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## ASHLEIGH MANOR,

BY ELLEN TAVASOUR NOEL.

As soon as I retired to my room I sat down to write a letter which I wished to post in the morning. I had been writing for about half an hour when in the dead silence that pervaded the house I distinctly heard out in the corridor a sudden awful cry of agony. I dropped my pen and started from my seat intending to rush out and see what could be the matter, but as I turned round towards the door which was behind me and which I am positive I closed when I entered the chamber, it was to my astonishment wide open. I heard in the passage the sound of light flying footsteps coming towards my door. Will you believe me my friends when I tell you that the figure of a lady came quickly into the room and stopped beside the toilet table. She wore an amber-coloured silk made in the fashion of the last century and lace and jewels adorned her stately form; the face was young and handsome, but oh! it was a wild fearful kind of beauty which made my blood freeze as I gazed upon her. She raised before her eyes a small jewelled dagger darkly stained with blood, a low awful hollow laugh came from the pale lips and then seizing a curious antique-looking silver goblet from the table, which I had never seen there, she drained its contents and immediately afterwards sank as it were noiselessly through the floor. Quicker than I can relate it this scene passed before my terrified gaze and in horror I hurried from the chamber.

"Good God!" exclaimed Lord Anchester as he helped himself to a glass of wine which stood on the table, "What was it, Glynn?"

"No creature of this earth of that I am convinced," he replied seriously. "Once before I saw her face. It is in an old picture in the portrait gallery." I looked towards Damer and his eyes met mine significantly.

"I mean that one, Damer," Squire Glynn continued turning to him, "which startled you so. Was it because you had also seen her?"

"It was. I have beheld the figure you speak of, and mentioned the circumstance to Jernam."

"Bless my soul, but this is a frightful old place!" the Squire exclaimed. "What was it that aroused you?" he asked. "Did you hear that awful cry?"

We told him we had. Lord Anchester and Sir Guy said it had awakened them, and, like myself, they had heard hurried footsteps coming up the stairs, and the sound as if several persons were running to and fro in the corridor.

"Then it is really a fact that this old Manor House is haunted," said Sir Guy gravely, as he leant back in his seat and gazed thoughtfully around the room. "I would not credit the story I heard of its being so. It seemed too absurd to believe in the existence of ghosts, but after the events of to-night, which have so shaken the nerves of us five strong men, who know not what fear is—unless indeed," he added, "it comes to us in the shape of the supernatural. I must confess I cannot help believing that this ancient place is haunted by beings from the other world."

"Then you have heard some ghost story connected with it," I remarked.

"Yes, the late owner of Ashleigh did not live here on that account. For many years the house was left to the care of a few servants, who occupy the east wing, which is almost separate from the main building. As they have lived here for a long time I will question them in the morning and see what they have to say about the old dwelling."

It was with feelings of the greatest relief and satisfaction that we saw the morning light, for with the daylight came a feeling of security, and once more we retired to our apartments to try and snatch a few hours' sleep.

The next morning while at breakfast Sir Guy asked one of the servants whether they had been disturbed by any noise during the night.

"No, Sir Guy," the man answered, "we heard nothing in our part of the house." A strange expression came into his face. "What was it disturbed you, sir?" he curiously inquired.

"I don't know; I can't make out what the singular noise we heard could be," our host replied.

"Oh! Sir Guy, there are strange sights and sounds heard in this old building," said the servant mysteriously.

"What do you mean, Harris?" asked Sir Guy.

"You, sir, and these gentlemen perhaps," and he glanced around the table, "won't believe me, but it is true, Sir Guy, that this old Manor House is haunted."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Lord Anchester, dropping his knife and fork as he leant back in his chair and gazed inquiringly at the old servant.

"Yes, gentlemen," Harris replied seriously, "there is a beautiful lady so proud-looking and dressed so grand and queer that walks in the corridor up-stairs and haunts the blue chamber which you have, sir," and he looked towards Squire Glynn, "and there is the awful shriek that ever you heard, sounds

sometimes in the dead of night through this part of the dwelling. I never saw the picture lady as she is called, because there is an old picture just like her in the picture gallery, but the housekeeper has, and the late Lord Ashleigh's father saw her too one night in the blue chamber. He never slept another night in the house, and on his death-bed he made his son promise not to occupy Ashleigh. And my wife's grandmother, who was lady's maid here many years ago, heard the bride's shriek, and saw her standing at the top of the staircase with the blood flowing from her bosom down her white dress."

