

House of Strange Stories

Andrew Lang

The House of Strange Stories, as I prefer to call it (though it is not known by that name in the county), seems the very place for a ghost. Yet, though so many peoples have dwelt upon its site and in its chambers, though the ancient Elizabethan oak, and all the queer tables and chairs that a dozen generations have bequeathed, might well be tenanted by ancestral spirits, and disturbed by rappings, it is a curious fact that there is not a ghost in the House of Strange Stories. On my earliest visit to this mansion, I was disturbed, I own, by a not unpleasing expectancy. There must, one argued, be a shadowy lady in green in the bedroom, or, just as one was falling asleep, the spectre of a Jesuit would creep out of the priest's hole, where he was starved to death in the "spacious times of great Elizabeth," and would search for a morsel of bread. The priest was usually starved out, sentinels being placed in all the rooms and passages, till at last hunger and want of air would drive the wretched man to give himself up, for the sake of change of wretchedness. Then perhaps he was hanged, or he "died in our hands," as one of Elizabeth's officers euphemistically put it, when the Jesuit was tortured to death in the Tower. No "House of Seven Gables" across the Atlantic can have quite such memories as these, yet, oddly enough, I do not know of more than one ghost of a Jesuit in all England. He appeared to a learned doctor in a library, and the learned doctor described the phantom, not long ago, in the Athenaeum.

"Does the priest of your 'priest-hole' walk?" I asked the squire one winter evening in the House of Strange Stories.

Darkness had come to the rescue of the pheasants about four in the afternoon, and all of us, men and women, were sitting at afternoon tea in the firelit study, drowsily watching the flicker of the flame on the black panelling. The characters will introduce themselves, as they take part in the conversation.

"No," said the squire, "even the priest does not walk. Somehow very few of the Jesuits have left ghosts in country houses. They are just the customers you would expect to 'walk,' but they don't."

There is, to be sure, one priestly ghost-story, which you may or may not know,

and I tell it here, though I don't believe it, just as I heard it from the Bishop of Dunchester himself. According to this most affable and distinguished prelate, now no more, he once arrived in a large country house shortly before dinner-time; he was led to his chamber, he dressed, and went downstairs. Not knowing the plan of the house, he found his way into the library, a chamber lined with the books of many studious generations. Here the learned bishop remained for a few minutes, when the gong sounded for dinner, and a domestic, entering the apartment showed the prelate the way to the drawing-room, where the other guests were now assembled. The bishop, when the company appeared complete, and was beginning to manoeuvre towards the dining-room, addressed his host (whom we shall call Lord Birkenhead), and observed that the ecclesiastic had not yet appeared.

"What ecclesiastic?" asked his lordship.

"The priest," replied the bishop, "whom I met in the library."

Upon this Lord Birkenhead's countenance changed somewhat, and, with a casual remark, he put the question by. After dinner, when the ladies had left the men to their wine, Lord Birkenhead showed some curiosity as to "the ecclesiastic," and learned that he had seemed somewhat shy and stiff, yet had the air of a man just about to enter into conversation.

"At that moment," said the bishop, "I was summoned to the drawing-room, and did not at first notice that my friend the priest had not followed me. He had an interesting and careworn face," added the bishop.

"You have certainly seen the family ghost," said Lord Birkenhead; "he only haunts the library, where, as you may imagine, his retirement is but seldom disturbed." And, indeed, the habits of the great, in England, are not studious, as a rule.

"Then I must return, Lord Birkenhead, to your library," said the bishop, "and that without delay, for this appears to be a matter in which the services of one of the higher clergy, however unworthy, may prove of incalculable benefit."

"If I could only hope," answered Lord Birkenhead (who was a Catholic) with a deep sigh, "that his reverence would recognize Anglican orders!"

The bishop was now, as may be fancied, on his mettle, and without further

parley, retired to the library. The rest of the men awaited his return, and beguiled the moments of expectation with princely havannas.

In about half an hour the bishop reappeared, and a close observer might have detected a shade of paleness on his apostolic features, yet his face was radiant like that of a good man who has performed a good action. Being implored to relieve the anxiety of the company, the worthy prelate spoke as follows:

