

THE PASSING OF THE CHRISTMAS GHOST

A Farewell to the Good Old Ghost Story

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The Christmas Thought of Yesterday



In the good old days — which means during that bright epoch when I myself was young — Christmas Time and Christmas gatherings and the Christmas numbers of the magazines were particularly associated with Ghost Stories.

Everybody knows that there are certain times of year especially adapted for the reading of certain kinds of tales. Love stories are for the summer time, to be read in a hammock swinging under the June leaves, or in the cushioned end of a canoe, moored beneath the overhanging branches of a willow tree. Sea stories belong with the roaring winds of the equinox. Detective stories flourish best in the murky evenings of November, when the fog lies thick upon the streets, and the autumn burglaries send a chill to the heart of the householder.

But for Christmas time with its roaring fires and its bright holly and its merry gatherings, the story of stories was always, till very recently, the Ghost Story.

No doubt there was a certain reasonableness in this. The love story, as compared with the wider love of Christmas time, shrinks to a poor selfish thing. "Why can't they," exclaimed the Christmas reader, filled with roast turkey and mince pie and too somnolent to follow the elaborate intrigues of the hero and heroine, "why can't they love everybody? Why doesn't he marry both of them, all three of them, any number of them?" With which he puts the book aside and falls to thinking of the Children's Party that is to come that evening and wishing that he knew of a good ghost story to tell beside the fire.

So, too, with the detective yarn. What have crime and robbery, pursuit and burglary to do with the soft atmosphere of Christmas? Why, bless my soul, a Christmas detective couldn't pursue a Christmas burglar a hundred yards. They'd both sit down puffing for breath and burst out laughing, each of them, at the jolly red face of the other flushed with Christmas cheer and the exercise of running in the snow. My own opinion is that even Mr. Sherlock Holmes used to fatten up a bit at Christmas time, lost his haggard appearance of over-intellectuality, swore off cocaine, gave up drawing deductions, presented a pair of bedroom slippers to his friend Watson, stupefied himself for two weeks with mince pie and plum pudding, and then "came to" somewhere about the first week in January and shuddered back again, as we all do, into his everyday life.

But with Ghost Stories it is—or it was till yesterday—a very different matter. The bright eyes of children gathered round the fire, glistened brighter still with the fearful fascination of the tales of haunted houses and mysterious apparitions, of ghosts that moaned at midnight, or that clanked their chains in hollow vaults and moonlit crypts. Even the grown-up people, who professed no belief in ghosts whatever, retired to bed by the light of a flickering candle and shuddered at the gruesome shadows that it threw into the dim corners of the room.

BUT most of all was the Ghost Story a prime favorite from the story-writer's point of view. It was so easy to construct. The shuddering reader came halfway to meet it. The dark night outside supplied the background. There was no local color needed—no character to delineate—nothing. One had but to begin with an ancient and gloomy manor house—by preference a Jacobean manor house, with strange little turrets and towers clustering in its roof—with a winding staircase somewhere inside, and panels in the walls concealed behind the portraits of departed ancestors.

Into such a house one had only to put, or to suggest, the ghost of Sir Everard Digby, or Sir Chomondeley Ponsonby, in fact of Sir Anybody whose name seems to carry with it the memories of the civil war of the

17th century, and to call up pictures of cavaliers with pointed beards and long rapiers, and Roundhead soldiers with steel caps and cropped hair. In such a manor

there was always — was there not? — one particular tower where Sir Everard Digby's ghost "walked" (that I think, is the phrase: these were, of course, the days before the motor) It was the loneliest of the towers with a circular, or no, an octagonal

room far up in the top of it, round which the wind moaned sadly of an winter night. Even in the broad light of day few visited it, and those who did climbed up the winding stairway, dark, dim, and dust-strewn, with something of a shudder, or with the bravado of a forced gayety.

Into the tower room one might, I say, in daylight penetrate: and gaze with a sort of awe at the quaint Jacobean furniture, unchanged and undisturbed (so ran the legends of the family) since one Christmas Eve of long ago when Sir Everard sat at the little oaken table, a pen in his hand, and the thought of murder in his heart. A long quill pen, it was, and with it Sir Everard was about to sign the parchment with the terms of surrender on it, handing over the manor house to his cousin and his victor, Ronald Digby, the Roundhead general—that grim stern man who stands beside the table on the other side, with eyes of steel fixed on Sir Everard's face. The portraits of both of them, now dim with age, are in the dining-hall below. And from them the ghostly forms of the two men rise before the mind's eye as one looks at the smooth oak table, and marks the strange dark stain that still shows, deep and guilty, after the lapse of two centuries—the stain of blood.

For it was here, was it not, that Sir Everard, forgetful of the honor of his house, struck the foul blow for which his ghost must walk two hundred years. The steel-gray eyes of the Roundhead were turned a moment, let us say, from Sir Everard's face. Perhaps there was a certain sobbing in the night wind outside, moaning over a Christmas-tide of strife and blood, that made the man turn towards the casement to stare out into the dark. And in that moment the poignard leaped from Sir Everard's belt and was buried in his cousin's heart. They carried the body, so the story ran, down the winding stair—Sir Everard with never a word, the men-servants as they bore it whispering together in horror, but faithful even in their fear. Somewhere below they buried it, under the flagstones of the vault beneath the tower.

