Hollow Ash... Hall

BY MARGARET BLOUNT.

CHAPTER I.—(Continued.)

"Queer as Dick's hat-band, no doubt. But I don't see how he could be offended if you let the house. There it is, lying idle—no good to him nor any one else. This gentleman has a fancy for seeing ghosts, and pays Mr. Vernon handsomely for it. What more can a man ask for?"

"I do not know," replied the agent, looking thoughtfully into the fire. "And there is no time to write—that is the worst of it. Mr. Vernon is in the Holy Land, and I don't know how long it would take a letter to reach him. Now, this gentleman wants to go out at once."

In fact I am to give him an answer tomorrow. I'm terribly perplexed about it."

"I don't see why. Say yes, of course, and think your stars for the chance."

"But if Mr. Vernon should be angry?"

"I don't see how he could be. Even if he knew, he would have time to get cool again before he met you. I should take the offer, most decidedly."

Well, I think I will. But I was quite undecided when I came in here. I'm very sure I'm not a coward, but a man, alone and on such a night as this, is apt to be nervous, and I've been told that Hollow Ash Hall is haunted."

"Haunted! Oh, I've heard that story. I thought it had been forgotten. Who is it that is supposed to walk?"

"Why, with spirituality and such matters I have nothing to do; but I am told that a lady, who bore the name of Ashton, and married Hollow Ash, and who made away with them all in a very cruel and horrible manner, and who, who makes noises and all the rest of it. I should not like to encounter her, mind. I think I have my share of courage, but I have no fancy for unnatural noises, and I hold that any one who makes a firm stand against the new-fangled nonsense is a public benefactor. I mean to do it myself, if matters do not turn out as I wish. But I hate to do it blind. For this reason I have told no one, as yet, that the attic floors of this house are said to be haunted. Not one among them dare come near the place. I'll show them that I'm not afraid to live here. And then, perhaps, they will come to their senses again, and I shall be popular in the other world are glad enough to get quit of this. Ghosts, indeed, I have no patience with such nonsense."

But, papa, if they come?" suggested Rose, with a timid glance at the close shut house.

"If they do, I'll pinch their noses with the tongs," said Mr. Cowley, solemnly, and Rose burst out laughing.

"But, papa," said Catharine, "the house is so damp."

"Damp! Nonsense! It is as dry as a bone. Don't you see that it stands on the top of a hill? How could the water get up here, I should like to know?"

"I am sure it does, and you will have lumbago and mamma rheumatism and Rose a sore throat and I a perpetual influenza. Dear papa, do give up this scheme and take us to Brighton instead!"

"Oh, yes, I think I see myself doing it!" was the grim reply. "Take you to Brighton to wear a pork-pie hat on the sands, and show your ank es on the pier! No Brighton for you at present, miss. You will stay here and do your fellow-countrymen a service. If you please, by disabusing their minds of a stupid prejudice, by means of your own experience. Drive, have you got the key to this door?"

"Here it is, sir," said the man. But he fell to the rear after presenting it. He was a lad of nineteen and had heard too much of the place not to keep at a respectful distance during the first moment of investigation.

"This lock has not been oiled since the year 17," said Mr. Cowley, puffing and blowing as he tried to turn the key. "Hang the thing, how it sticks! Bear a hand here, my good fe low, will you? Hallo!"

The key turned suddenly as he spoke, the lock yielded, and the door flew open with such violence that Mr. Cowley landed on his nose in the hall. Seeing this, his wife forgot her fears and ran to pick him up. Rose and Catharine followed, and so at last they stood together beyond the threshold of the haunted house. While Mrs. Cowley and Catherine were helping the head of the family to his feet, Rose gazed around her with breathless awe, half expecting each moment to see some ghastly form glide out to welcome them. But no one came. All was still and quiet. They stood within a small, square hall very dusty and dirty and lighted only by the fanlight over the door. A worn mat covered the floor, there was a small iron stove in the center of the hall, and, leaning against it a curiously carved walking stick, resembling the wand of a magician rather than the ordinary cane of a gentleman in the nineteenth century. Rose took this in her hand but quickly laid it down. It did not seem safety to hold it, though who would there say.

Mr. Cowley rubbed his head, felt his nose carefully all over, and pronounced himself quite sound.

"I shall have rheumatic fever, I know. My knees will never be stiff enough to live here. The house is like a well."

"Don't fear, mamma," replied Catharine, with an air of composed certainty that was peculiarly provoking to Rose. "By the time papa has had to go without breakfast and dinner once or twice, because the chimney will not draw, he will be ready enough to go away. Men may be stoics and ascetics and philosophers in theory easily enough. But all their fine doctrines go to the wall, I observe, when their stomachs come in question."

As she spoke, they drew up before their new home, and even Rose was obliged to confess in her own heart that it might have been a pleasanter one, when she looked up at the fast-closed door, and the blank range of dusty windows. Mrs. Cowley groaned again. The place was even worse than she thought, and she was wicked enough to pray secretly for a fit of the gout, or a smart twinge of lumbago, which should lay her lord and master flat on his back, and thus enable her to take him to Brighton or town even, rather than to this modern Castle of Udolpho, which she felt sure would be the scene of unheard of and disconsolate tears to the ghostly tenants which it held within.

Now, mamma, do not help your lump-ish Rose, and see which of us will find the haunted chamber first," said Mr. Cowley, coming to the door of the carriage, and Rose beamed on him with delight at the evident tropical turn that his wife and eldest daughter's temper was about to take. "Come, jump out and see how you like your future home. You are as good as the lady of the manor now, Mrs. C. What do you think of that? Did you ever expect to be so grand? Don't you feel overwhelmed at the thought of the future?"

