rooms, and then, I’ll know – I’ll *know*

that whatever I see or hear is not a fraud or trick of *anybody*. And I think you can trust me to tell you the truth in the morning.”

“If there’s anything to tell,” supplemented Braye. “I think, Eve, as to ghosts, you’re cutting off your source of supply.”

“Then we’ll merely prove nothing. But I’m determined to try.”

Again Vernie begged to be allowed to share Eve’s experiences, but neither Mr. Bruce, nor Eve herself would consider the child’s request.

“Every one of us,” the Professor said, musingly, “has told of hearing mysterious sounds and of seeing mysterious shadows, but, – except for Bruce’s graphic details! – all our observations have been vague and uncertain. They may well have been merely imagination. But Miss Carnforth is not imaginative, I mean, not so, to the exclusion of a fair judgment of what her senses experience. Therefore I shall feel, if she sees nothing to-night, that I shall see nothing when I sleep in that room to-morrow night.”

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