"On entering the library, which was illuminated by a single lamp, I found myself alone. I drew a chair to the fire, and, taking up a volume of M. Renan's which chanced to be lying on the table, I composed myself to detect the sophistries of this brilliant but unprincipled writer. Thus, by an effort of will, I distracted myself from that state of 'expectant attention' to which modern science attributes such phantoms and spectral appearances as can neither be explained away by a morbid condition of the liver, nor as caused by the common rat (*Mus rattus*). I should observe by the way," said the learned bishop, interrupting his own narrative, "that scepticism will in vain attempt to account, by the latter cause, namely rats, for the spectres, Lemures, simulacra, and haunted houses of the ancient Greeks and Romans. With these supernatural phenomena, as they prevailed in Athens and Rome, we are well acquainted, not only from the *Mostellaria* of Plautus, but from the numerous ghost-stories of Pliny, Plutarch, the *Philopseudes* of Lucian, and similar sources. But it will at once be perceived, and admitted even by candid men of science, that these spiritual phenomena of the classical period cannot plausibly, nor even possibly, be attributed to the agency of rats, when we recall the fact that the rat was an animal unknown to the ancients. As the learned M. Selys Longch observes in his *Etudes de Micromammalogie* (Paris, 1839, p. 59), 'the origin of the rat is obscure, the one thing certain is that the vermin was unknown to the ancients, and that it arrived in Europe, introduced, perhaps, by the Crusaders, after the Middle Ages.' I think," added the prelate, looking round, not without satisfaction, "that I have completely disposed of the rat hypothesis, as far, at least, as the ghosts of classical tradition are concerned."

"Your reasoning, bishop," replied Lord Birkenhead, "is worthy of your reputation; but pray pardon the curiosity which entreats you to return from the simulacra of the past to the ghost of the present."

"I had not long been occupied with M. Renan," said the bishop, thus adjured,

"when I became aware of the presence of another person in the room. I think my eyes had strayed from the volume, as I turned a page, to the table, on which I perceived the brown strong hand of a young man. Looking up, I beheld my friend the priest, who was indeed a man of some twenty-seven years of age, with a frank and open, though somewhat careworn, aspect. I at once rose, and asked if I could be of service to him in anything, and I trust I did not betray any wounding suspicion that he was other than a man of flesh and blood.

"You can, indeed, my lord, relieve me of a great burden,' said the young man, and it was apparent enough that he did acknowledge the validity of Anglican orders. 'Will you kindly take from the shelf that volume of Cicero "De Officiis," he said, pointing to a copy of an Elzevir variorum edition,--not the small duodecimo Elzevir,--'remove the paper you will find there, and burn it in the fire on the hearth.'

"Certainly I will do as you say, but will you reward me by explaining the reason of your request?'

"In me,' said the appearance, 'you behold Francis Wilton, priest. I was born in 1657, and, after adventures and an education with which I need not trouble you, found myself here as chaplain to the family of the Lord Birkenhead of the period. It chanced one day that I heard in confession, from the lips of Lady Birkenhead, a tale so strange, moving, and, but for the sacred circumstances of the revelation, so incredible, that my soul had no rest for thinking thereon. At last, neglecting my vow, and fearful that I might become forgetful of any portion of so marvellous a narrative, I took up my pen and committed the confession to the security of manuscript. *Litera scripta manet*. Scarcely had I finished my unholy task when the sound of a distant horn told me that the hunt (to which pleasure I was passionately given) approached the demesne. I thrust the written confession into that volume of Cicero, hurried to the stable, saddled my horse with my own hands, and rode in the direction whence I heard the music of the hounds. On my way a locked gate barred my progress. I put Rupert at it, he took off badly, fell, and my spirit passed away in the fall. But not to the place of repose did my sinful spirit wing its flight. I found myself here in the library, where, naturally, scarcely any one ever comes except the maids. When I would implore them to destroy the unholy document that binds me to earth, they merely scream; nor have I found any scion of the house, nor any guest, except your lordship, of more intrepid resolution or more charitable mood. And now, I trust, you will release me.'

"I rose (for I had seated myself during his narrative), my heart was stirred with pity; I took down the Cicero, and lit on a sheet of yellow paper covered with faded manuscript, which, of course, I did not read. I turned to the hearth, tossed on the fire the sere old paper, which blazed at once, and then, hearing the words *pax vobiscum*, I looked round. But I was alone. After a few minutes, devoted to private ejaculations, I returned to the dining-room; and that is all my story. Your maids need no longer dread the ghost of the library. He is released."

"Will any one take any more wine?" asked Lord Birkenhead, in tones of deep emotion. "No? Then suppose we join the ladies."

"Well," said one of the ladies, the Girton girl, when the squire had finished the prelate's narrative, "I don't call that much of a story. What was Lady Birkenhead's confession about? That's what one really wants to know."

"The bishop could not possibly have read the paper," said the Bachelor of Arts, one of the guests; "not as a gentleman, nor a bishop."

"I wish I had had the chance," said the Girton girl.

"Perhaps the confession was in Latin," said the Bachelor of Arts.