"I think you are. And now that business is well off your mind, I do think the health of the household and such things might be looked to a little more."

Well, that is a joke, did it mistake."

I wonder how soon it will be wrong."

CHAPTER II.

So the thing was accomplished. The haunted house was let.

The next day all Hartley knew the tale by heart. The banker's name was Cowley, and the young lady who wished to see the ghost was Miss Rose Cowley, a pretty, fair, little creature, who looked as if she would shrink and die away if a mouse crossed her path. Her elder sister Catherine or Miss Cowley was a tall, dark-haired girl, with a high color and flashing black eyes—by far the most proper person, one would say, to encounter a denizen of the other world. But she did not approve of the project, and shuddered at the very name of the Hall. Mrs. Cowley, fat, fair and forty, took the matter easily, though in her heart she considered it a tempting of Providence. But she said nothing. She was devotedly attached to her stout, good-tempered husband, and had he chosen to walk into the crater of Vesuvius, I think she would have given one sigh to old England, and followed meekly in his wake.

Mr. Cowley, having made himself master of the Hall, was not long in paying it a visit. He took his family with him, and though they went in broad daylight, their carriage was escorted to the very lodge gates by a select troop of rosy-cheeked children, who stared at Rose as if she had been the Dragon of Wantley in person.

Only to the gates, however, did this youthful bodyguard venture. When the driver got down and lifted the rusty bolt from its socket the first creak dispersed the rabble like magic. A dire vision of Queen Bess in ruff and farthingale, coming down the avenue to meet these who sought to enter, affrighted them; and with one accord they set off at full speed toward the village, never daring to look behind them, or to slacken their pace until they were safe once more at their own mothers' sides.

Rose Cowley watched this exodus with laughing eyes; but her mother and sister looked as if they would gladly have followed the example of the children, and taken to their heels as well.

"Mercy preserve us!" said Mrs. Cowley, looking up at the Hall. "Who would have believed it was such a dismal place? Why, yesterday from the road it seemed pleasant!"

"Dismal, mamma!" said Rose, "I think it is anthing but that! Romantic, solitary, lonely, if you will, but surely not dismal!"

"It is only fit for rats and owls to live in," said Catharine, with a look of intense disgust. "What could papa be thinking of when he took it without even paying a visit to the place? However, there is one comfort—he likes snug, warm rooms as well as any of us, and the first glance at the interior of the old shell will be sure to disenchant him. We shall never live here, mamma, so you need not distress yourself at all about it."

"Don't be too certain," remarked Rose. "I was talking with papa this morning about it, and I asked what was to be done if the place should turn out damp and cold. What do you think his answer was?"

"Why, that in such a case we could not stop, of course."

"Not a bit of it!" replied the mischievous girl. Papa said that he thought we were all apt to pamper ourselves too much and that it would do us good to miss a few luxuries and comforts for a time."

Mrs. Cowley groaned.

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"Nonsense, my dear, don't interrupt me, if you please! Robbed and murdered, indeed! Is that likely while you have me to protect you? I merely made that remark as a warning in case such a person should be concealed here. I recommend that person not to come too near, whoever he may be; and I add, for his further information, that I shall sleep here with a revolver, loaded and capped, by my side, and if he begins any of his tricks upon travelers, I'll give him pepper, by Jove! Now, Mrs. C., come along and look at the rooms."

Trembling and disgusted the good lady followed her truculent spouse as he opened door after door within the mansion. The rooms were all dark and dreary, but some had high ceilings and plenty of windows with pleasant aspects. Soap and water and afternoon sun, carpets and bright furniture might, and a few pictures would make a comfortable place of it after all.

CHAPTER III.

Now, before the guests proposed from London to come, a change fell over them all. A mistake might seemed to be upon every heart. Mrs. Cowley looked at Catharine, who was very pale, and Rose looked at her father, who was very red. Each one seemed afraid to speak to each other, and every one looked at his neighbor as if he were a ghost. Black was the word for it. Mr. Cowley was the first to break the spell.

"Bah! I am a fool," he said, with a forced laugh. "I am ashamed of myself. And you, you silly women, you look as if you believed in ghosts. Rose, my child, you are the only one with any sense. Let us go home. I am sick of the whole affair."

And you could not have chosen a more opportune moment. A bloody corpse, with its head under its arm, could not have produced a more startling effect than the words. Mrs. Cowley looked as if she would faint. Catharine sank into a chair, and Rose looked at her father with a face of such utter consternation that he burst into a loud laugh.

"Why, what is the matter with you all?" he said. "What has frightened you? Speak, Rose, you are not afraid?"

"Papa, I—I—I am afraid of nothing," said Rose, with a gasp. "But I—I—I thought you were afraid."

"I afraid! Ha, ha, ha! Why, you little goose, I am afraid of nothing. Why, I am as brave as a lion. Now, Mrs. C., what do you think of that? Did you ever see such a pack of fools? Come, come, let us go home. I am sick of the whole affair."

"Oh, papa, I am so glad!" said Rose, with a sigh of relief. "I am sure I am not afraid, but I am very glad to go home."

"Home, indeed!" said Catharine, with a look of scorn. "Rose, you are a child. Papa, I am ashamed of you. Mamma, I am surprised at you. Do you suppose that we are going to be frightened away by a ridiculous story? Do you suppose that we are going to be driven out of our own house by a set of stupid, ignorant people?