

The Closed Door.

(Virginia W. Frame, in the 'Christian Intelligencer.')

The room had come to have a significance to the imaginative nature of the two girls, second only to their early belief in fairy tales. They had come to visit their grandparents with hearts filled with enthusiasm, and their welcome had been all and more than they had anticipated.

The old people had received them with open arms, glad for the young life that had come to them, and glad of the sound of young voices in the halls. The house with its long corridors, and its general air of wealth and luxury, was thrown open to them, wholly and entirely at their service, with the exception of one room.

This room faced the east, occupying the sunniest corner of the house. The corridor leading to it was dark and narrow, with a veritable Bluebeard atmosphere about it, so thought the little girls. Only one servant about the place had been known to enter its sacred portals, and, as the priestesses of old, her lips were sealed to all inquiries. It added to the mystery that no one had been prohibited from entering, and, though the door was commonly supposed to be locked, no one was known to have tried the knob.

From the moment of the discovery of its existence, the two girls lost all concern for the rest of the house, and centred their interests here. Jane deserted the library, where she had spent the first few days of their visit, curled up in one of the soft leather chairs, deep in the enchantment of some romance, for the more living question. She imagined treasures stored in the closed room, and jewels laid away in some rich caskets; pearls, diamonds, and precious stones of great value; fine pictures and art treasures from the old world, which had been gathered with infinite expense, and, blessed thought, perhaps there were fine frocks and rare, daintily trained gowns hanging in the closets, and upholstered furniture in pale silks and satins.

Alice pooh-poohed this theory in lively derision; she was sure there were no ghosts, or maybe a lunatic, or perhaps—oh, the joy in the thought—the kind-hearted grandmother was hiding a hunted murderer from the hands of justice! Only such stirring imagery could have kept the lively Alice from the company of her beloved dogs and horses, and make her sit for hours, as dreamy as Jane herself, under the one elm of the place directly under the window of the room.

One day they questioned the grandparents, but their inquiries were so indefinite, or as they chose to think, their elders' powers at concealment were such, that there was little satisfaction.

'Grandpa,' Alice had abruptly asked, as the four sat on the wide veranda, one warm and sunny afternoon, 'grandpa, are you afraid of ghosts?'

The old couple sat hand in hand. It had been thus from the first; sweethearts at sixteen, sweethearts at three score and ten. The children had placed themselves on the steps, Jane sitting startle-eyed at the audacity of her sister's question, Alice calmly rocking herself as she nursed her knee and looked off over the hills.

'Ghosts, dearie, ghosts,' the old man said, pressing the small wrinkled hand held in his, 'ghosts are one form of being with whom I have never come in contact.' He turned his eyes to his wife as he made answer, for since she had given him the answer to that ever-portent question, which had been the turning point of his life he had considered all deci-

sions as valueless unless stamped with the approval of his gentle dictator.

Alice's small red lips tightened; her grandfather was evidently afraid to meet her eye. Next Jane timidly advanced her theories.

'Grandmother,' she sweetly asked, 'wouldn't you love to have lived in the days of the beautiful princes and princesses, when everybody wore pink satin and diamond buckles, and long trains and pages to carry them? But maybe you did wear satins and trains when you were a girl?' she added, for she vaguely conceived her grandmother's youth as somewhere located in the far-away land of the Long Ago. Children reckoned time by the generous lengths of the indefinite Future, while with the aged, it is computed by the close-lined measure of the swift receding Past.

'No, honey,' the grandmother answered, 'you know I was poor as a girl, living with my father on a farm, and my best gown was a lawn, my second best a crinoline. Very elaborate affairs they were, too, for a time. After married grandpa,' she paused, turning to look for what she always found in his eyes, then continued, 'I had one silk gown, which is all I had until your mother and auntie were grown girls. Then we became rich—'

'As the world accounts wealth,' the man interrupted, 'though I had been rich twenty-five years.'

If this was so Jane wondered why grandma had only one silk gown, for she had never thought grandpa stingy. One pair of eyes smiled comprehensively, and the free hand travelled over the rich folds of her black satin skirt, as she added, a note of affectionate complaint in her voice, 'But now grandpa wants me to have a new silk every week, and my old one's as good as new.'

