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## MYSTERY OF THE THATCHED HOUSE.

(From the Month)

It was a clean, bright, wholesome, thoroughly lovable house. The first time I saw it, I fell in love with it, and wanted to live in it at once. — It fascinated me. When I crossed its threshold, I felt as if I had opened a book whose perusal promised enchantment. I felt a passionate longing to have been born here, to have been expected by the brown old watchful walls for years before it had been my turn to exist in the world. I felt despoiled of my rights; because there was here a hoard of wealth which I might not touch, placed just beyond the reach of my hand. I was tantalized; because the secrets of a sweetly odoriferous past hung about the shady corners, and the sunny window-frames, and the grotesque hearth-places; and their breath was no more to me than the scent of dried rose leaves.

It was my fault that we bought the Thatched House. We wanted a country home; and, hearing that this was for sale, we drove many miles one showery April morning to view the place, and judge if it might suit our need. Aunt Featherstone objected to it from the first, and often boasted of her own sagacity in doing so, after the Thatched House had proved itself an incubus—a dreadful Old Man of the Mountains, not to be shaken from our necks. I once was bold enough to tell her that temper, and not sagacity, was the cause of her dislike that April morning. We drove in an open phaeton, and Aunt Featherstone got some drops of rain on her new silk dress. Consequently she was out of humor with everything, and vehemently pronounced her veto upon the purchase of the Thatched House.

I was a spoiled girl, however; and I thought it hard that I might not have my own way in this matter as in everything else. As we drove along a lonely road, across a wild, open country, I had worshipped the broken, gold edged rain clouds, and the hills, with the waving lines of light and their soft trailing shadows. I had caught the shower in my face and laughed; and dried my limp curls with my pocket handkerchief. I was disposed to love everything I saw, and clapped my hands when we stopped before the sad looking old gates, with their mossy brick pillars, and their iron arms folded across, as if mournfully forbidding inquiry into some long hushed up and forgotten mystery. When we swept along the silent avenue my heart leaped up in silent greeting to the grand old trees that rose towering freshly at every curve, spreading their masses of green foliage right and left, and flinging showers of diamond drops to the ground whenever the breeze lifted the tresses of a drowsy bough, or a bird poised its slender weight upon a twig, and then shot off sudden into the blue.

Aunt Featherstone exclaimed against the house the very moment we came in sight of it. It was not the sort of thing we wanted at all, she said. It had not got a modern porch, and it was all nooks and angles on the outside. The lower windows were too long and narrow, and the upper ones too small, and pointing up above the eaves in that old-fashioned, inconvenient manner. To crown its absurdities the roof was thatched. No, no, Aunt Featherstone said, it was necessary for such old houses to exist for the sake of pictures and romances; but as for people of common sense going to live in them, that was out of the question.

I left her still outside with her eye-glass levelled at the chimneys, and darted into the house to explore. An old woman preceded me with a jingling bunch of keys, unlocking all the doors, throwing open the shutters, and letting the long levels of sunshine fall over the uncarpeted floors. It was all delicious, I thought; the long dining-room, with its tall windows opening like doors upon the broad gravel; the circular drawing-room with its stained-glass roofing, the double flights of winding stairs, the roomy passages, the numerous chambers of all shapes and sizes opening one out of another, and chasing each other from end to end of the house; and, above all, the charming old rustic balcony, running round the waist of the building like belt, and carrying one, almost quick as a bird could fly, from one of those dear old pointed windows under the eaves down amongst the flower-beds below.

I said to myself in my own wilful way, 'This Thatched House must be my home!' and then I sat about coaxing Aunt Featherstone into my way of thinking. It was not at all against her will that she completed the purchase at last. — Afterwards, however, she liked to think it was so.

