

Shadows and Specters: A Critical Edition of “The Shadow in the Corner” by M.E. Braddon

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This edition provides a critical examination of M.E. Braddon’s “The Shadow in the Corner.” Specifically, the authors explore the ways in which themes of haunting in the Victorian period and in M.E. Braddon’s work are informed by competing notions of subjectivity and the shadowy presence of female working class figures in both the history and fiction of the time.

General Introduction

In his article “Hauntings,” author Andrew Smith traces the changing trajectory of Gothic fictions from the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, interpreting the Gothic motif of ghosts and haunting in terms of two critical historical and cultural themes, those of subjectivity and labor. The work of M.E. Braddon perfectly embodies both of these themes, and this is particularly true of her short story, “The Shadow in the Corner.” Smith argues that the motif of ghosts and hauntings in the Gothic fiction of the nineteenth century reflected a culture grappling with transforming and increasingly spectral conceptions of subjectivity.

The Victorian period inherited a host of ideas from the rise of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, which during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced a litany of discoveries and philosophies that contributed to the development of new models for theorizing the self. The transition from a geocentric to a heliocentric model of the universe destabilized subjectivity by disorienting and reordering our understanding of the universe and humanity’s place within it. Within philosophy, one of the most significant contributions was the rise of Materialism. Materialism, in opposition to preceding models of idealism and cosmology, put forth the idea that the self was entirely constructed by material processes and interactions. This philosophy created tension within idealist and cosmological schools of thought,

which put emphasis on consciousness and the origins of the universe to structure concepts of existence and the self. During the Victorian period itself, the development of atomic theory, in which scientists discovered that matter is made up of discrete units that exist separately from one another, literally fragmented the formulation of the self. Thus, scientific advancement contributed to increasingly spectral concepts of subjectivity, and the “whole” of the self became more ghostly.

These models of subjectivity were in tension with other models that, according to Smith, emerged in the Gothic literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and explored the irrational and the supernatural. Because Gothic literature anticipates psychoanalysis, Freud’s models are particularly helpful when analyzing ghost stories from the Victorian period. Freud’s models merge philosophy with scientific practice and reflect a concept of the self moving more fully into the realm of the mind. With Freud’s concept of the unconscious, suddenly, the self was not only immaterial, but unknowable, with parts of it hidden from sight and awareness. Freud’s model allows us to see what was ghostly about subjectivity in the Victorian period. In Freud, the unconscious, the realm of the repressed, was also representative of traumatic memory. In this way, psychoanalysis gives us important tools for analyzing the ways that Victorian subjectivity was further fragmented. Returning to Smith, psychoanalysis introduced a “haunted” conception of

the self (149). We can now see that Victorian science and philosophy continually deferred the concept of the self even as it constantly tried to define and “fix” it. The ghosts of early Victorian fiction, as literally destabilized subjects, represented the destabilization of subjectivity that occurred with the development of contradictory formulations of the self in the Victorian period.

Further, the Gothic fiction of the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, according to Smith, referenced the emergence of a new industrial capitalist economy. According to Smith, during the 18th century, capital became increasingly spectral. The emergence of the stock exchange, as well as the use of paper money, made “wealth appear intangible, subject to seemingly occult fluctuations in the market” (150). In addition, the rise of commodity fetishism created a sudden dissonance between labor and production. As Smith points out, we see the commodity of the table, not the labor that produced it (150). In this way, the specter of the ghost in late Victorian fiction represented the spectral, immaterial relationships between money and value, labor and production, that were introduced by an industrial capitalist system.

By pushing on the spectral economies introduced by Smith, we reveal an additional capitalist haunting. During the Industrial Revolution, the emergence of a female working class created an additional space of spectrality and anxiety within an already ghostly capitalist system. Female labor was embodied in a threshold space of capitalist paradox and temporal anachronism, transgressing and disordering boundaries of gender, race, and class.

Perhaps the clearest example of the spectrality of the female working class is the contradiction of its existence within capitalism, and the subsequent politics of its visibility. During the Victorian period, women were not supposed to work, yet made up a large part of the capitalist labor force. As a result of this contradiction, women’s labor, including the work of female miners and domestic servants, was rendered carefully invisible, relegated to underground mineshafts and within the space of the home, where it would not be seen. Female domestic servants were especially subject to this paradoxical politics of invisibility. In her book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, author Anne McClintock writes (in the aptly titled section, “The Invisible Servant”), “The housewife’s labor of leisure found its counterpart in the servant’s labor of invisibility. Servants were ordered to remain unseen, completing the filthiest

work before dawn or at night, dodging their employers, keeping to the labyrinthine back passages, remaining, at all costs, out of sight” (163). It was this relegation of women’s labor to realms of between and below, the result of its paradoxical existence within the Victorian capitalist market, that made women’s labor “suffer one of the most successful vanishing acts in modern history” (163).

Female labor in the Victorian period was also spectral in its transgression of boundary. Mining women, by performing men’s work in men’s clothing (particularly the phallic work of penetrating the earth), threatened binaries and hierarchies of gender. Female miners, blackened by coal dust, also destabilized racial boundaries, and were often referred to as a “race” or “species” apart, who were also “half savage” (115). In this way, female labor also occupied an alternate, ghostly temporal space, relegated via racialization to a “primitive” or “pre-historic” time. In addition, female domestic servants, by being paid for domestic labor, displaced categories of private, domestic space and the public space of capital and exchange. According to McClintock, by “overtly crossing the thresholds of private and public, home and market, working and middle class, servants brought into the middle class home the whiff of the marketplace, the odor of cash” which “constantly imperiled the ‘natural’ separation of private home and public market” (165).

The spectrality and ghostliness of the female working class is also represented in Gothic fictions. In *The Servant’s Hand*, author Bruce Robbins describes the depiction of servants in literature as “human blanks” and “signs” who “cannot be represented except as displaced or deferred” (23). Robbins also identifies the female laborer as a site of contradiction in literature, as someone who “functions as a sign that carries awareness of the unnaturalness and arbitrariness of signs into a social hierarchy that would like to present itself as natural, rooted, fixed” (23). As in life, the female working class of Victorian fictions embodied a space of paradox, destabilization, and transgression within capitalist economies. As Robbins notes, Victorian fictions commonly referred to servant work as a “situation” or “place,” further emphasizing the spectrality of female labor by making linguistic attempts to “fix” and orient it.

