

The Fourth Wall

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When Forran complained of pains in the head, a steadily declining appetite, and a growing difficulty in getting to sleep, his wife urged him to waste no more faith on the local practitioner and spend two guineas on a visit to some great man in Harley Street. And after two months of gentle bullying, and a miserable consciousness of growing worse instead of better, Forran went.

The Harley Street doctor earned his two guineas in as many minutes. When Forran left the house he found himself pledged to give up work for at least two months, and rest in some quiet and bracing part of the country. Forran was one of three partners in a firm of solicitors, and as he was not a poor man it was not difficult for him to arrange for an eight or nine weeks holiday. His idea was to take a furnished cottage within easy distance of some pike fishing, and where rough shooting might also be obtained. Mrs Forran was to accompany him.

At first, their plan was to go away by themselves, but it occurred to Forran that such an arrangement might be very dull for poor Betty, and Mrs Forran thought that a little company other than her own might be good for dear Jack. Thus it came about that Tom and Helen Marriott, Mrs Forran's brother and sister, were urged to join them.

At that time I was just beginning to realise that life without Helen would be worse than a lingering death; so I angled tactfully for an invitation, which eventually I received from Mrs Forran, who saw how it was with me. So we went away five strong, a happy little party, whose members could be relied upon to live for two months under the same roof without wearing upon each other.

Jack Forran saw the advertisement of the furnished cottage in a weekly paper devoted to such things, and Tom went down into Huntingdonshire to look at it. He returned full of ecstasies. He had never seen such a cottage, he said; and in five minutes we had caught his enthusiasm. It was very old, and had been endowed with the comforts of civilisation without losing its antiquity. It was furnished throughout with genuine old furniture, and the whole place contained nothing shoddy and not one jarring note. In a word, it was the cottage one often dreams of

but seldom sees.

For the rest, Tom had to admit that it was miles from any town or village, but he argued that this seclusion was just what we wanted. Moreover, the Great Ouse was only half an hour's walk distant, and there, he told us, the wildfowl were crying aloud to be shot and the pike begging to be caught. So Jack, without wasting time, wrote to the London agent, and took this paragon of cottages for two months, antique furniture and all.

We arrived on a December evening, having driven five miles in a slow trap from a little village station on the branch line from Cambridge. Our cottage stood just outside the region of the fens, but it had been built on the crest of what passes for a hill in that part of the country, and Tom guaranteed it to be fairly dry. In other respects we were prepared for disappointments, for we had begun to fear that he had made us expect too much. We got ready to fall upon him and find fault.

But when the door was opened to us, and one after another we crossed the threshold into a warm room flooded with soft light, we were all ready to swear that Tom had done the place less than justice.

The door opened straight into the one large living-room, and opposite to us a grandfather's clock ticked loudly and with elderly precision. On our right hand logs were burning on the wide, open hearth, in the ingles of which were chintz-covered seats. Already I fancied myself there with Helen, we two alone in the firelight, watching the grey smoke curling up into the wide chimney. Heavy beams supported the low ceiling, and one ran diagonally along the cream-washed wall, sloping downwards from the ceiling and disappearing behind the clock.

Beside the clock were two doors, one leading to the kitchen and the other to the stairs. There was another door on our left as we entered, and that led into a small apartment fitted up as a morning-room or study. These details are important in view of what follows.

Supper was ready, but we explored the rest of the cottage before sitting down to it. I don't think we met with one disappointment. There was even a bathroom. 'So,' Tom said to me triumphantly, 'you won't have to sponge yourself over, standing up on one leg in a kind of degraded frying pan.'

Mrs Forran had arranged for a woman to come in every morning and do the

rough work, since there was no room there for a servant to sleep. The woman was present when we arrived, and had prepared a hot meal for us. Her younger sister had come, too, to keep her company.

This Mrs Lubbock was a stumpy, silent creature, seemingly very nervous and stupid, and it was hard to get more than a word out of her. She did not know to whom the cottage belonged, or so she said. A gentleman named Sellinger used to come and stop there, but him she had hardly seen, and knew nothing about. She looked nervously around her as she said this, and left as soon as we would let her, dragging her sister with her.