And that was Christmas Eve of 1645. Since that day, so runs the legend, on every Christmas Eve at midnight you may see the light burning in the windows of the tower room; and you may catch, if you dare listen, from the darkness of the shrubberies outside, the sound of foot-steps in the room and on the stairway, and the moaning of a soul in distress that comes to you in the pauses of the wind. For they say that Sir Everard's spirit every year, each Christmas Eve, is doomed to come back again to the scene of his crime. There he must walk, each Christmas night through, in the tower room and up and down the winding stair. Nor shall his soul ever know peace, so runs the legend of the family, till some one of his descendants shall buy back his rest and the broken honor of the Digbys with the price of his life.

THAT is, or used to be, the kind of background out of which the good old Christmas Ghost Story was made. With such a start as that the rest was easy. The title naturally came dripping from one's pen—THE HONOUR OF THE DIGBYS—or words to that effect.

Now notice how easy it is to run the story on:

At every Christmas-tide for generations the light had burned in the windows of the tower, and the foot-steps had sounded on the stair.

But no one had ever dared to penetrate within the haunted room on Christmas night.

Sometimes at a Christmas gathering round the great fire in the hall below, the bolder of the spirits had challenged one another to enter the east wing on the stroke of midnight. But at the foot of the dark stairway, their hearts had failed them.

So with each generation was handed down the legend of the haunted room and of the price that must be paid with a life to restore the honor of the Digbys. And with each generation the blood feud between the cousins of the two branches of the house had continued. With each generation a Ronald and an Everard Digby had lived with hatred in their hearts, unforgiving. The fortunes of the younger branch had risen, those of the elder branch had declined. The manor house for want of means, had fallen into ill-repair. The park had grown into a tangled wood; the wide lawns and the sunken gardens were overgrown with matted grass and with dank shrubs. And here lived, in the shame of a concealed poverty, at the time when the story opens on the world of to-day, the last of the elder branch of the family, young Everard Digby and his only sister Madeleine. The younger branch, grown rich and prosperous, had bought adjoining land, and built on it a stately home—living in opulence, but casting still a covetous glance upon the ancestral manor of the family which the chances of descent might throw into their hands at any moment. For if young Everard died, the manor passed to his cousin Ronald.

Meantime the war had come and the cousins Everard and Ronald had passed beyond the seas. And the Christmas season had found Madeleine alone beside the fire in the great hall. The house is almost deserted, untenanted except by Madeleine and two or three ancient servants bound to the family by long association.

IT is midnight, the midnight of Christmas. The fire has burned low. The girl's head is sunk upon her hands. She does not heed or hear the winter storm that drives against the lattice windows. She does not note the dying of the fire. For her thoughts and her heart are far away, with her brother, somewhere in France, wondering and dreaming of his return. Then suddenly she lifts her head. For a call has echoed through the house, one clear strong cry. She runs to the casement and looks sideways from it through the driving snow towards the east wing of the house from which the cry has come. There is a light in the window of the haunted tower, not the dim light of the ghostly legend, but a bright clear illumination, that floods outward into the storm.

The girl snatches a candle from the table and hurries through the dark corridors towards the winding stairway. The faded hangings rustle in the cold draught of the night wind as she passes. The candle shudders in a fitful light, blotting great shadows on the wall. But Madeleine knows no fear. Her face is white and set but not with terror for herself. For she has heard and recognized the voice that called.

She hurries up the winding stairway toward the tower room. A bright light shines from beneath the door. She bursts it open and stands a moment transfixed upon the threshold at the vision before her.

It is not the bent figure of the Jacobean soldier that she sees standing beside the table—but a younger, nobler form—the figure of a boylike soldier of to-day. There is a steel cap upon his head. His hand is pressed against his heart. His lips are bloodless and his face is pale; but on his countenance a look of no mere mortal happiness reveals the passing of a soul at peace.

Then with a cry she falls forward across the threshold. There they find her in the morning, dead. The servants bear her down the winding stair fearful of what should come. And with the war news of the day there comes the brief announcement. "Lieutenant Everard Digby of Digby Manor was killed in action at midnight of December 24th, in saving the life of his cousin Lieutenant Ronald Digby."

THERE! That is about the size and kind of the good old Christmas Ghost Story. Round it and a hundred like it flowed our Christmas tears, or shook our Christmas shudders. (Odd language, I admit, but it is hard to express it otherwise.)

But, alas, such stories are no longer for to-day. Our overwise generation is banishing them to the limbo of forgotten things. The children of to-day, acquainted with such things as physical science and chemical reactions, would reduce poor Sir Everard and his lighted tower to some sort of (CONTINUED ON PAGE 28F)



The Spirit of To-Day