In many ways, Braddon’s own life and authorship embody these spectral movements of subjectivity and female labor within the Victorian period. Braddon, who published an incredibly prolific 80 works in her lifetime,

also authored under a gender-neutral pseudonym. Braddon’s authorship occupies a ghostly space within capitalism, as a female labor that is not supposed to be there, rendered invisible by an ungendered name. Braddon also lived with her long-term partner without marrying him, and bought out his publishing company in order to rescue him from debt. In this way, Braddon’s labor was also ghostly in its destabilization of boundary. By supporting her lover financially, Braddon transgressed hierarchical categories of gender and power.

That the female working class was rendered ghostly within the Victorian capitalist system was also reflected in Braddon’s personal social reform politics, as well as in her choice of genre. According to Eve Lynch, Braddon “agitated to experiment with fiction that considered more pressing social issues, particularly the problems she saw arising out of Victorian reform policies that ignored the private domestic trials of women and the poor” (235). In the use of the ghost story, Braddon found a vehicle for communicating her political criticisms; for Braddon, ghosts serve “as emblems of what Victorian society is unwilling to ‘see’ in its social condition” (238). According to Lynch, Braddon’s tales “are filled with characters culled from the lower orders, especially servants from the regions ‘below stairs’ whose social position in the house was analogous to the spectral apparition that haunted it” (237). Lynch goes on to say that, “like the supernatural influence quietly imposing its own order on the will of the domestic inhabitants, the servant of the house suggested a bilateral, silent estate of discontent and dis-ease cohabiting the same physical space as the family but imagined by the family as immaterial and invisible” (238). In this way, Braddon’s use of ghosts and haunting in her body of work commented on the erasure and invisibility of female labor, likening it to the ghost, in order to “repeatedly expose social inequities” (237).

Braddon’s works are also centrally concerned with issues of subjectivity; as Lynch notes, Braddon continuously satirized the materialist and individualist philosophy of the economic elite (235). Braddon’s works, including “The Shadow in the Corner,” are littered with affluent, intellectually elitist characters whose materialist philosophies are unable to account for the haunting that takes place in the narrative, unlike their “superstitious” working class counterparts. Using these devices, Braddon criticizes the way knowledge and education was centralized, often as a strategy for maintaining stratifications

and divisions of class power. In this way, Braddon’s works also illustrate the ways in which competing notions of subjectivity were intimately bound up in the spectrality of the female working class, informing the structures of class power that contributed to women’s invisibility and erasure.

It is also pertinent to note the historical connections between ghost stories and movements of scientific reasoning and social reform in the Victorian era. According to Lynch, the sudden rise in the popularity of the ghost story form coincided with a period of prolific social reforms, including the Reform Bill of 1867, which included several education reforms as well as reforms for women’s labor (238). Perhaps the most explicit representation of these entangled categories of ghostliness, subjectivity, and capital can be parsed from a popular call to action during the Victorian period, which often referenced the “spirit of reform.” Here, the word “spirit” invokes both ghostliness and constructions of subjectivity and applies to the social structures of capital and economy.

This edition includes several documents that further contextualize these themes in Braddon’s work. A diary entry from Arthur Munby, written in the 1800’s, illustrates the spectrality of the female working class through Munby’s erotic obsession with the transgression of categories of race, class, and gender by working class women. In addition, a diary entry from Munby’s partner Hannah Cullwick, herself a member of the female working class, reveals the spectral visibility of working class women by pairing descriptions of erasure with descriptions of labor. Finally, an excerpt from *Lady Audley’s Secret*, also written by Braddon, explores the ghostliness of women’s labor using the prominent theme of live burial, alluding to working women’s experiences of confinement and erasure.

Reading Braddon’s story, as well as the life of Braddon herself, within these intersections of subjectivity and capital allows us to interpret the cultural “stuff” that makes up “The Shadow in the Corner.”

Introduction to M.E. Braddon’s “The Shadow in the Corner”

What is perhaps most striking about M.E. Braddon’s ghost story “The Shadow in the Corner” is how little of the story’s narrative action is devoted to the haunting itself. Although Braddon’s narrative tells the story of the “shadow in the corner,” descriptions of the “shadow” and its ghostly effects are sparse, scattered and dislocat-

ed throughout the text. Rather, what is foregrounded are competing Victorian models of subjectivity and the spectral presence of women’s labor. One can therefore interpret the “shadow in the corner” both as a motif of competing conceptions of subjectivity, and as the ghostly existence of the female working class.

Braddon’s story begins not with a description of a haunting, but with negotiations between the master of Wildheath and his butler Mr. Skeggs over the problem of employing a “maid-of-all-work.” Mrs. Skeggs, he says, “must have a girl... a girl to trot about and wash up, and help the old lady.” In this opening exchange, Braddon’s text emphasizes not only the existence of women’s domestic wage labor, but also its extreme difficulty. Descriptions of Mrs. Skegg’s labor, including “ruling over the kitchen, pantry, and scullery,” as well as cooking, dusting, sweeping, and scrubbing, are coupled with the sympathetic acknowledgment that she “wore her life out” in these tasks. In many ways, by focusing on representations of female labor, as well as the process of employing a female servant, Braddon moves the specter of the female working class into sudden visibility. However, this visibility is often tenuous and contradictory within the narrative itself. Descriptions of female labor, that which render it visible, are coupled with subtle reinforcements of its invisibility. The female servants are remarked upon for their quietness and status as individuals with whom the master “rarely came in contact.” When the master of the house does encounter a female servant who speaks to him, he “startles” very much as if he had seen a ghost. Similarly, Mrs. Skegg, as the other “maid-of-all-work,” never actually speaks; instead, her speech is mediated and translated by her husband. In this way, Braddon’s narrative does not simply make women’s domestic labor visible. Rather, Braddon’s story constantly moves female servants between the realms of seen and unseen, emphasizing their paradoxical, ghostly status within Victorian society.

This spectral position is further reinforced by the introduction of Maria, who becomes employed at Wildheath and is later the unfortunate victim of the “shadow in the corner.” The text often mentions that Maria was educated “above her station,” emphasizing the potential of the female working class to transgress different forms of boundary. In addition, it is the presence of Maria, who is made to sleep in the haunted attic room, which facilitates the ghostly events of the story. In a fundamental sense, the narrative thrust of Braddon’s story is moved

not by the ghost, but by these negotiations over female labor and the actions of female servants. Just as the female working class acted as a largely invisible force, a “secret pressure” influencing the movement of Victorian capitalist markets, female laborers in “The Shadow in the Corner” are an absent presence that shapes the plot and progression of the narrative, embodying a paradoxical space that is at once central and peripheral.