In May it was all settled. The house was filled with painters and paper-hangers, and all through the long summer months they kept on making a mess within the walls, and forbidding us to enter and enjoy the place in the full glorious luxuriance of its summer beauty. At last on driving there one bright evening, I found to

my joy that the workmen had decamped, leaving the Thatched House clean, and fresh, and gay ready for the reception of us, and our goods and chattels. I sprang in through one of the open dining-room windows, and began waltzing round the floor from sheer delight. Pausing at last for breath, I saw that the old woman who took care of the place, she who had, on my first visit, opened the shutters for me, and jingled her keys, had entered the room while I danced, and was standing watching me from the doorway with a queer expression on her wrinkled face.

'Ah, ha! Nelly,' I cried triumphantly, 'what do you think of the old house now?'

Nelly shook her gray head, and shot me a worried look out of her small black eyes. Then she folded her arms slowly, and gazed all round the room musingly, while she said:—

'Ay, Miss Lucy! wealth can do a deal, but there's things it can't do. All that the hand of man can do to make this place wholesome to live in, has been done. Dance and sing now, pretty lady—now, while you have the courage. The day'll come when you'd as soon think of sleeping all night on a tombstone as of standing on this floor alone after sunset.'

'Good gracious, Nelly!' I cried, 'what do you mean? Is it possible that there is anything—have you heard or seen—'

'I have heard and seen plenty,' was Nelly's curt reply.

Just then a van arriving with the first instalment of our household goods, the old woman vanished; and not another word could I wring that evening from her puckered lips. Her words haunted me, and I with my mirth considerably sobered; and dreamed all night of wandering up and down that long dining-room in the dark, and seeing dimly horrible faces grinning at me from the walls. This was only the first shadow of the trouble that came upon us in the Thatched House.

'Come by degrees in nods and whispers, and stories told in lowered tones by the fire at night. The servants got possession of a rumor, and the rumor reached me. I stammered in silence, and contrived for the first few months to keep it a jealous secret from my unsuspecting aunt. For the house was ours, and Aunt Featherstone was timorous; and the rumor, very horrible, was this—The Thatched House was haunted.'

Haunted, it was said, by a footstep, which, every night, at a certain hour, went down the principal corridor, distinctly audible as it passed the doors, descended the staircase, traversed the hall, and ceased suddenly at the dining-room door. It was a heavy, unshod foot, and walked rather slowly. All the servants could describe it minutely, though none could avow that they positively heard it. New editions of this story were constantly coming, and found immediate circulation. To each of these was added some fresh harrowing sequel, illustrative of the manners and customs of a certain shadowy inhabitant, who was said to have occupied the Thatched House all through the dark days of its past emptiness and desolation, and who resented fiercely the unwelcome advent of us flesh-and-blood intruders. The tradition of this lonely shadow was as follows:—The builder and first owner of the Thatched House was an elderly man, wealthy, wicked and feared. He had married a gentle wife, whose heart had been broken before she consented to give him her hand. — He was cruel to her, using her harshly, and leaving her solitary in the lonely house for long winter months together, till she went mad with brooding over her sorrows, and died a maniac. Goaded with remorse, he had shut up the house and fled the country. Since then different people had fancied the beautiful, romantic old dwelling, and made an attempt to live in it; but they said that the sorrowful lady would not yield up her right to any new comer. It had been her habit, when alive, to steal down stairs at night, when she could not sleep for weeping, and to walk up and down the dining room, wringing her hands, till the morning dawned; and now, though her coffin was nailed, and her grave green, and though her tears ought to have long since blown from her eyes like rain on the wind, still the unhappy spirit would not quit the scene of her former wretchedness, but paced the passage, and trod the stairs, and traversed the hall night after night, as of old. At the dining-room door the step was said to pause; and up and down the dreary chamber a wailing ghost was believed to flit, wringing her hands, till the morning dawned.

It was not till the summer had departed that I learned this story. As long as the sun shone, and the roses bloomed; and the nightingales sang about the windows till midnight, I tried hard to shut my ears to the memory of old Nelly's hint, and took good care not to mention it to my aunt. If the servants looked mysterious, I would not see them; if they whispered together, it was nothing to me. There was so short a time for the stars to shine between the slow darkening of the blue sky at night and the early quickening of flowers

and birds and rosy beams at dawn, that there was literally no space for the accommodation of ghosts. So long as the summer continued the Thatched House was a dwelling of sunshine and sweet odors, and bright fancies for me. It was different, however, when a wintry sky closed in around us, when solitary leaves dangled upon shivering boughs, and when the winds began to shudder at the windows all through the long dark nights. Then I took fear to my heart, and wished that I had never seen the Thatched House.