In the interval between her departure and our sitting down to the roast ham and fowls, Tom nodded to me to come into the kitchen. I did so, and he pointed to the inside of the door, on which a cross had been roughly drawn with a piece of white chalk. I looked at him and saw him smiling, his eyebrows lifted.

'That's that woman,' he remarked. 'Do you know what it means, Archie?'

'I suppose it means that she thinks the house is haunted,' I said, 'I should think the people round here are pretty superstitious. They generally are in these lonely places.'

Tom sank his voice.

'Don't say anything to Jack,' he whispered.

'Pooh! Jack doesn't believe in spooks. He's not such a fool.'

'Nevertheless, he's not himself these days, and we won't take any risks. Look out!'

He took out his handkerchief and smudged the chalk marks until the cross was obliterated. 'By Jove,' he added, 'this is "some" cottage! Ghost and all!'

'We ought to have a sweepstake,' I suggested. 'The money to go to the first who sees it.'

'Could we trust each other, do you think?' said Tom, and we both laughed.

It would be well to explain at once that none of us believed in what is commonly called the supernatural. We were normal, hard-headed people, even more sceptical concerning such things as ghosts than the average man in the street.

At ordinary times we should have welcomed a ghost story connected with our dwelling-place, but, as Tom had said, Jack Forran was not quite himself.

During supper we criticised the cottage, and Jack was the only one who had something to say about it that fell short of praise.

'It's a ripping old place,' he said; 'but do you know it seems to me rather self-conscious of being a cottage.'

'What do you mean?' Mrs Forran laughed.

'I mean that everything about it—the furniture and all that—is so very "cottagey". It seems to keep on shouting at you: "I am a cottage. Everything in me is just right for a cottage." I don't express myself very well.'

Helen laughed.

'I know,' she said. 'You mean this room is, somehow, just a little stagey.'

'Stagey was just the very word I was trying to think of,' Jack said. Tom, who was sitting opposite Helen and me, looked around him. 'Do you know,' he said, 'that this room is just like a scene on the stage. Try and imagine that wall over there—the fourth wall I think it's called—has been taken down. On the floor is a row of footlights. Beyond it's all dark, and there is row after row of blurred faces.'

Mrs Forran nodded, and we all looked round at the fourth wall. 'Yes, I can imagine all that,' she said.

'Well, then,' Tom continued, 'imagine yourself among the audience for a moment. You'd be looking on to the stage at a conventional stage cottage sitting-room. That door leading to the little room would be the exit on the prompt side. There's no exit on the other side, but the space behind the chimney looks like one. Open hearth on right. Two doors at back, grandfather's clock, oak beams, everything complete.'

We all marvelled, because it was in very truth a perfect stage cottage, and I immediately experienced what I took to be the power of suggestion. I was sitting beside Helen, with my back to the fourth wall, and I felt that there was no wall there. Behind me was a row of bright footlights, and a sea of dim faces. I could feel hundreds of eyes upon me, and even suffered for the moment a mild kind of stage

fright.

Now I am not one given to nerves, nor is my imagination in the ordinary way a particularly active one. But on that occasion it seemed to slip out of my control, and I imagined not only that the fourth wall was down, but that all our little party began to behave in a certain precise and self-conscious manner as if they were acting before an audience. And I, too, although I strove against it, became one of the mummies.

When we spoke we pitched our voices in a slightly higher key, and made our articulation clearer. We addressed each other not in our usual manner, but as rather stiff strangers who had been placed at the same table at an hotel. Our table manners lost their freedom. Jack, who was inclined to sprawl in his chair, sat up straight as a ramrod. Tom, who had a habit of playing with his breadcrumbs while he was not actually eating, sat between the courses with his hands under the table. The idea that the wall was down and the audience watching our every movement and listening to every word seemed to have worked ridiculously on the minds of us all.

We were talking primly in our stupid stage voices about something quite unimportant, when Tom, who had been silent for a while, suddenly startled us. He raised his voice, and, looking over the heads of Helen and me, declaimed as follows:

'When I do fall in love, Heaven help me—and her!'

The voice was hardly his own; it was the sonorous, flexible voice of an actor. The words boomed from his lips, full of passion and sadness. I felt Helen start beside me. We had not been talking of love, and in the circumstances I had never heard a less pertinent speech. There was dead silence for nearly half a minute.