"What bride?" inquired Sir Guy Beverly. "Is there any story connected with the ghostly visitants in the Ashleigh family?"

"Yes, Sir Guy, and a dreadful one it is too! I have heard my wife's grandmother tell it many a time, and she heard it from her mistress, who said it was an old legend in the Ashleigh family."

"What is it?" Sir Guy demanded. "Tell it to us, Harris."

"Well, sir, you see ever so long ago there lived here a Lord Edgar Ashleigh with his mother and cousin, Lady Millicent. She was a handsome lady, as you can see by her picture, which hangs in the gallery, but dreadfully passionate and haughty. She loved Lord Edgar, but he did not return her love, neither did his mother wish him to marry his cousin, for there was insanity in her family, and she had already exhibited slight traces of it. Lord Edgar went to travel on the Continent, and after being absent some weeks brought home from Italy a lovely young bride to Ashleigh Manor. The night after their arrival, as young Lady Ashleigh was retiring to her apartment she was met at the head of the staircase by Lady Millicent, who had been watching for her, and stabbed to the heart. She gave one piercing cry of agony which rang through the house, bringing her husband and the other inmates in terror to the spot. They found her lying lifeless in the corridor. Lady Millicent after, in a sudden fit of insanity, committing the dreadful deed, went quickly back to her room, the blue chamber, where, with the bloody dagger still clenched in her hand, she was found quite dead, having taken some deadly poison that caused instant death."

It was with intense interest that we listened to his history. The mysterious events of the preceding night were thus accounted for, and our sceptical doubts of supernatural things greatly shaken. We were obliged to acknowledge that it was possible such things could be.

A few hours after we looked our last on the ivied walls of the old grey Manor House, where in the silent hours of the night the spirits of the unhappy maniac and murdered bride still visit the scene of the dreadful tragedy which took place so long ago within its ancient walls.

THE END.

## A SPIRITUAL SUBPENA.

SOME dozen years ago, I passed a couple of early summer months in Devonshire, fishing; changing one picturesque scene of sport for another, always disbelieving that I should find so fair a place as that last quitted, and always having pleasantly to acknowledge myself wrong. There is indeed an almost inexhaustible treasure of delicious nooks in that fertile county, which comprehends every element of landscape beauty—coast and inland, hill and valley, moor and woodland—and excels in nothing more than its curved rivers. What cliff-like and full-foliated banks about their sources, and what rich meadows sprinkled with unrivalled king, as they broaden towards the sea! At the close of my tour, I was lodging in a farmhouse near a branch of the Exe, rather regretful at the thought of so soon having to shoulder my knapsack and return to native Dorset, near a certain provincial town of which county, and in a neighbourhood without a tree within sight, or a stream within sound, it was my lot to dwell. We had lately thrown out a bow-window to the drawing-room there, but why, I cannot tell, for there was certainly nothing to see from it. What a difference between such a spot and my then abode, from the windows of which a score of miles of undulating and varied landscape could be discerned, with the old cathedral towers of the capital city standing grandly up against the southern sky!

It is not true that people who live in picturesque places do not appreciate them, but only that they require to be made to understand their good fortune. Michael Courtenay, the goodman of the farm, and like all of his class, a thorough stay-at-home, could not discover what I found in that look-out from his house to make such a fuss about; but his wife, who had once paid a visit to her son when in business at Birmingham, knew perfectly well. Concerning which son Robert, by the by, there was a sad tale. He was the only child of the good pair, and one who should have been there at Cowles, the right hand of his father, and the comfort of his loving mother; but the young man had decided otherwise. He had never taken to farming, but had grieved his father hugely by a hankering after mechanical

studies, which the old agriculturist associated almost with the black art itself. Thinking himself to have a gift for the practical sciences, Robert had got apprenticed in Birmingham, and for some time bade fair to acquit himself well. But it had not been farming to which he was in reality averse, so much as to restraint of any kind; and finding, after a little, that he could not be his own master at the lathe, any more than at the plough, he forsook his second calling likewise. This had justly angered Michael, and drawn from him, on the return of the lad, certain expressions which his young spirit undutifully resented. There was a violent scene in that peaceful homestead of Cowles one day; and the next morning, when the house was astir, it was found that Robert had gone away in the night-time, nor had he since either returned home or written of his whereabouts.