Braddon’s tale is also threaded with constant references to competing Victorian conceptions of the self. The most prominent of these representations can be found in descriptions of the master of Wildheath, for whom “the universe, with all its inhabitants, was a great machine, governed by inexorable laws.” The master responds to the events of the haunting with an inflexible materialist philosophy: “to such a man, the idea of a ghost was simply absurd- as absurd as the assertion that two and two make S, or that a circle can be formed of a straight line.” The most literal illustration of the master’s formulations of the concept of self are imbedded in the following line describing his reaction to the ghost: “the subject offered an amusing psychological study.” Here, the text subtly engages the historical context of Victorian concepts of subjectivity; the “subject” has moved to the realm of the mind. Similarly, the act of suicide is often referred to as “self-destruction,” implying (in reverse) the psychoanalytic interpretation of “self” as something constructed.

The master’s materialist and psychoanalytic conceptions of subjectivity are contrasted with descriptions of the “folly” and “superstition” of Maria and the “country people,” whose “fancies” must be “conquered by rational treatment.” However, Braddon often satirizes the master’s materialist views, particularly in the portrayal of his speech. In addition, the master’s materialism cannot accommodate the “shadow,” which resists his universal laws and ultimately claims the life of Maria. In this way, Braddon puts competing Victorian conceptions of the self into play with one another.

Along with these direct references, descriptions of ghostly encounters with the “shadow” are often framed using a language of labor and subjectivity. When the master encounters the shadow for the first time, he realizes that “it was not the ghost of the man’s body that returned to the spot where he had suffered and perished, but the ghost of his mind- his very self.” Here, the description of the ghost is situated within a psychoanalytic model of subjectivity via the conflation of “mind” and “self.”

The “shadow” is also explained in relation to the commodity objects around it. The “shadow” is often attributed to “the angle of the wardrobe” or to a coat “flung upon a chair.” In a description of the haunted attic room, a lengthy paragraph is devoted to its objects, in which commodities suddenly take on a sinister cast. A wardrobe’s brass handles “gleamed out of the darkness like a pair of diabolical eyes”; a bed is “misshapen and deformed”; a bureau “smelt of secrets.” Similarly, this anthropomorphic language is also reversed in passages where people are compared to objects. When Mr. Skegg first speaks to the master, his sudden “breaking into speech” is described as “almost as startling as if the bust of Socrates above the bookcase had burst into human language.” This play of anthropomorphic language, rendering people as objects and objects as people, implies the ghostly dissonance between labor and production. In this way, Braddon subtly references the spectral economy of Victorian capitalism.

In many ways, the title of Braddon’s narrative offers the most concise representation of its themes of subjectivity and labor. The “shadow in the corner” echoes with a psychoanalytic motif of repressed trauma and memory, haunting the unconscious “corners” of the mind. “Shadows” also symbolically evoke the dirt of labor, and corners resonate with economic context. Corners themselves are an important part of economic architectures as the place of exchange where two points meet. Corners are also the spaces of “dirty” capital and labor that is meant to be hidden in shadows. Such is the case of prostitution, the “dirty” invisible women’s labor, which often takes place on the street corner. In these ways, Braddon’s title points to spectral and conflicted subjectivity in the Victorian period, and also to an interpretation of the female working class as the “shadow in the corner” of 1800’s capitalism.

M.E. Braddon’s “The Shadow in the Corner”¹

Wildheath Grange stood a little way back from the road, with a barren stretch of heath behind it, and a few tall fir-trees, with straggling wind-tossed heads, for its only shelter. It was a lonely house on a lonely road, little better than a lane, leading across a desolate waste of san-

dy fields to the sea-shore; and it was a house that bore a bad name among the natives of the village of Holcroft, which was the nearest place where humanity might be found.

It was a good old house, nevertheless, substantially built in the days when there was no stint of stone and timber—a good old grey stone house with many gables, deep window-seats, and a wide staircase, long dark passages, hidden doors in queer corners, closets as large as some modern rooms, and cellars in which a company of soldiers might have lain perdu.²

This spacious old mansion was given over to rats and mice, loneliness, echoes, and the occupation of three elderly people: Michael Bascom, whose forebears had been landowners of importance in the neighbourhood, and his two servants, Daniel Skegg and his wife, who had served the owner of that grim old house ever since he left the university, where he had lived fifteen years of his life—five as student, and ten as professor of natural science.

At three-and-thirty Michael Bascom had seemed a middle-aged man; at fifty-six he looked and moved and spoke like an old man. During that interval of twenty-three years he had lived alone in Wildheath Grange, and the country people told each other that the house had made him what he was. This was a fanciful and superstitious notion on their part, doubtless, yet it would not have been difficult to have traced a certain affinity between the dull grey building and the man who lived in it. Both seemed alike remote from the common cares and interests of humanity; both had an air of settled melancholy, engendered by perpetual solitude; both had the same faded complexion, the same look of slow decay.

Yet lonely as Michael Bascom’s life was at Wildheath Grange, he would not on any account have altered its tenor. He had been glad to exchange the comparative seclusion of college rooms for the unbroken solitude of Wildheath. He was a fanatic in his love of scientific research, and his quiet days were filled to the brim with labours that seldom failed to interest and satisfy him. There were periods of depression, occasional moments of doubt, when the goal towards which he strove seemed unattainable, and his spirit fainted within him. Happily such times were rare with him. He had a dogged power of continuity which ought to have carried him to the highest pinnacle of achievement, and which perhaps

Notes

1. M.E. Braddon. “The Shadow in the Corner.” *All the Year Round*. Vol. 23. Extra Summer Number. (London, 1879) 1-11.

2. Perdu, meaning hidden or concealed. In Latin, perdere means to lose. Although it is important to note the now obsolete use of the word as a military phrase that referred to a soldier set on an especially hazardous mission.

might ultimately have won for him a grand name and a world-wide renown, but for a catastrophe which burdened the declining years of his harmless life with an unconquerable remorse.