Then I felt a change come over me, as if a shadow had passed on from my mind. I felt no more the footlights behind me and the rows of faces, and suddenly set up a roar of laughter. Simultaneously all the others laughed.

Once again we were old friends, supping privately and behaving naturally, no longer mummies on a stage. We laughed until the tears ran down our cheeks.

'Oh, Tom, you idiot!' Helen cried.

'What on earth made you say that?' Mrs Forran demanded, choking.

Tom regarded us all, smiling but slightly flushed.

'I don't know,' he said. 'It must have sounded frightfully mad. The words came into my head, and I just said them.'

Afterwards they became a catch-phrase with us. Now we all repeated them, imitating Tom's voice, until Mrs Forran sniffed audibly, and looked towards the fire.

'Can you smell anything burning?' she asked.

We all could. There was a heavy smell of smoke in the air. It was as if a part of the carpet were smouldering.

'A spark must have jumped out of the fire,' I said; and went to see. But I could find nothing, although I searched the room, and presently the smell of burning went. We agreed that it was rather curious.

We had been at the cottage more than a week when, just after tea on a dark, drizzling evening, Tom begged me to come out for a walk with him. It was not inviting outside, and I was never glad to leave Helen, but the look in her brother's eyes made me aware that he had something to say to me. So I assented rather grudgingly, and put on my cap and Ulster.

Up to then we had had a good time. I was always happy when I was near Helen; Jack was already much better, and everybody was delighted at the signs he displayed of an early recovery. Moreover, we had had plenty of sport with our guns, and Jack had landed an eleven-pound pike on a spinner,

All that marred our pleasure was that sensation of being on the stage, to which all of us had to confess. Generally it came on at supper, and then we made frantic efforts to behave like our normal selves. Fifty times a day we bullied Tom for giving voice to the suggestion, and thus affecting all of us.

There was also a mystery, which we had given up trying to solve. Regularly every evening at about the same time we smelt something burning, and always we searched for a smouldering splinter on the carpet, and never found it. Jack had a theory beginning, 'When the wind is in a certain quarter . . .' which we accepted, but only because a poor explanation is better than none to people who do not care

for being mystified.

As Tom and I picked our way down the dark garden, sucking at our pipes, I knew instinctively that he wanted to talk to me about the cottage. For some reason I did not care to be too serious, and as we reached the road I imitated his voice, saying:

'When I do fall in love, Heaven help me—and her!' He laughed, but not very mirthfully.

'Yes,' he said, 'that was dashed queer. Archie, my dear lad, there are a lot of things that are very queer. Have you any vices?'

'Such as?'

'Going downstairs at night and reading your immortal short stories aloud to yourself?' 'Me!' I exclaimed. 'Good Lord, no! Why?'

'Well, Jack had a jolly good night's sleep last night, so it wasn't he. It certainly wasn't I. And now you say it wasn't you. And it was a man's voice.'

I felt an uncomfortable, prickly feeling in my skin. 'What are you talking about?' I asked.

He hesitated a moment.

'Look here,' he said, 'Helen's had a fright. You know her room is over the dining-room? Well, it seems she woke up last night quite late, and heard a man's voice in the room underneath. It sounded quite plain—so plain that she could almost hear the words. It was like somebody reading aloud with a lot of expression. She didn't know the voice.'

Again I felt that prickly sensation in my skin. 'She must have been dreaming,' I said.

My dear chap, a week ago I should have declared unhesitatingly that she was dreaming. But now I'm not so sure.'

'You say it was like somebody reading aloud?'

'Yes, with a lot of expression. An actor going through his part, for instance.'

He said this with an elaborate casualness, but I caught another note in his

voice. 'Tom,' I said, 'don't be an idiot.'

He was silent for a short while. Presently he said:

'You don't believe in ghosts, of course?'

'No, I don't.'

'Nor did I until the last few days. It's no use howling me down, Archie, but there is something queer about that cottage. For instance, that sensation of being on the stage before an audience. We all get it at times. And the smell of burning. And the queer thing I said almost unconsciously that you all rag me about.'

I was already more than half convinced, but I tried to argue on the side of what I thought was sanity.

'Are you sure we haven't all caught nerves from poor old Jack?' I suggested.