The Girton girl disdained to reply to this unworthy sneer.

"I have often observed," she said in a reflective voice, "that the most authentic and best attested bogies don't come to very much. They appear in a desultory manner, without any context, so to speak, and, like other difficulties, require a context to clear up their meaning."

These efforts of the Girton girl to apply the methods of philology to spectres, were received in silence. The women did not understand them, though they had a strong personal opinion about their learned author.

"The only ghost I ever came across, or, rather, came within measurable distance of, never appeared at all so far as one knew."

"Miss Lebas has a story," said the squire, "Won't she tell us her story?"

The ladies murmured, "Do, please."

"It really cannot be called a ghost-story," remarked Miss Lebas, "it was only an uncomfortable kind of coincidence, and I never think of it without a shudder. But I know there is not any reason at all why it should make any of you shudder; so don't be disappointed.

"It was the Long Vacation before last," said the Girton girl, "and I went on a reading-party to Bantry Bay, with Wyndham and Toole of Somerville, and Clare of Lady Margaret's. Leighton coached us."

"Dear me! With all these young men, my dear?" asked the maiden aunt.

"They were all women of my year, except Miss Leighton of Newnham, who was our coach," answered the Girton girl composedly.

"Dear me! I beg your pardon for interrupting you," said the maiden aunt.

"Well, term-time was drawing near, and Bantry Bay was getting pretty cold, when I received an invitation from Lady Garryowen to stay with them at Dundellan on my way south. They were two very dear, old, hospitable Irish ladies, the last of their race, Lady Garryowen and her sister, Miss Patty. They were so hospitable that, though I did not know it, Dundellan was quite full when I reached it, overflowing with young people. The house has nothing very remarkable about it: a grey, plain building, with remains of the chateau about it, and a high park wall. In the garden wall there is a small round tower, just like those in the precinct wall at St. Andrews. The ground floor is not used. On the first floor there is a furnished chamber with a deep round niche, almost a separate room, like that in Queen Mary's apartments in Holy Rood. The first floor has long been fitted up as a bedroom and dressing-room, but it had not been occupied, and a curious old spinning-wheel in the corner (which has nothing to do with my story, if you can call it a story), must have been unused since '98, at least. I reached Dublin late--our train should have arrived at half-past six--it was ten before we toiled into the station. The Dundellan carriage was waiting for me, and, after an hour's drive, I reached the house. The dear old ladies had sat up for me, and I went to bed as soon as possible, in a very comfortable room. I fell asleep at once, and did not waken till broad daylight, between seven and eight, when, as my eyes wandered about, I saw, by the pictures on the wall, and the names on the books beside my bed, that Miss Patty must have given up her own room to me. I was quite sorry and, as I dressed, determined to get her to let me change into any den rather than accept this sacrifice. I went

downstairs, and found breakfast ready, but neither Lady Garryowen nor Miss Patty. Looking out of the window into the garden, I heard, for the only time in my life, the wild Irish keened over the dead, and saw the old nurse wailing and wringing her hands and hurrying to the house. As soon as she entered she told me, with a burst of grief, and in language I shall not try to imitate, that Miss Patty was dead.

"When I arrived the house was so full that there was literally no room for me. But 'Dundellan was never beaten yet,' the old ladies had said. There was still the room in the tower. But this room had such an evil reputation for being 'haunted' that the servants could hardly be got to go near it, at least after dark, and the dear old ladies never dreamed of sending any of their guests to pass a bad night in a place with a bad name. Miss Patty, who had the courage of a Bayard, did not think twice. She went herself to sleep in the haunted tower, and left her room to me. And when the old nurse went to call her in the morning, she could not waken Miss Patty. She was dead. Heart-disease, they called it. Of course," added the Girton girl, "as I said, it was only a coincidence. But the Irish servants could not be persuaded that Miss Patty had not seen whatever the thing was that they believed to be in the garden tower. I don't know what it was. You see the context was dreadfully vague, a mere fragment."

There was a little silence after the Girton girl's story.

"I never heard before in my life," said the maiden aunt, at last, "of any host or hostess who took the haunted room themselves, when the house happened to be full. They always send the stranger within their gates to it, and then pretend to be vastly surprised when he does not have a good night. I had several bad nights myself once. In Ireland too."

"Tell us all about it, Judy," said her brother, the squire.

"No," murmured the maiden aunt. "You would only laugh at me. There was no ghost. I didn't hear anything. I didn't see anything. I didn't even smell anything, as they do in that horrid book, 'The Haunted Hotel.'"

"Then why had you such bad nights?"

"Oh, I felt" said the maiden aunt, with a little shudder.