Then it was that my ears became gradually open to the dreadful murmurs that were rife in the house; then it was that I learned the story of the weeping lady, and of her footstep on the stairs. Of course I would not believe, though the thumping of my heart, if I chanced to cross a landing, even by twilight, belied the courage of which I boasted. I forbade the servants to mot at such folly as the existence of ghosts, and warned them at their peril not to let a whisper of the kind disturb my aunt. On the latter point I believe they did their best to obey me.

Aunt Featherstone was a dear old, cross, good-natured, crotchety kind-hearted lady, who was always needing to be coaxed. She considered herself an exceedingly strong minded person, whereas she was in reality one of the most nervous women I have ever known. I verily believe that, if she had known that story of the footstep, she would have made up her mind to bear it distinctly every night, and would have been found some morning stone-dead in her bed with fear. Therefore, as long as it was possible, I kept the dreadful secret from her ears. — This was, in reality, however, a much shorter space of time than I had imagined it to be.

About the middle of November Aunt Featherstone noticed that I was beginning to look very pale, to lose my appetite, and to start and tremble at the most commonplace sounds. The truth was that the long nights of terror which passed over my head, in my pretty sleeping room off the ghost's corridor, were wearing out my health and spirits, and threatening to throw me into a fever; and yet neither sight nor sound of the supernatural had ever disturbed my rest—none worth recording, that is; for of course, in my paroxysms of wakeful fear, I fancied a thousand horrible revelations. Night after night I lay in agony, with my ears extended for the sound of the footstep. Morning after morning I awakened, weary and jaded, after a short, unrefreshing sleep, and resolved that I would confess to my aunt, and implore her to fly from the place at once. But, when seated at the breakfast table, my heart invariably failed me. I accounted, by the mention of a headache, for my pale cheeks, and kept my secret.

Some weeks passed, and then I in my turn began to observe that Aunt Featherstone had grown exceedingly dull in spirits. 'Can any one have told her the secret of the Thatched House?' was the question I quickly asked myself. But the servants denied having broken their promise; and I had reason to think that there had been of late much less gossip on the subject than formerly. I was afraid to risk questioning the dear old lady, and so I could only hope and surmise. But I was dull, and the Thatched House was dreary. Things went on in this way for some time, and at last a dreadful night arrived. I had been for a long walk during the day; and had gone to bed rather earlier than usual, and fallen asleep quickly. For about two hours I slept, and then I was roused suddenly by a slight sound just like the creaking of a board, just outside my door. With the instinct of fear I started up and listened intently. A watery moon was shining into my room, revealing the pretty blue and white furniture, the pale statuettes, and the various little dainty ornaments with which I had been pleased to surround myself in this my chosen sanctuary. I sat up, shuddering, and listened. I pressed my hands tightly over my heart, to try and keep its throbbing from killing me; for distinctly, in the merciless stillness of the winter night, I heard the thread of a stealthy footstep on the passage outside my room. Along the corridor it crept, down the staircase it went, and was lost in the hall below.

I shall never forget the anguish of fear in which I passed the remainder of that wretched night. While covering into my pillow, I made up my mind to leave the Thatched House as soon as the morning broke, and never to enter it again. I had heard of people whose hair had grown gray in a single night, of grief or terror. When I glanced in the looking glass at dawn, I almost expected to see a white head upon my own shoulders.

During the next day, I, as usual, failed of courage to speak to my aunt. I desired one of the maids to sleep on the couch in my room, keeping this arrangement a secret. The following night I felt some little comfort from the presence of a second person near me; but the girl soon fell asleep. Lying awake in fearful expectation, I was visited by a repetition of the

previous night's horrors. I heard the footstep a second time.