'Nerves! Rubbish! Besides, old Jack is, luckily, the least affected by these things of all of us. That's because he doesn't believe in uncanny things, and he doesn't know all that we know. Helen told nobody but me about the man she heard reading, simply because she wanted it kept from Jack. And he doesn't know about the cross we found on the kitchen door. If anything happens to give him a bad shock—well, you know what the result might be. I think we ought to try to get him away.'

Still I argued.

'The cross we found on the kitchen door proves that the silly old charwoman thought the cottage was haunted. And you know what country people are.'

Tom looked at me queerly.

'Look here, old chap,' he said, 'when we came here we didn't believe in such things. We all rather prided ourselves on being hard-headed. But now don't you think, after what has happened, that we might as well revise our views a little? Even if we would like to believe otherwise, don't for Heaven's sake let us shut our eyes to proofs. Supernatural or not, there is something confoundedly queer about the place we're living in. If Jack gets a bad shock it may send him mad. And poor Helen's frightened.'

Those two arguments were enough to make me see that we ought to leave the

cottage. But the problem of how to get Jack to go was not easily solved. He was so thoroughly in love with his surroundings that no trivial objection would dislodge him, while to tell him the truth would simply defeat our own ends.

We talked this over for some time, but found no way out of the difficulty.

Then Helen began to occupy all my thoughts, and I insisted on our going back. She was safe enough with Jack and Mrs Forran, but I felt somehow that my place was near her. And Tom grabbed me by the shoulder with his long fingers, and let me know by a peculiar chuckle that he understood.

The evening of the twenty-second of December will live long in my memory, and with good reason. Let me try to tell what happened plainly and straightforwardly, without the omission of any important detail, and yet without exaggeration.

We had then occupied the cottage for about a fortnight, and since my walk in the rain with Tom—when he had confessed his sudden belief in 'ghosts'—nothing of importance had happened. We had experienced as usual the smell of burning, and the queer sensation of being on the stage, but Helen had heard no more voices, nor had there been any fresh phenomena.

After tea on that particular evening it was arranged that we should drive into St Ives and do some shopping; but I, seeing a Heaven-sent opportunity to do some of the work which I had neglected of late, elected to stay behind. I will not pretend that I was not nervous, but I will stoutly maintain, until the last day I live, that my nerves played no part in deluding me.

At first, when I was left alone and sat down to write, I felt 'jumpy' and uncomfortable. But a couple of pipes soothed me, and I soon lost myself in my work. After a while my pen began to scrape, paused, and went on scraping in the old familiar way. The old grandfather's clock said 'tock-tock, tock-tock', until I got so used to his voice that it seemed to become part of the silence.

Work passes the time as quickly as play, and when I paused to light another pipe and looked up at the clock, I found, to my surprise, that more than two hours had slipped away. It would not be very long before the others returned, so I went on with my work at once, and became absorbed in it for another half-hour.

Then quite suddenly I felt grow upon me that feeling of self-consciousness that I was beginning to know so well. I felt that hundreds of eyes were upon me, that hundreds of people were waiting to see what I would do next, and hear what I would say. I felt the cold air of fear in my nostrils, a dreadful sinking in the stomach, a prickly feeling in the skin.

'Nerves!' I told myself; but I dared not raise my eyes. I sat still, with my gaze bent down upon the uncompleted sentence, my pen shaking in my fingers. The grandfather's clock ticked on slowly, and I sat quite still, the slave of fear.

At last, and never so slowly and stealthily, I raised my eyes. They rested upon the door leading into the morning-room, which stood ajar. It was dark inside, but certain things were dimly visible, and those things were unfamiliar.

I saw the half of a step-ladder, the corner of what looked like a rough wooden shed, and a piece of rope dangling. My heart gave a great leap, and then seemed to stop beating.

'Oh, my God!' was the thought that leaped into my brain. 'The wings of a theatre!'

I moved my gaze round a little to the left, and instead of seeing the wall—the fourth wall—I saw a space of semi-gloom. Beyond the carpet was a short space of bare boards, and then a row of footlights throwing up a yellow glare. In the gloom I saw faces, row upon row of them, the curves of a dress circle and gallery with a glint of light on their brass railings, and high up in a kind of dome a cluster of small lamps was burning dimly.

