

OUR CHRISTMAS GHOST STORY.



The Grey Cottage.

BY MRS. CLAXTON.

THE cottage was old and grey. A pear tree ran over the front of it; there was a wooden porch covered with jessamine and honeysuckle, which promised to be very sweet and delightful in the spring. It stood in a pretty garden, sloping down to a thick hedge, beyond this, and much below it, ran the lane leading up into the village. A large walnut tree and some tall fir trees shaded the cottage to the south, while the hill, on the side of which it was built, protected it from the north winds, they blew keenly enough at times. An orchard divided us from our neighbors at the back, from the front we looked over the thatched roofs of a few low dwellings to the wide valley beyond, where a lazy river wound in and out through clumps of pollards. A picturesque mill and loch lay to the left, to the right a graceful spire rose in the distance.

Such was my new home. It was chosen partly for its retirement and its pretty garden, chiefly on account of its low rental and the inexpensive neighborhood. The nearest town was three miles off; more than that when the floods were out, as was often the case, for then the short cut across the fields was impassable.

This Grey Cottage—called so, possibly, from the old grey stone of which it was built—had belonged to an aged man of the name of Vallyer. He had purchased it some fifty years before. By nature, as we heard, he had been close and miserly, saving up by little and little until he was reputed to be very rich. His wife he lost shortly after their marriage; and since that time he had led a most solitary life, the only other inmate of the cottage being an aged housekeeper, very deaf, and as eccentric as himself. Occasionally a married sister would come over to spend a few hours with him, but never stayed over the night. These visits were like angels' in like being few and far between; but in another respect very unlike angels, for they never took place without a quarrel, and a declaration on the part of the sister, Mrs. Bittern, that she would never enter the house again. People said her only reason for making these quarrels up, was the old man's money. Be that as it might, virtue proved to be its own reward, for when he died it was found he had left her nothing.

The old gentleman was wonderfully fond of his garden, working in it the greater part of the day, and seldom going beyond it. It was strange that with all his love for his flowers, he should never have cared to show them to his neighbors. On the contrary, he did what he could to keep them

from their sight. During his life the place was unknown land; and, consequently, the subject of much curiosity, especially to the village children. Mr. Vallyer always seemed to be on the look-out

if they attempted to peer and pry through the hedge or over the gate, and he carried a thick stick, with which he would make sudden lunges and thrusts, scattering the young visitors ignominiously. It was not safe for juvenile eyes to gaze into Mr. Vallyer's property. Another peculiarity he had. It was to stand by the garden gate in the gloaming leaning on his stick, and watching the few people who went up and down.

It has been said that he was supposed to have saved money. None—save a few pounds—could be found after his death. It then became known that he had purchased a life annuity, which had died with him. The cottage and furniture were left to a nephew, a chemist in London. Not requiring to live in it himself, he advertised it to be let furnished. Two maiden ladies had taken it first by the month; but they had quickly given notice to leave, complaining of damp and other disagreeables. They had, however, always been considered rather crotchety people. I, with my two pretty nieces, Hilda and Cecily, took possession at Michaelmas, a few weeks after they left. We were pleased with our country home. The few neighbors were friendly and sociable. I began to look upon the little Grey Cottage as a haven of rest after a changeful and troubled life.

As our old servant, Martha, was not quite as active as she used to be, I enquired for a charwoman, to come in twice a week to assist her, and was recommended to a Mrs. Briggs. She did not do her work amiss, but her propensity to gossip was irrepressible.

"You should see the place in spring, ma'am, when the gilly flowers and stocks is out," she said to me one day when I was in the kitchen making a tart, and she stood at the other end of it cleaning brasses and tins. "It looked beautiful when the Miss Jessops first came here."

"I wonder what made them leave so soon?" I remarked. "Damp, the agent told me; but I have discovered no damp about the cottage."

"It weren't the damp, ma'am," was Mrs. Briggs' answer, and I thought her tone significant. "At first they liked it—oh, so much; but in a little time they said they must leave. Doubtless," lowering her voice, "they had their reasons."

"Perhaps they found it too lonely?"

"No, and it weren't exactly the loneliness," returned Mrs. Briggs. "Not that altogether, ma'am."

I asked no more; for gossip, though Mrs. Briggs' chief failing, was not one of mine; but went on with my pastry-making. She, rubbing fiercely at the copper tea-kettle, began again after an interlude.

"Did you chance to hear nothing about this cottage, ma'am?"

"Nothing particular. Why? What is there to hear?"

"Perhaps I ought not to tell you, ma'am; you might be scared," returned she, as she looked at me over the kettle.

"Scared! Not I. Pray tell what you have to tell—if it concerns the cottage."

"Well, ma'am, it's a healthy place and a pretty place; that's for sure. But—it's about the old gentleman."—"The old gentleman!"

"Old Mr. Vallyer. They say he is in the house."

"Why, what do you mean?" I asked, feeling somewhat as the woman had said—scared.

"It's said, ma'am, that he never went out of it, though his funeral did; that he stopped in to haunt it. Folks talk of something that happened here years and years ago; some friend of Mr. Vallyer's came from over the seas to visit him. They used to quarrel, and one night the stranger was found dead in the garden. Some thought the death didn't come about by accident; that Vallyer knew more than he said. Anyway, it's pretty sure that he can't rest now, but is about the place troubling it."

I am not especially superstitious, but I confess I did not like the tale. Mrs. Briggs continued, Her tongue, once oiled, would have gone on for ever.

"The first to see him was the Widow Munn's children: he had been dead about a month. I was at her place, helping her with a day's washing. 'Mother,' said they, running in at dusk, 'we have seen the old gentleman at the Grey Cottage; he's leaning over the gate with his stick just as he used to be.' They weren't frightened, those young children, they told it as a bit of news. The Widow Munn looked at me, and I at her, and then she whipped 'em all round, thinking it might be the best way to put it out of their heads."

I laughed, and said the children might have been mistaken.

"So they might, ma'am," assented Mrs. Briggs. "The next to see it was a stranger: a young man coming through the village one moonlight night on his way to London, he was walking it. He went into the public-house, down there in Greenford, and called for a glass of ale. While he was sitting by the fire drinking it, he began to talk. 'What uncivil people you seem to have in these parts,' says he. 'I asked an old gentleman, standing at his garden-gate half way up the hill, whether there was a public-house near, and he would not answer me: he just stared straight in my face with his glassy looking eyes, and never spoke.' The company in the tap-room stopped talking at this, and looked at one another. 'What sort of an old gentleman was it,' they asked: 'how was he dressed?'"

"He wore a long grey coat, with a curious little cape to it," says the traveller, "and a spotted white kerchief, tied loose around his neck, with the ends hanging, and he had a stick in his hand. Very civil, I must say he was! I asked him the question in a louder tone, thinking he might be deaf; but he never answered, only continued to stare at me." It was the dress of old Vallyer, ma'am; he never wore any other, and I'll leave you to judge what the company at the White Hart thought of it. A great deal of talk went about Greenford next day."

We found that Mr. Vallyer's ghost was firmly believed in by the neighborhood. Fortunately my nieces were sensible girls, and only laughed. The stories told were made a source of amusement to them, and their young friends. They treated the subject as a good joke; sometimes intruding irreverently near the confines of that strange and mysterious world beyond whose veil we know so little, and which, it has always