One autumn morning—when he had lived just three-and-twenty years at Wildheath, and had only lately begun to perceive that his faithful butler and body servant, who was middle-aged when he first employed him, was actually getting old—Mr. Bascom’s breakfast meditations over the latest treatise on the atomic theory³ were interrupted by an abrupt demand from that very Daniel Skegg. The man was accustomed to wait upon his master in the most absolute silence, and his sudden breaking out into speech was almost as startling as if the bust of Socrates above the bookcase had burst into human language.

“It’s no use,” said Daniel; “my missus must have a girl!”

“A what?” demanded Mr. Bascom, without taking his eyes from the line he had been reading.

“A girl—a girl to trot about and wash up, and help the old lady. She’s getting weak on her legs, poor soul. We’ve none of us grown younger in the last twenty years.”

“Twenty years!” echoed Michael Bascom scornfully. “What is twenty years in the formation of a strata—what even in the growth of an oak—the cooling of a volcano!”

“Not much, perhaps, but it’s apt to tell upon the bones of a human being.”

“The manganese⁴ staining to be seen upon some skulls would certainly indicate—” began the scientist dreamily.

“I wish my bones were only as free from rheumatics as they were twenty years ago,” pursued Daniel testily; “and then, perhaps, I should make light of twenty years. Howsoever, the long and the short of it is, my missus must have a girl. She can’t go on trotting up and down these everlasting passages, and standing in that stone scullery year after year, just as if she was a young woman. She must have a girl to help.”

“Let her have twenty girls,” said Mr. Bascom, going back to his book.

“What’s the use of talking like that, sir. Twenty girls, indeed! We shall have rare work to get one.”

“Because the neighbourhood is sparsely populated?” interrogated Mr. Bascom, still reading.

“No, sir. Because this house is known to be haunted.”

Michael Bascom laid down his book, and turned a look of grave reproach upon his servant.

“Skegg,” he said in a severe voice, “I thought you had lived long enough with me to be superior to any folly of that kind.”

“I don’t say that I believe in ghosts,” answered Daniel with a semi-apologetic air; “but the country people do. There’s not a mortal among ‘em that will venture across our threshold after nightfall.”

“Merely because Anthony Bascom, who led a wild life in London, and lost his money and land, came home here broken-hearted, and is supposed to have destroyed himself in this house—the only remnant of property that was left him out of a fine estate.”

“Supposed to have destroyed himself!” cried Skegg; “why the fact is as well known as the death of Queen Elizabeth, or the great fire of London. Why, wasn’t he buried at the cross-roads⁵ between here and Holcroft?”

“An idle tradition, for which you could produce no substantial proof,” retorted Mr. Bascom.

“I don’t know about proof; but the country people believe it as firmly as they believe their Gospel.”

“If their faith in the Gospel was a little stronger they need not trouble themselves about Anthony Bascom.”

“Well,” grumbled Daniel, as he began to clear the table, “a girl of some kind we must get, but she’ll have to be a foreigner, or a girl that’s hard driven for a place.”

When Daniel Skegg said a foreigner, he did not mean the native of some distant clime, but a girl who had not been born and bred at Holcroft. Daniel had been raised and reared in that insignificant hamlet, and, small and dull as it was, he considered the world beyond it only margin.

Michael Bascom was too deep in the atomic theory to give a second thought to the necessities of an old servant. Mrs. Skegg was an individual with whom he rarely came in contact. She lived for the most part in a gloomy region at the north end of the house, where she ruled over the solitude of a kitchen, that looked like a cathedral, and numerous offices of the sculler, larder, and pantry class, where she carried on a perpetual warfare with spiders and beetles, and wore her old life out in the labour of sweeping and scrubbing. She was a woman of severe aspect, dogmatic piety, and a bitter tongue. She

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3. Atomic theory at this time had advanced only so far as discovering the properties of cathode rays. Only ten years earlier, Dmitri Mendeleev had arranged the elements into seven groups based on their similar properties, a discovery which became known as Periodic Law.

4. Manganese is a natural element discovered in 1774. It is used for industrial alloys, and its ions are used for pigmentation.

5. Historically, criminals and those who committed suicide were buried at cross-roads as the “cross” was seen as the next best burial site to consecrated ground.

was a good plain cook, and ministered diligently to her master’s wants. He was not an epicure, but liked his life to be smooth and easy, and the equilibrium of his mental power would have been disturbed by a bad dinner.

He heard no more about the proposed addition to his household for a space of ten days, when Daniel Skegg again startled him amidst his studious repose by the abrupt announcement:

“I’ve got a girl!”

“Oh,” said Michael Bascom; “have you?” and he went on with his book.

This time he was reading an essay on phosphorus and its functions in relation to the human brain.

“Yes,” pursued Daniel in his usual grumbling tone; “she was a waif and stray, or I shouldn’t have got her. If she’d been a native she’d never have come to us.”

“I hope she’s respectable,” said Michael.

“Respectable! That’s the only fault she has, poor thing. She’s too good for the place. She’s never been in service before, but she says she’s willing to work, and I daresay my old woman will be able to break her in. Her father was a small tradesman at Yarmouth. He died a month ago, and left this poor thing homeless. Mrs. Midge, at Holcroft, is her aunt, and she said to the girl, Come and stay with me till you get a place; and the girl has been staying with Mrs. Midge for the last three weeks, trying to hear of a place. When Mrs. Midge heard that my missus wanted a girl to help, she thought it would be the very thing for her niece Maria. Luckily Maria had heard nothing about this house, so the poor innocent dropped me a curtsy, and said she’d be thankful to come, and would do her best to learn her duty. She’d had an easy time of it with her father, who had educated her above her station, like a fool as he was,” growled Daniel.

“By your own account I’m afraid you’ve made a bad bargain,” said Michael. “You don’t want a young lady to clean kettles and pans.”

“If she was a young duchess my old woman would make her work,” retorted Skegg decisively.

“And pray where are you going to put this girl?” asked Mr. Bascom, rather irritably; “I can’t have a strange young woman tramping up and down the passages outside my room. You know what a wretched sleeper I am, Skegg. A mouse behind the wainscot is enough to wake me.”

“I’ve thought of that,” answered the butler, with his

look of ineffable wisdom. “I’m not going to put her on your floor. She’s to sleep in the attics.”

“Which room?”

“The big one at the north end of the house. That’s the only ceiling that doesn’t let water. She might as well sleep in a shower-bath as in any of the other attics.”