I sprang up with a little cry, and stood facing the ghastly change that had overtaken the wall. There was not a sound, but I was horribly conscious of the undivided attention of hundreds upon hundreds of eyes and ears. And as I stood, dumb and quaking, my nostrils caught an acrid whiff of smoke.

Simultaneously I heard a sharp scream behind me. A hoarse voice shouted something inaudible. Heavy footfalls began to ring on hollow boarding; I heard a hiss like an escape of steam, and the clatter of pails.

Then I spoke, and the voice sounded in no way like my own. I said: 'If I do fall in love, Heaven help me—and her!'

I uttered the words without realising their meaning, and because I was powerless to do otherwise.

Then the faces of that ghastly audience dimmed, and finally vanished, cut off from me by a curtain of black smoke. The smoke was all around me in reeking clouds. It got into my eyes and my throat, and I fell forward, choking and gasping, on to my knees. An agony of suffocation tore me. As consciousness slipped away from me I have a dim memory of a great tongue of flame flickering a yard in front of my eyes . . .

It was Helen who found me lying on the floor. She had run in a little in advance of the others, and the sight of me, lying thus, gave her the greatest fright of her experience. What she said to me before I came round I never learned until we became engaged, and that is neither here nor there. After a minute the others came in, and I have a dim memory of being given brandy and led up to bed.

Next day I lied painfully to my fellow members of the household, assuring them that I was only the victim of a heart attack, the first of my experience. But later in the morning Tom came and sat on the edge of my bed, fixing me with a pair of quizzical eyes.

'Better now?' he asked. 'Much.'

'Then you can tell me what happened. Heart attack be hanged. I've already prepared Jack for what I'm going to tell him. We're going to clear out of this at once. Will you tell your story first, or shall I tell mine?'

I looked at him in surprise.

'Has anything fresh happened?'

'I found out something yesterday,' he answered. 'The cottage is supposed to be haunted, although nobody seems to know precisely in what way. But I've found out all about the man who used to live here, and it seems to fit in rather well with what we've all experienced. Shall I tell you?'

'Yes, do!'

'Well, then. Yesterday evening, while the others were buying groceries, I went in to an inn at St Ives to get a bottle of whisky. There was a farmer chap in the bar,

and I started talking to him, and told him where we were stopping. He pricked up his ears at once, and asked if we'd seen the ghost. I told him no, and asked him about it. He said that the cottage was supposed to be haunted by a man named Sellinger, who had lived in it off and on for years.'

'An actor?'

'Yes, an actor. It seems he used to use the place always when he was resting. He was quite a celebrity in his way, although he was hardly known to the London stage. For years he'd been touring the provinces with a play called *The Heart of Annette*, in which he played the lead. There was a scene in the play which depicted the interior of an old cottage, and from that scene he copied the arrangement of the room downstairs in every detail.'

'Ah!' I said, and shuddered. Already I had a dim idea of what was coming.

'He loved this place,' Tom resumed, 'and every weekend he could spare he came down here. All his vacations, too, were spent here. You can imagine him going through his parts in that room downstairs.'

I nodded grimly. My imagination needed very little stimulation.

'About a year ago,' Tom continued, 'he met his death on the stage. He was playing at a theatre in the Midlands, and was in the middle of his scene in the cottage sitting-room when the stage caught fire. He was suffocated by the smoke. He had just said, "If I fall in love, Heaven help me—and her!" when the smoke and flame rushed in upon him. Those were his last words. Why, what's the matter, Archie?'

There is a theory that when a man loves the place he lives in, it remains imbued with his personality long after he has left it. There is another theory to the effect that the spirit of a very strong personality (such as the actor Sellinger had doubtless been) can impress upon the minds of living people mental pictures of places and incidents which have figured prominently in his life, and can even make them experience the sense of a certain smell—as of burning, for instance. The spirit could, indeed, on rare occasions actually 'control' a person still in the flesh, and make him utter words quite involuntarily. As to that, let each think as he will.

But we were practical people, and we did not theorise overmuch. We simply

left the cottage and went to Malvern. Anybody may have that cottage at a very modest rental, but we do not recommend it. There may not be such things as ghosts, but there are a lot of things, pleasant and unpleasant, which are beyond our ken.