It was a year ago and more by this time, during which period Mrs. Courtenay had grown older than in the half-dozen years before, while the old man himself, said the farm-people, had altered to the full as much as she, although, for his part, he never owned to it. It was not he who told me of the matter, but the gudewife, who was fond of me—as my vanity was obliged to confess—mainly because I was of the age of her lost lad, and so reminded her of him. I slept in the very room which had formerly been her Robert's, and a very comfortable little room it was.

Here it was, very early one May morning, before even the earliest risers of the farm were up, that I was awakened by these three words, pronounced close by me in the distinctest tones: "The ferryman waits."

So perfectly conscious was I of having been really addressed, that I sat up in my bed at once, and replied: "Well, and what is that to me?" before the absurdity of the intimation had time to strike me. The snow-white curtains of the little bed were completely undrawn, so that no person could have been hidden behind them. Although it was not broad daylight, every object was clearly discernible, and through the half-opened window came the cool, delicious summer air with quickening fragrance. I heard the dog rattle his chain in the yard as he came out of his kennel and shook himself, and then returned to it lazily, as though it was not time to be up yet. A cock crew, but very unsatisfactorily, leaving off in the middle of his performance, as though he had been mistaken in the hour. My watch, a more reliable chronicler, informed me that it wanted a quarter of four o'clock. I was not accustomed to be awakened at such a time as that, and turned myself somewhat indignantly on the pillow, regretful that I had eaten clotted cream for supper the preceding evening. I lay perfectly still, with my eyes shut, endeavouring, since I could not get to sleep again, to account for the peculiar nature of my late nightmare, as I had made up my mind to consider it, until the cuckoo clock on the oaken stair outside struck four. The last note of the mechanical bird had scarcely died away, when again, close to my pillow, I heard uttered, not only with distinctness, but with a most unmistakable earnestness, the same piece of information which had once so startled me already: "The ferryman waits."

Then I got up and looked under the little bed, and behind it; into the small cupboard where my one change of boots were kept and where there was scarcely room for anything else. I sounded the wall nearest my bed's head, and found it solid enough; it was also an outside wall; nor from any of the more remote ones could so distinct a summons have come. Then I pushed the window-casement fully back, and thrust my head and bare neck into the morning air. If I was still asleep, I was determined to wake myself, and then, if I should hear the mysterious voice again, I was determined to obey it. I was not alarmed, nor even disturbed in my mind, although greatly interested. The circumstances of my position precluded any supernatural terror. The animals in the farmyard were lying in the tumbled straw close by, and near enough to be startled at a shout of mine; some pigeons were already circling round the dovecote, or pacing, sentinel-like, the little platforms before their domiciles; and the sound of the lasher, by whose circling eddies I had so often watched for trout, came cheerily and with inviting tone across the dewy meadows. The whole landscape seemed instinct with newborn life, and to have thoroughly shaken off the solemnity of dreary night. Its surpassing beauty and freshness so entirely took possession of me indeed, that in its contemplation I absolutely forgot the inexplicable occurrence which had brought me to the window. I was wrapped in the endeavour to make out whether those tapering lines, supporting, as it appeared, a mass of southern cloud, were indeed the pinnacles of the cathedral, when close by my ear, close by, as though the speaker had his face at the casement likewise, the words were a third time uttered: "The ferryman waits."