“The room at the north end,” repeated Mr. Bascom thoughtfully; “isn’t that—?”

“Of course it is,” snapped Skegg; “but she doesn’t know anything about it.”

Mr. Bascom went back to his books, and forgot all about the orphan from Yarmouth, until one morning on entering his study he was startled by the appearance of a strange girl, in a neat black and white cotton gown, busy dusting the volumes which were stacked in blocks upon his spacious writing-table—and doing it with such deft and careful hands that he had no inclination to be angry at this unwonted liberty. Old Mrs. Skegg had religiously refrained from all such dusting, on the plea that she did not wish to interfere with the master’s ways. One of the master’s ways, therefore, had been to inhale a good deal of dust in the course of his studies.

The girl was a slim little thing, with a pale and somewhat old-fashioned face, flaxen hair, braided under a neat muslin cap, a very fair complexion, and light blue eyes. They were the lightest blue eyes Michael Bascom had ever seen, but there was a sweetness and gentleness in their expression which atoned for their insipid colour.

“I hope you do not object to my dusting your books, sir,” she said, dropping a curtsy.

She spoke with a quaint precision which struck Michael Bascom as a pretty thing in its way.

“No; I don’t object to cleanliness, so long as my books and papers are not disturbed. If you take a volume off my desk, replace it on the spot you took it from. That’s all I ask.”

“I will be very careful, sir.”

“When did you come here?”

“Only this morning, sir.”

The student seated himself at his desk, and the girl withdrew, drifting out of the room as noiselessly as a flower blown across the threshold.⁶ Michael Bascom looked after her curiously. He had seen very little of youthful womanhood in his dry-as-dust career, and he wondered at this girl as at a creature of a species hitherto unknown to him. How fairly and delicately she was

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6. Servants at the time were expected to be both silent and unseen. This idea even helped mold the construction of houses so that they were built with secret passageways and corridors for the servants to use for the purpose of remaining out of sight.

fashioned; what a translucent skin; what soft and pleasing accents issued from those rose-tinted lips. A pretty thing, assuredly, this kitchen wench! A pity that in all this busy world there could be no better work found for her than the scouring of pots and pans.

Absorbed in considerations about dry bones, Mr. Bascom thought no more of the pale-faced handmaiden. He saw her no more about his rooms. Whatever work she did there was done early in the morning, before the scholar’s breakfast.

She had been a week in the house, when he met her one day in the hall. He was struck by the change in her appearance.

The girlish lips had lost their rose-bud hue; the pale blue eyes had a frightened look, and there were dark rings round them, as in one whose nights had been sleepless, or troubled by evil dreams.

Michael Bascom was so startled by an undefinable look in the girl’s face that, reserved as he was by habit and nature, he expanded so far as to ask her what ailed her.

“There is something amiss, I am sure,” he said. “What is it?”

“Nothing, sir,” she faltered, looking still more scared at his question. “Indeed, it is nothing; or nothing worth troubling you about.”

“Nonsense. Do you suppose, because I live among books, I have no sympathy with my fellow-creatures? Tell me what is wrong with you, child. You have been grieving about the father you have lately lost, I suppose.”

“No, sir; it is not that. I shall never leave off being sorry for that. It is a grief which will last me all my life.”

“What, there is something else then?” asked Michael impatiently. “I see; you are not happy here. Hard work does not suit you. I thought as much.”

“Oh, sir, please don’t think that,” cried the girl, very earnestly. “Indeed, I am glad to work—glad to be in service; it is only—”

She faltered and broke down, the tears rolling slowly from her sorrowful eyes, despite her effort to keep them back.

“Only what?” cried Michael, growing angry. “The girl is full of secrets and mysteries. What do you mean, wench?”

“I—I know it is very foolish, sir; but I am afraid of the room where I sleep.”

“Afraid! Why?”

“Shall I tell you the truth, sir? Will you promise not to be angry?”

“I will not be angry if you will only speak plainly; but you provoke me by these hesitations and suppressions.”

“And please, sir, do not tell Mrs. Skegg that I have told you. She would scold me; or perhaps even send me away.”

“Mrs. Skegg shall not scold you. Go on, child.”

“You may not know the room where I sleep, sir; it is a large room at one end of the house, looking towards the sea. I can see the dark line of water from the window, and I wonder sometimes to think that it is the same ocean I used to see when I was a child at Yarmouth. It is very lonely, sir, at the top of the house. Mr. and Mrs. Skegg sleep in a little room near the kitchen, you know, sir, and I am quite alone on the top floor.”

“Skegg told me you had been educated in advance of your position in life, Maria. I should have thought the first effect of a good education would have been to make you superior to any foolish fancies about empty rooms.”

“Oh, pray, sir, do not think it is any fault in my education. Father took such pains with me; he spared no expense in giving me as good an education as a tradesman’s daughter need wish for. And he was a religious man, sir. He did not believe”—here she paused, with a suppressed shudder—“in the spirits of the dead appearing to the living, since the days of miracles, when the ghost of Samuel appeared to Saul.”⁷

He never put any foolish ideas into my head, sir. I hadn’t a thought of fear when I first lay down to rest in the big lonely room upstairs.”

“Well, what then?”

“But on the very first night,” the girl went on breathlessly, “I felt weighed down in my sleep as if there were some heavy burden laid upon my chest. It was not a bad dream, but it was a sense of trouble that followed me all through my sleep; and just at daybreak—it begins to be light a little after six—I woke suddenly, with the cold perspiration pouring down my face, and knew that there was something dreadful in the room.”

“What do you mean by something dreadful? Did you see anything?”

“Not much, sir; but it froze the blood in my veins, and I knew it was this that had been following me and weighing upon me all through my sleep. In the corner, between

Notes

7. In the 1 Samuel 28, King Saul seeks out a woman who can speak to the spirits of the dead. The woman allows him to speak with Samuel, who warns him that the Lord will allow Saul’s army to be defeated and that he and his sons will die.

the fire-place and the wardrobe, I saw a shadow—a dim, shapeless shadow—”

“Produced by an angle of the wardrobe, I daresay.”

“No, sir; I could see the shadow of the wardrobe, distinct and sharp, as if it had been painted on the wall. This shadow was in the corner—a strange, shapeless mass; or, if it had any shape at all, it seemed—”

“What?” asked Michael eagerly.

“The shape of a dead body hanging against the wall!”