"What did you feel, Aunt Judy?"

"I know you will laugh," said the maiden aunt, abruptly entering on her nervous narrative. "I felt all the time as if somebody was looking through the window. Now, you know, there couldn't be anybody. It was in an Irish country house where I had just arrived, and my room was on the second floor. The window was old-fashioned and narrow, with a deep recess. As soon as I went to bed, my dears, I felt that some one was looking through the window, and meant to come in. I got up, and bolted the window, though I knew it was impossible for anybody to climb up there, and I drew the curtains, but I could not fall asleep. If ever I began to dose, I would waken with a start, and turn and look in the direction of the window. I did not sleep all night, and next night, though I was dreadfully tired, it was just the same thing. So I had to take my hostess into my confidence, though it was extremely disagreeable, my dears, to seem so foolish. I only told her that I thought the air, or something, must disagree with me, for I could not sleep. Then, as some one was leaving the house that day, she implored me to try another room, where I slept beautifully, and afterwards had a very pleasant visit. But, the day I went away, my hostess asked me if I had been kept awake by anything in particular, for instance, by a feeling that some one was trying to come in at the window. Well, I admitted that I had a nervous feeling of that sort, and she said that she was very sorry, and that every one who lay in the room had exactly the same sensation. She supposed they must all have heard the history of the room, in childhood, and forgotten that they had heard it, and then been consciously reminded of it by reflex action. It seems, my dears, that that is the new scientific way of explaining all these things, presentiments and dreams and wraiths, and all that sort of thing. We have seen them before, and remember them without being aware of it. So I said I'd never heard the history of the room; but she said I must have, and so must all the people who felt as if some one was coming in by the window. And I said that it was rather a curious thing they should all forget they knew it, and all be reminded of it without being aware of it, and that, if she did not mind, I'd like to be reminded of it again. So she said that these objections had all been replied to (just as clergymen always say in sermons), and then she told me the history of the room. It only came to this, that, three generations before, the family butler (whom every one had always thought a most steady, respectable man), dressed himself up like a ghost, or like his notion of a ghost, and got a ladder, and came in by the window to steal the

diamonds of the lady of the house, and he frightened her to death, poor woman! That was all. But, ever since, people who sleep in the room don't sleep, so to speak, and keep thinking that some one is coming in by the casement. That's all; and I told you it was not an interesting story, but perhaps you will find more interest in the scientific explanation of all these things."

The story of the maiden aunt, so far as it recounted her own experience, did not contain anything to which the judicial faculties of the mind refused assent. Probably the Bachelor of Arts felt that something a good deal more unusual was wanted, for he instantly started, without being asked, on the following narrative:--

"I also was staying," said the Bachelor of Arts, "at the home of my friends, the aristocracy in Scotland. The name of the house, and the precise rank in the peerage of my illustrious host, it is not necessary for me to give. All, however, who know those more than feudal and baronial halls, are aware that the front of the castle looks forth on a somewhat narrow drive, bordered by black and funereal pines. On the night of my arrival at the castle, although I went late to bed, I did not feel at all sleepy. Something, perhaps, in the mountain air, or in the vicissitudes of baccarat, may have banished slumber. I had been in luck, and a pile of sovereigns and notes lay, in agreeable confusion, on my dressing-table. My feverish blood declined to be tranquillized, and at last I drew up the blind, threw open the latticed window, and looked out on the drive and the pine-wood. The faint and silvery blue of dawn was just wakening in the sky, and a setting moon hung, with a peculiarly ominous and wasted appearance, above the crests of the forest. But conceive my astonishment when I beheld, on the drive, and right under my window, a large and well-appointed hearse, with two white horses, with plumes complete, and attended by mutes, whose black staffs were tipped with silver that glittered pallid in the dawn.

I exhausted my ingenuity in conjectures as to the presence of this remarkable vehicle with the white horses, so unusual, though, when one thinks of it, so appropriate to the chariot of Death. Could some belated visitor have arrived in a hearse, like the lady in Miss Ferrier's novel? Could one of the domestics have expired, and was it the intention of my host to have the body thus honourably removed without casting a gloom over his guests?

Wild as these hypotheses appeared, I could think of nothing better, and was

just about to leave the window, and retire to bed, when the driver of the strange carriage, who had hitherto sat motionless, turned, and looked me full in the face. Never shall I forget the appearance of this man, whose sallow countenance, close-shaven dark chin, and small, black moustache, combined with I know not what of martial in his air, struck into me a certain indefinable alarm. No sooner had he caught my eye, than he gathered up his reins, just raised his whip, and started the mortuary vehicle at a walk down the road. I followed it with my eyes till a bend in the avenue hid it from my sight. So wrapt up was my spirit in the exercise of the single sense of vision that it was not till the hearse became lost to view that I noticed the entire absence of sound which accompanied its departure. Neither had the bridles and trappings of the white horses jingled as the animals shook their heads, nor had the wheels of the hearse crashed upon the gravel of the avenue. I was compelled by all these circumstances to believe that what I had looked upon was not of this world, and, with a beating heart, I sought refuge in sleep.