Alice hazarded one more hint. 'Grandpa,' she said, 'if a great big, bold man, awful wicked, you know, had killed another man and then run away, would you hide that wicked man if he came to your house to get hid?'

This time Jane fairly gasped at the other's temerity. The two old people laughed more heartily than the little girls had ever seen them before. The grandmother had to wipe the tears from her eyes and the grandfather was quite red with merriment as he asked what occasion had put such notions into the little head. This time Alice was certain he was begging the question. Her active young brain began to devise new schemes for solving the mystery, and to herself she said, 'I bet you I'll know pretty soon,' not realizing how soon.

It was after luncheon as she was going upstairs to her apartments that she passed before the corridor leading to the closed room. Her lively imagination was weaving glittering fancies about its secrets, when from behind the door came the sound of a voice. It was not loud, spectral, nor unearthly, but coming suddenly and unexpectedly as it did, it caused Alice to make a misstep and she fell backwards down the stairs. There followed the confused sense of a cry for help from Jane, her grandmother's distressed voice, the feeling of warm air, then she sank into a swoon.

The first sound that came to her ears as she began to regain consciousness was the crackling of a fire. To her dulled sense the sound meant nothing, nor did the words spoken near her carry any significance.

'And this has been our refuge, John,' the voice was saying, 'when all the riches seemed too oppressive. How often we have slipped away from the rest of the world, its form and its show, to rest us here.'

'Yes,' came the answer, 'and here I seem to see you again just as I used to when you were a girl. Your hair becomes gold in the light of

fond memories, and the little 'kerchief about your throat makes your face as young as the look in your eyes.'

'And you, I see,' rejoined the other, 'a tall, dark-eyed lad in knickers with sword at side, this dear old sword,' a pause, and the sound of a soft step. 'And after—' another pause, 'you'd never let your chair rest on this side of the hearth and mine on that, but both have always stood side-by-side.'

Alice stirred, and the voice was directly above her. 'The dear child is waking up, John, do you suppose she will laugh at our room? Jane did not, but—Alice—'

'Alice,' said the other, 'will see through the outer covering even more than did our dreamy little Jane.'

At the second mention of her name Alice opened her eyes. Through the window at her feet, she made out the dark branches of an elm and with the sight came the realization that she was in the closed room; this made her shut her eyes with a snap. Was she really in that realm of her imaginings? Were the far-away voices she heard, the voices of the ghosts or some such species of supernatural being? Or, most horrible of suspicions! was a wild-eyed murderer hovering near her, all ready to add her name to the list of his victims? Her heart beat with terrifying loudness and grew uncomfortably large in her throat.

After a moment of profound stillness, in which the sound of breathing was audible very near her, she heard her grandfather's voice repeat her name. Very cautiously she opened one eye—she had heard of the deceptive tricks of murderers. The sight of the familiar face of her old grandfather encouraged her to open the other eye, and with the first glimpse of her surroundings she sat bolt upright in bed.

Her glance fell on the bright red carpet, the fireplace with smouldering logs upheld by old-fashioned andirons, a sword in whose ungainly shape she failed to recognize the colonial weapon, and on the furniture, rough-hewn and homely. On the table in the centre of the room were bunches of marigolds and honey-suckle, on the mantel were two portraits, one of a fair haired girl with poke bonnet and wide hooped skirt, in whose demure countenance Alice found a strong resemblance to her dear grandmother's sweet face, and guessed that the black-eyed youth in the other portrait must be her grandfather. Other strange pictures were about the walls, ladies in ruffs and ruffles, men in powdered wigs, and small children with the most elaborate costumes. The whole furnishings of the room seemed to have been transported from an attic of the days gone by. Alice looked questioningly from one to the other of her companions, then back again at the room, and rising, tripped over to the fireplace.

'Isn't it jolly!' she cried.

'Yes,' exclaimed Jane, just coming in, with a book in her hand to settle herself in one of the cane-bottomed chairs before the fire, 'and isn't it homey?'

'It was Jane who knew, after all,' whispered the old man.'

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