Michael Bascom grew strangely pale, yet he affected utter incredulity.

“Poor child,” he said kindly; “you have been fretting about your father until your nerves are in a weak state, and you are full of fancies. A shadow in the corner, indeed; why, at daybreak, every corner is full of shadows. My old coat, flung upon a chair, will make you as good a ghost as you need care to see.”

“Oh, sir, I have tried to think it is my fancy. But I have had the same burden weighing me down every night. I have seen the same shadow every morning.”

“But when broad daylight comes, can you not see what stuff your shadow is made of?”

“No, sir: the shadow goes before it is broad daylight.”

“Of course, just like other shadows. Come, come, get these silly notions out of your head, or you will never do for the work-a-day world. I could easily speak to Mrs. Skegg, and make her give you another room, if I wanted to encourage you in your folly. But that would be about the worst thing I could do for you. Besides, she tells me that all the other rooms on that floor are damp; and, no doubt, if she shifted you into one of them, you would discover another shadow in another corner, and get rheumatism into the bargain. No, my good girl, you must try to prove yourself the better for a superior education.”

“I will do my best, sir,” Maria answered meekly, dropping a curtsy.

Maria went back to the kitchen sorely depressed. It was a dreary life she led at Wildheath Grange—dreary by day, awful by night; for the vague burden and the shapeless shadow, which seemed so slight a matter to the elderly scholar, were unspeakably terrible to her. Nobody had told her that the house was haunted, yet she walked about those echoing passages wrapped round with a cloud of fear. She had no pity from Daniel Skegg and his wife. Those two pious souls had made up their minds

that the character of the house should be upheld, so far as Maria went. To her, as a foreigner, the Grange should be maintained to be an immaculate dwelling, tainted by no sulphurous blast⁸ from the under world. A willing, biddable girl had become a necessary element in the existence of Mrs. Skegg. That girl had been found, and that girl must be kept. Any fancies of a supernatural character must be put down with a high hand.

“Ghosts, indeed!” cried the amiable Skegg. “Read your Bible, Maria, and don’t talk no more about ghosts.”

“There are ghosts in the Bible,” said Maria, with a shiver at the recollection of certain awful passages in the Scripture she knew so well.

“Ah, they was in their right place, or they wouldn’t ha’ been there,” retorted Mrs. Skegg. “You ain’t agoin’ to pick holes in your Bible, I hope, Maria, at your time of life.”

Maria sat down quietly in her corner by the kitchen fire, and turned over the leaves of her dead father’s Bible till she came to the chapters they two had loved best and oftenest read together. He had been a simple-minded, straightforward man, the Yarmouth cabinet-maker—a man full of aspirations after good, innately refined, instinctively religious. He and his motherless girl had spent their lives alone together, in the neat little home which Maria had so soon learnt to cherish and beautify; and they had loved each other with an almost romantic love. They had had the same tastes, the same ideas. Very little had sufficed to make them happy. But inexorable death parted father and daughter, in one of those sharp, sudden partings which are like the shock of an earthquake—instantaneous ruin, desolation, and despair.

Maria’s fragile form had bent before the tempest. She had lived through a trouble that might have crushed a stronger nature. Her deep religious convictions, and her belief that this cruel parting would not be for ever, had sustained her. She faced life, and its cares and duties, with a gentle patience which was the noblest form of courage.

Michael Bascom told himself that the servant-girl’s foolish fancy about the room that had been given her was not a matter of serious consideration. Yet the idea dwelt in his mind unpleasantly, and disturbed him at his labours. The exact sciences require the complete power of a man’s brain, his utmost attention; and on this particular evening Michael found that he was only giving his work a part of his attention. The girl’s pale face, the girl’s tremulous tones,

Notes

8. In Revelation 21:8, Hell is described as a lake of fire and burning sulfur or brimstone which will be the “second death” for those who are cowards or disbelievers, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and liars.

thrust themselves into the foreground of his thoughts.

He closed his book with a fretful sigh, wheeled his large arm-chair round to the fire, and gave himself up to contemplation. To attempt study with so disturbed a mind was useless. It was a dull grey evening, early in November; the student's reading-lamp was lighted, but the shutters were not yet shut, nor the curtains drawn. He could see the leaden sky outside his windows, the fir-tree tops tossing in the angry wind. He could hear the wintry blast whistling amidst the gables, before it rushed off seaward with a savage howl that sounded like a war-whoop.

Michael Bascom shivered, and drew nearer the fire.

“It's childish, foolish nonsense,” he said to himself, “yet it's strange she should have that fancy about the shadow, for they say Anthony Bascom destroyed himself in that room. I remember hearing it when I was a boy, from an old servant whose mother was housekeeper at the great house in Anthony's time. I never heard how he died, poor fellow—whether he poisoned himself, or shot himself, or cut his throat; but I've been told that was the room. Old Skegg has heard it too. I could see that by his manner when he told me the girl was to sleep there.”

He sat for a long time, till the grey of evening outside his study windows changed to the black of night, and the war-whoop of the wind died away to a low complaining murmur. He sat looking into the fire, and letting his thoughts wander back to the past and the traditions he had heard in his boyhood.

That was a sad, foolish story of his great-uncle, Anthony Bascom: the pitiful story of a wasted fortune and a wasted life. A riotous collegiate career at Cambridge, a racing-stable at Newmarket, an imprudent marriage, a dissipated life in London, a runaway wife; an estate forfeited to Jew money-lenders,⁹ and then the fatal end.

Michael had often heard that dismal story: how, when Anthony Bascom's fair false wife had left him, when his credit was exhausted, and his friends had grown tired of him, and all was gone except Wildheath Grange, Anthony, the broken-down man of fashion, had come to that lonely house unexpectedly one night, and had ordered his bed to be got ready for him in the room where he used to sleep when he came to the place for the wild duck shooting, in his boyhood. His old blunderbuss was still hanging over the mantelpiece, where he had left it when he came into the property, and could afford to buy

the newest thing in fowling-pieces. He had not been to Wildheath for fifteen years; nay, for a good many of those years he had almost forgotten that the dreary old house belonged to him.

The woman who had been housekeeper at Bascom Park, till house and lands had passed into the hands of the Jews, was at this time the sole occupant of Wildheath. She cooked some supper for her master, and made him as comfortable as she could in the long untenanted dining-room; but she was distressed to find, when she cleared the table after he had gone upstairs to bed, that he had eaten hardly anything.

