

A MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

(FOUNDED ON FACT.)

It was Christmas Eve, the wintry wind was moaning through the tree tops, and everything as far as the eye could see was white with snow; it was a veritable old-fashioned winter evening.

The air was chilling in the extreme to one who had not taken the precaution to wrap himself up against the cold, but none the less brightly for this burned the log fire in the open fire-place in an old stone mansion which, ivy-grown and gray with years, had for half a century bid defiance to the ravages of time.

This house, which had been for twenty years or more the abode of the family Montague, was reputed to be haunted, and on certain nights in the year and under certain conditions of weather it was averred that strange sights were to be seen and awful sounds heard. Whatever truth there may have been in these sayings the old house had undoubtedly many peculiar features which may have given rise to them, for in a long corridor, separated from the remainder of the building by a massive oaken door, which bore enough bolts and bars for a prison, sunk deep in the well-worn floor was an iron ring which lifted a large trap-door disclosing a square vault some twelve feet in depth with stone walls. About this place centred many of the stories. The author remembers going one evening accompanied by a dog and lifting up the trap; the dog looked in, gave vent to a long and mournful howl and quickly retreated.

But to return to the fire-place, at which were seated the mistress of the house, Mrs. Montague, and her daughter Eva. The fire was burning low upon the hearth, and the hands of the clock pointed to 10.30, when with noiseless step entered the servant, with terror depicted on her face. "Oh, Miss Eva," she said, "as I was working in the kitchen near the window, I heard ghost voices talking to one another, and it must be the ones as everyone says comes from that deep hole under the trap-door in the corridor." Eva Montague, herself in no wise given to superstition, endeavored to allay the fears of the terrified girl, and on her earnest entreaty entered the kitchen in company with her and proceeded to the corner she had referred to. Here to her extreme amaze-

ment she heard such fragments of sentences as these in rough men's voices: "Quiet there . . . softly . . . hand it to me now . . . that ought to fix 'em;" followed by a fiendish sort of laugh. Struck dumb with terror, the two looked at one another, with faces white as a sheet.

For some time not a word was spoken. Then slowly and fearfully they began to look around for the cause of the sounds. They explored every corner of the room, but in that corner only by the window which led into the corridor could they hear them plainly. Then into the corridor they went, and shuddering lifted the heavy trap-door. Faintly they heard the voices, and—a crash—with a scream from the servant, the ponderous trap fell thundering shut, awakening the echoes through the old house—but no, it was but an illusion of overstrained nerves, for she thought she had heard chains rattling. Still—was it an illusion? Faintly, very faintly as yet, they began to hear a sound, as of heavy chains being dragged over the floor. Suddenly an idea seemed to strike Eva, and her face resumed its natural colour. "Come with me down into the cellar," said she, "and we will soon find the cause of all this." Trembling in every limb the terrified servant followed her through the corridor, and down the steps which led to the cellar. Here the sounds became louder, louder still as they neared the corner where the water pipes passed through the room, and now mingled with the voices they began to hear the *tap, tap, tap*, three times repeated, which is so often associated with ghostly visitations. Then Eva stepped forward and placed her ear near to the pipe; still plainer grew the sounds. Here then at last was the solution of the mystery. Owing to the intense cold the water-pipes had frozen and acted as a sort of telephone to convey the voices of some persons in a cellar about half a block away trying to thaw out the pipes; the tap was that of a hammer on the pipes, and the "Hand it to me now," turned out to refer to a kettle of boiling water.

Reassured, the two remounted the stairs, and betook themselves to their apartments. But the servant however still retained half a belief that the voices were ghostly, and took the earliest opportunity of leaving, declaring that she would not stay in a house that was haunted one day more than she could help. C. D. CRIGHTON.