I suffered secretly in this way for about a week. I had become so pale and nervous, that I was only like a shadow of my hands. I only prized the day inasmuch as it was a respite from the night; the appearance of twilight coming on at evening invariably threw me into an ague fit of shivering. I trembled at a shadow; I screamed at a sudden noise. My aunt groaned over me, and sent for the doctor. I said to him, 'Doctor, I am only a little moped. I have got a bright idea of curing myself. You must prescribe me a schoolfellow.'

Hereupon, Aunt Featherstone began to ride off her old hobby about the loneliness, the unhealthiness, and total objectionableness of the Thatched House, bewailing her own weakness in having allowed herself to be forced into buying it. She never mentioned the word 'haunted,' though I afterwards knew that at the very time, and for some weeks previously, she had been in full possession of the story of the nightly footstep. The doctor recommended me a complete change of scene; but, instead of taking advantage of this, I asked for a companion at the Thatched House.

The prescription I had begged for was written in the shape of a note to Ada Rivers imploring her to come to me at once, 'Do come now,' I wrote; 'I have a mystery for you to explore. I will tell you about it when we meet.' Having said so much, I knew that I should not be disappointed.

Ada Rivers was a tall, robust girl, with the whitest teeth, the purest complexion, and the clearest laugh I have ever met with in the world. To be near her made one feel healthier both in body and mind. She was one of those lively, fearless people, who love to meet a morbid horror face to face, and put it to rout. When I wrote to her, 'Do come, for I am sick.' I was pretty sure she would obey the summons; but when I added, 'I have a mystery for you to explore,' I was convinced of her compliance beyond the possibility of a doubt.

It wanted just one fortnight of Christmas Day when Ada arrived at the Thatched House. For some little time beforehand, I had busied myself so pleasantly in making preparations, that I had almost forgotten the weeping lady, and had not heard the footstep for two nights. And, when, on the evening of her arrival, Ada stepped into the haunted dining room, in her trim, flowing robe of crimson cashmere, with her dark hair bound closely round her comely head, and her bright eyes clear with that frank, unwavering light of theirs, I felt as if her wholesome presence had banished dread at once, and that ghosts could surely never harbor in the same house with her free step and genial laugh.

'What is the matter with you?' said Ada, putting her hands on my shoulders, and, looking in my face. 'You look like a changeling, you little white thing! When shall I get leave to explore your mystery?'

'To-night,' I whispered, and, looking round me quickly, shuddered. We were standing on the hearth before the blazing fire, on the very spot where that awful footstep would pass and re-pass through the long, dark, unshapely hours after our lights had been extinguished, and our heads laid upon our pillows.

Ada laughed at me and called me a little goose; but I could see that she was wild with curiosity, and eager for bedtime to arrive. I had arranged that we should both occupy my room, in order that, if there was anything to be heard, Ada might hear it. 'And now what is all this that I have to learn?' said she, after our door had been fastened for the night, and we sat looking at one another with our dressing-gowns upon our shoulders.

As I had expected, a long ringing laugh greeted the recital of my doleful tale. 'My dear Lucy!' cried Ada, 'my poor sick little moped Lucy, you surely don't mean to say that you believe in such vulgar things as ghosts?'

'But I cannot help it,' I said. 'I have heard the footstep no less than seven times, and the proof of it is that I am ill. If you were to sleep alone in this room every night for a month, you would get sick, too.'

'Not a bit of it!' said Ada, stoutly; and she sprang up and walked about the chamber. 'To think of getting discontented with this pretty room, this exquisite little nest! No, I engage to sleep here every night for a month—alone, if you please—and, at the end of that time, I shall not only be still in perfect health, my unromantic self, but I promise to have cured you, you little, absurd, imaginative thing! And now let us go to bed without another word on the subject.—'Talking it over,' in cases of this kind, always does a vast amount of mischief.'