"Next morning, feeling far from refreshed, I arrived among the latest at a breakfast which was a desultory and movable feast. Almost all the men had gone forth to hill, forest, or river, in pursuit of the furred, finned, or feathered denizens of the wilds--"

"You speak," interrupted the schoolboy, "like a printed book! I like to hear you speak like that. Drive on, old man! Drive on your hearse!"

The Bachelor of Arts "drove on," without noticing this interruption. "I tried to 'lead up' to the hearse," he said, "in conversation with the young ladies of the castle. I endeavoured to assume the languid and preoccupied air of the guest who, in ghost-stories, has had a bad night with the family spectre. I drew the conversation to the topic of apparitions, and even to warnings of death. I knew that every family worthy of the name has its omen: the Oxenhams a white bird, another house a brass band, whose airy music is poured forth by invisible performers, and so on. Of course I expected some one to cry, 'Oh, we've got a hearse with white horses,' for that is the kind of heirloom an ancient house regards with complacent pride. But nobody offered any remarks on the local omen, and even when I drew near the topic of hearses, one of the girls, my cousin, merely quoted, 'Speak not like a death's-head, good Doll' (my name is Adolphus), and asked me to play at lawn-tennis.

In the evening, in the smoking-room, it was no better, nobody had ever heard of an omen in this particular castle. Nay, when I told my story, for it came to that at last, they only laughed at me, and said I must have dreamed it. Of course I expected to be wakened in the night by some awful apparition, but nothing disturbed me. I never slept better, and hearses were the last things I thought of during the remainder of my visit. Months passed, and I had almost forgotten the vision, or dream, for I began to feel apprehensive that, after all, it was a dream. So costly and elaborate an apparition as a hearse with white horses and plumes complete, could never have been got up, regardless of expense, for one occasion only, and to frighten one undergraduate, yet it was certain that the hearse was not 'the old family coach.' My entertainers had undeniably never heard of it in their lives before. Even tradition at the castle said nothing of a spectral hearse, though the house was credited with a white lady deprived of her hands, and a luminous boy.

Here the Bachelor of Arts paused, and a shower of chaff began.

"Is that really all?" asked the Girton girl.

"Why, this is the third ghost-story to-night without any ghost in it!"

"I don't remember saying that it was a ghost-story," replied the Bachelor of Arts; "but I thought a little anecdote of a mere 'warning' might not be unwelcome."

"But where does the warning come in?" asked the schoolboy.

"That's just what I was arriving at," replied the narrator, "when I was interrupted with as little ceremony as if I had been Mr. Gladstone in the middle of a most important speech. I was going to say that, in the Easter Vacation after my visit to the castle, I went over to Paris with a friend, a fellow of my college. We drove to the Hotel d'Alsace (I believe there is no hotel of that name; if there is, I beg the spirited proprietor's pardon, and assure him that nothing personal is intended). We marched upstairs with our bags and baggage, and jolly high stairs they were. When we had removed the soil of travel from our persons, my friend called out to me, 'I say, Jones, why shouldn't we go down by the lift.' {256} 'All right,' said I, and my friend walked to the door of the mechanical apparatus, opened it, and got in. I followed him, when the porter whose business it is to 'personally conduct' the inmates of the hotel, entered also, and was closing the door.

"His eyes met mine, and I knew him in a moment. I had seen him once before. His sallow face, black, closely shaven chin, furtive glance, and military bearing, were the face and the glance and bearing of the driver of that awful hearse!

"In a moment--more swiftly than I can tell you--I pushed past the man, threw open the door, and just managed, by a violent effort, to drag my friend on to the landing. Then the lift rose with a sudden impulse, fell again, and rushed, with frightful velocity, to the basement of the hotel, whence we heard an appalling crash, followed by groans. We rushed downstairs, and the horrible spectacle of destruction that met our eyes I shall never forget. The unhappy porter was expiring in agony; but the warning had saved my life and my friend's."

"I was that friend," said I--the collector of these anecdotes; "and so far I can testify to the truth of Jones's story."

At this moment, however, the gong for dressing sounded, and we went to our several apartments, after this emotional specimen of "Evenings at Home."