There was a deeper seriousness in its tone on this occasion, an appeal which seemed to have a touch of pathos as well as gloom; but it was the same voice, and one which I shall never forget. I did not hesitate another moment, but dressed myself as quickly as I could, and descending the stairs, took down the vast oaken door-bar, and let myself out, as I had

been wont to do when I went betimes a-fishing. Then I strode southward along the foot-path leading through the fields to where the river-ferry was, some three miles off, now doubting, now believing, that the ferryman *did* wait there at such an unusually early hour, and for me. I made such good use of my legs, that it was not five o'clock when I reached the last meadow that lay between me and the stream; it was higher ground than its neighbour land, and every step I took I was looking eagerly to come in sight of the ferry-house, which was on the opposite bank, and by no means within easy hailing distance. At last, I did so, and observed, to my astonishment, that the boat was not at its usual moorings. It must needs, therefore, have been already brought over upon my own side. A few steps further brought me into view of it, with the ferryman standing up in the stern leaning on his punt-pole, and looking intently in my direction. He gave a great 'hollo' when he recognized me, and I returned it, for we were old acquaintances.

"Well, Master Philip," cried he, as I drew nearer, "you are not here so very much betimes, after all; I have been waiting for you nigh upon half an hour."

"Waiting for me?" echoed I. "I don't know how that can be, since nobody knew that I was coming; and indeed I didn't know myself, till—". And there I stopped myself upon the very verge of confessing myself to have been fooled by a voice. Perhaps the ferryman himself may be concerned in the trick, thought I, and is now about to charge me roundly for being taken across out of hours.

"Well, sir," returned the Genius of the River, turning his peakless cap hind before, which was his fashion when puzzled, and certainly a much more polite one than that common to his brethren of the land, of scratching their heads—"all I can say is, as I was roused at half-past three or so by a friend of yours, saying as though you would be wanting me in a little on the north bank."

"What friend was that?" inquired I.

"Nay, sir, for that matter, I can't say, since I didn't see him, but I *heard* him well enough at all events, and as plain as I now hear you. I was asleep when he first called me from outside yonder, and could scarcely make any sense of it; but the second time I was wide awake; and the third time, as I was undoing the window, there could be no mistake about—"Be ready for Philip Reaton on the north bank," he said.

"And how was it you missed seeing my friend?" inquired I, as carelessly as I could.

"He was in such a hurry to be gone, I reckon, that as soon as he heard my window open, and knew he had roused me, he set off. His voice came round the east corner of the cottage, as though he went Exeter way. I wouldn't have got up at such a time, and at such a summons, for many other folks but you, I do assure you, Master Philip."

"Thank you," said I, though by no means quite convinced; "you're a good fellow, and here's five shillings for you. And now, put me across, and show me the nearest way by which I can get to the city."

Now if, by some inscrutable means, the ferryman—who had become the leading figure in my mind because of the mysterious warning—or any accomplice of his had played me a trick, and trumped up a story for my further bewilderment, they had not, I flattered myself, very much cause for boasting. I had evinced but slight curiosity about the unknown gentleman who had heralded my approach daylight, and I had given them to understand that I had a real object in my early rising—that of reaching the capital city, at least ten miles away. But my own brain was, for all that, a prey to the most conflicting suggestions, not one of which was of final service towards an explanation of the events of the morning.

There was I, at a little after 5 a.m., with a walk before me of ten, and a walk behind me of three good Devon miles, breakfastless, without the least desire to reach the place I was bound for—and all because of a couple of *vox-et-præterea-nihil* voices without a body between them. I consumed the way in mentally reviewing all the circumstances of the case again and again, and by no means in a credulous spirit; but when I at length arrived at the city upon the hill, I was as far from the solution of the matter as when I started. That the ferryman himself, a simple countryman, should be concerned in any practical joke upon me, a mere fly-fishing acquaintance of a couple of weeks' standing; or that such persons as the Courtenays should have permitted the playing of it upon a guest at Cowles, was only less astounding than the perfection of the trick itself—if trick it really was. But neither my feelings of anger, when I looked on the matter in that light, nor those of mystery, when I took the more supernatural view of it, in anywise interfered with the gradual growth of appetite; and when I turned into a private room of the *Bishop's Head* in the High Street, the leading idea in my mind, after all my cogitations, was Breakfast. If seven-and-forty mysterious voices had informed me that the ferryman was waiting *then*, I should have responded: "Then let him wait—at all events; while I eat a breakfast and sundries."

Although Exeter is as picturesque and