Next morning she got his breakfast ready in the same room, which she managed to make brighter and cheerier than it had looked overnight. Brooms, dusting-brushes, and a good fire did much to improve the aspect of things. But the morning wore on to noon, and the old housekeeper listened in vain for her master's footfall on the stairs. Noon waned to late afternoon. She had made no attempt to disturb him, thinking that he had worn himself out by a tedious journey on horseback, and that he was sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. But when the brief November day clouded with the first shadows of twilight, the old woman grew seriously alarmed, and went upstairs to her master's door, where she waited in vain for any reply to her repeated calls and knockings.

The door was locked on the inside, and the housekeeper was not strong enough to break it open. She rushed downstairs again full of fear, and ran bare-headed out into the lonely road. There was no habitation nearer than the turnpike on the old coach road, from which this side road branched off to the sea. There was scanty hope of a chance passer-by. The old woman ran along the road, hardly knowing whither she was going or what she was going to do, but with a vague idea that she must get somebody to help her.

Chance favoured her. A cart, laden with sea-weed, came lumbering slowly along from the level line of sands yonder where the land melted into water. A heavy lumbering farm-labourer walked beside the cart.

“For God's sake, come in and burst open my master's door!” she entreated, seizing the man by the arm. “He's lying dead, or in a fit, and I can't get to help him.”

“All right, missus,” answered the man, as if such an invitation were a matter of daily occurrence. “Whoa,

Notes

9. Author M. E. Braddon held anti-Semitic prejudices, like much of Europe at that time. Many Jewish people experienced prejudice in both secular and religious arenas.

Dobbin; stond still, horse, and be donged to thee.”

Dobbin was glad enough to be brought to anchor on the patch of waste grass in front of the Grange garden. His master followed the housekeeper upstairs, and shattered the old-fashioned box-lock with one blow of his ponderous fist.

The old woman’s worst fear was realised. Anthony Bascom was dead. But the mode and manner of his death Michael had never been able to learn. The housekeeper’s daughter, who told him the story, was an old woman when he was a boy. She had only shaken her head, and looked unutterable things, when he questioned her too closely. She had never even admitted that the old squire had committed suicide. Yet the tradition of his self-destruction was rooted in the minds of the natives of Holcroft: and there was a settled belief that his ghost, at certain times and seasons, haunted Wildheath Grange.

Now Michael Bascom was a stern materialist. For him the universe with all its inhabitants, was a great machine, governed by inexorable laws. To such a man the idea of a ghost was simply absurd--as absurd as the assertion that two and two make five, or that a circle can be formed of a straight line. Yet he had a kind of dilettante interest in the idea of a mind which could believe in ghosts. The subject offered an amusing psychological study. This poor little pale girl, now, had evidently got some supernatural terror into her head, which could only be conquered by rational treatment.

“I know what I ought to do,” Michael Bascom said to himself suddenly. “I’ll occupy that room myself tonight, and demonstrate to this foolish girl that her notion about the shadow is nothing more than a silly fancy, bred of timidity and low spirits. An ounce of proof is better than a pound of argument. If I can prove to her that I have spent a night in the room, and seen no such shadow, she will understand what an idle thing superstition is.”

Daniel came in presently to shut the shutters.

“Tell your wife to make up my bed in the room where Maria has been sleeping, and to put her into one of the rooms on the first floor for to-night, Skegg,” said Mr. Bascom.

“Sir?”

Mr. Bascom repeated his order.

“That silly wench has been complaining to you about her room,” Skegg exclaimed indignantly. “She doesn’t deserve to be well fed and cared for in a comfortable home. She ought to go to the workhouse.”

“Don’t be angry with the poor girl, Skegg. She has taken a foolish fancy into her head, and I want to show her how silly she is,” said Mr. Bascom.

“And you want to sleep in his—in that room yourself,” said the butler.

“Precisely.”

“Well,” mused Skegg, “if he does walk—which I don’t believe—he was your own flesh and blood; and I don’t suppose he’ll do you any hurt.”

When Daniel Skegg went back to the kitchen he railed mercilessly at poor Maria, who sat pale and silent in her corner by the hearth, darning old Mrs. Skegg’s grey worsted stockings, which were the roughest and harshest armour that ever human foot clothed itself withal. “Was there ever such a whimsical, fine, lady-like miss,” demanded Daniel, “to come into a gentleman’s house, and drive him out of his own bedroom to sleep in an attic, with her nonsenses and vagaries.” If this was the result of being educated above one’s station, Daniel declared that he was thankful he had never got so far in his schooling as to read words of two syllables without spelling. Education might be hanged for him, if this was all it led to.

“I am very sorry,” faltered Maria, weeping silently over her work. “Indeed, Mr. Skegg, I made no complaint. My master questioned me, and I told him the truth. That was all”

“All!” exclaimed Mr. Skegg irately; “all, indeed! I should think it was enough.”

Poor Maria held her peace. Her mind, fluttered by Daniel’s unkindness, had wandered away from that bleak big kitchen to the lost home of the past—the snug little parlour where she and her father had sat beside the cosy hearth on such a night as this; she with her smart work-box and her plain sewing, he with the newspaper he loved to read; the petted cat purring on the rug, the kettle singing on the bright brass trivet, the tea-tray pleasantly suggestive of the most comfortable meal in the day.

Oh, those happy nights, that dear companionship! Were they really gone for ever, leaving nothing behind them but unkindness and servitude?

Michael Bascom retired later than usual that night. He was in the habit of sitting at his books long after every other lamp but his own had been extinguished. The Skeggs had subsided into silence and darkness in their drear ground-floor bed-chamber. Tonight his studies were of a peculiarly interesting kind, and belonged to the order of recreative reading rather than of hard work. He was deep in the history of that mysterious people

who had their dwelling-place in the Swiss lakes, and was much exercised by certain speculations and theories about them.

The old eight-day clock¹⁰ on the stairs was striking two as Michael slowly ascended, candle in hand, to the hitherto unknown region of the attics. At the top of the staircase he found himself facing a dark narrow passage which led northwards, a passage that was in itself sufficient to strike terror to a superstitious mind, so black and uncanny did it look.

“Poor child,” mused Mr. Bascom, thinking of Maria; “this attic floor is rather dreary, and for a young mind prone to fancies—”

He had opened the door of the north room by this time, and stood looking about him.