Ada always meant what she said. In half an hour we were both in bed, without a further word being spoken on the matter. So strengthened and reassured was I by her strong, happy presence, that, wearied out by the excitement of

the day, I was quickly fast asleep. It was early next morning when I awakened again, and the red, frosty sun was rising above the trees.—When I opened my eyes, the first object that met me was Ada, sitting in the window, her forehead against the pane, and her hands locked in her lap. She was very pale, and her brows were knit in perplexed thought. I had never seen her look so strangely before.

A swift thought struck me. I started up, and cried, 'O Ada! forgive me for going to sleep so soon. I know you have heard it.'

She unknit her brows, rose from her seat, and came and sat down on the bed beside me. 'I cannot deny it,' she said gravely; 'I have heard it. Now tell me, Lucy, does your aunt know anything of all this?'

'I am not sure,' I said; 'I cannot be, because I am afraid to ask her. I rather think that she has heard some of the stories, and is anxiously trying to hide them from me, little thinking of what I have suffered here. She has been very dull lately, and repines constantly about the purchase of the house.'

'Well,' said Ada, 'we must tell her nothing till we have sifted this matter to the bottom.'

'Why, what are you going to do?' I asked, beginning to tremble.

'Nothing very dreadful, little coward!' she said, laughing; 'only to follow the ghost, if it passes our door to-night; I want to see what stuff it is made of. If it be a genuine spirit, it is time the Thatched House were vacated for its more complete accommodation. If it be flesh and blood, it is time the trick were found out.'

I gazed at Ada with feelings of mingled reverence and admiration. It was in vain that I tried to dissuade her from her wild purpose.—She bade me hold my tongue, get up and dress, and think no more about ghosts till bed time. I tried to be obedient; and all that day we kept strict silence on the dreadful subject, while our tongues and hands, and (seemingly), our heads were kept busily occupied in helping to carry out Aunt Featherstone's thousand and one pleasant arrangements for the coming Christmas festivities.

During the morning, it happened that I often caught Ada with her eyes fixed keenly on Aunt Featherstone's face, especially when once or twice the dear old lady sighed profoundly, and the shadow of an unaccountable cloud settled down upon her troubled brows. Ada pondered deeply in the intervals of our conversation, though her merry comment and apt suggestion were always ready as usual when occasion seemed to call for them. I noticed, also, that she made excuses to explore rooms and passages, and found means to observe and exchange words with the servants. Ada's bright eyes were unusually wide open that day. For me, I hung about her like a mute, and dreaded the coming of the night.

Bed time arrived too quickly; and when we were shut in together in our room, I implored Ada earnestly to give up the wild idea she had spoken of in the morning, and to lock fast the door, and let us try to go to sleep. Such praying, however, was useless. Ada had resolved upon a certain thing to do, and this being the case, Ada was the girl to do it.

We said our prayers, we set the door ajar we extinguished our light, and went to bed. An hour we lay awake, and heard nothing to alarm us. Another silent hour went past, and still the sleeping house was undisturbed. I had begun to hope that the night was going to pass by without accident, and had just commenced to doze a little and to wander into a confused dream, when a sudden squeezing of my hand which lay in Ada's, startled me quickly into consciousness.

I opened my eyes; Ada was sitting erect in the bed, with her face set forward, listening, and her eyes fastened on the door. Half smothered with fear, I raised myself upon my elbow and listened, too. Yes, O horror! there it was—the soft, heavy, unshod footstep going down the corridor outside the door. It paused at the bottom of the staircase, and began slowly descending to the bottom. 'Ada!' I whispered, with a gasp. Her hand was damp with fear, and my face was drenched in a cold dew. 'In God's name!' she sighed, with a long drawn breath; and then she crept softly from the bed threw on her dressing-gown, and went swiftly away out of the already open door.

What I suffered in the next few minutes I could never describe, if I spent the remainder of my life in endeavoring to do so. I remember an interval of stupid horror; while leaning on my elbow in the bed, I gazed with a fearful, fascinated stare at the half-open door beside me. Then, through the silence of the night, there came a cry.

It seemed to come struggling up through the flooring from the dining-room underneath. It sounded wild, suppressed, smothered, and was quickly hushed away into stillness again but