It was a large room, with a ceiling that sloped on one side, but was fairly lofty upon the other; an old-fashioned room, full of old-fashioned furniture—big, ponderous, clumsy—associated with a day that was gone and people that were dead. A walnut-wood wardrobe stared him in the face—a wardrobe with brass handles, which gleamed out of the darkness like diabolical eyes. There was a tall four-post bedstead, which had been cut down on one side to accommodate the slope of the ceiling, and which had a misshapen and deformed aspect in consequence. There was an old mahogany bureau, that smelt of secrets. There were some heavy old chairs with rush bottoms, mouldy with age, and much worn. There was a corner washstand, with a big basin and a small jug—the odds and ends of past years. Carpet there was none, save a narrow strip beside the bed.

“It is a dismal room,” mused Michael, with the same touch of pity for Maria’s weakness which he had felt on the landing just now.

To him it mattered nothing where he slept; but having let himself down to a lower level by his interest in the Swiss lake-people, he was in a manner humanised by the lightness of his evening’s reading, and was even inclined to compassionate the weaknesses of a foolish girl.

He went to bed, determined to sleep his soundest. The bed was comfortable, well supplied with blankets, rather luxurious than otherwise, and the scholar had that agreeable sense of fatigue which promises profound and restful slumber.

He dropped off to sleep quickly, but woke with a start

ten minutes afterwards. What was this consciousness of a burden of care that had awakened him—this sense of all-pervading trouble that weighed upon his spirits and oppressed his heart—this icy horror of some terrible crisis in life through which he must inevitably pass? To him these feelings were as novel as they were painful. His life had flowed on with smooth and sluggish tide, unbroken by so much as a ripple of sorrow. Yet to-night he felt all the pangs of unavailing remorse; the agonising memory of a life wasted; the stings of humiliation and disgrace, shame, ruin; a hideous death, which he had doomed himself to die by his own hand. These were the horrors that pressed him round and weighed him down as he lay in Anthony Bascom’s room.

Yes, even he, the man who could recognise nothing in nature, or in nature’s God, better or higher than an irresponsible and invariable machine governed by mechanical laws, was fain to admit that here he found himself face to face with a psychological mystery. This trouble, which came between him and sleep, was the trouble that had pursued Anthony Bascom on the last night of his life. So had the suicide felt as he lay in that lonely room, perhaps striving to rest his wearied brain with one last earthly sleep before he passed to the unknown intermediate land where all is darkness and slumber. And that troubled mind had haunted the room ever since. It was not the ghost of the man’s body that returned to the spot where he had suffered and perished, but the ghost of his mind—his very self; no meaningless simulacrum of the clothes he wore, and the figure that filled them.

Michael Bascom was not the man to abandon his high ground of sceptical philosophy without a struggle. He tried his hardest to conquer this oppression that weighed upon mind and sense. Again and again he succeeded in composing himself to sleep, but only to wake again and again to the same torturing thoughts, the same remorse, the same despair. So the night passed in unutterable weariness; for though he told himself that the trouble was not his trouble, that there was no reality in the burden, no reason for the remorse, these vivid fancies were as painful as realities, and took as strong a hold upon him.

The first streak of light crept in at the window—dim, and cold, and grey; then came twilight, and he looked at the corner between the wardrobe and the door.

Yes; there was the shadow: not the shadow of the

Notes

10. To work properly, most clocks had to be wound by hand before electricity was available. Eight-day clocks only had to be wound every eight days.

wardrobe only—that was clear enough, but a vague and shapeless something which darkened the dull brown wall; so faint, so shadow, that he could form no conjecture as to its nature, or the thing it represented. He determined to watch this shadow till broad daylight; but the weariness of the night had exhausted him, and before the first dimness of dawn had passed away he had fallen fast asleep, and was tasting the blessed balm of undisturbed slumber. When he woke the winter sun was shining in at the lattice, and the room had lost its gloomy aspect. It looked old-fashioned, and grey, and brown, and shabby; but the depth of its gloom had fled with the shadows and the darkness of night.

Mr. Bascom rose refreshed by a sound sleep, which had lasted nearly three hours. He remembered the wretched feelings which had gone before that renovating slumber; but he recalled his strange sensations only to despise them, and he despised himself for having attached any importance to them.

“Indigestion very likely,” he told himself; “or perhaps mere fancy, engendered of that foolish girl’s story. The wisest of us is more under the dominion of imagination than he would care to confess. Well, Maria shall not sleep in this room any more. There is no particular reason why she should, and she shall not be made unhappy to please old Skegg and his wife.”

When he had dressed himself in his usual leisurely way, Mr. Bascom walked up to the corner where he had seen or imagined the shadow, and examined the spot carefully.

At first sight he could discover nothing of a mysterious character. There was no door in the papered wall, no trace of a door that had been there in the past. There was no trap-door in the worm-eaten boards. There was no dark ineradicable stain to hint at murder. There was not the faintest suggestion of a secret or a mystery.

He looked up at the ceiling. That was sound enough, save for a dirty patch here and there where the rain had blistered it.

Yes; there was something--an insignificant thing, yet with a suggestion of grimness which startled him.

About a foot below the ceiling he saw a large iron hook projecting from the wall, just above the spot where he had seen the shadow of a vaguely defined form. He mounted on a chair the better to examine this hook, and to understand, if he could, the purpose for which it had been put there.

It was old and rusty. It must have been there for many years. Who could have placed it there, and why? It was not the kind of hook upon which one would hang a picture or one’s garments. It was placed in an obscure corner. Had Anthony Bascom put it there on the night he died; or did he find it there ready for a fatal use?

“If I were a superstitious man,” thought Michael, “I should be inclined to believe that Anthony Bascom hung himself from that rusty old hook.”

“Sleep well, sir?” asked Daniel, as he waited upon his master at breakfast.

“Admirably,” answered Michael, determined not to gratify the man’s curiosity.

He had always resented the idea that Wildheath Grange was haunted.

“Oh, indeed, sir. You were so late that I fancied—”

“Late, yes! I slept so well that I overshot my usual hour for waking. But, by-the-way, Skegg, as that poor girl objects to the room, let her sleep somewhere else. It can’t make any difference to us, and it may make some difference to her.”

“Humph!” muttered Daniel in his grumpy way; “you didn’t see anything queer up there, did you?”

“See anything? Of course not.”

“Well, then, why should she see things? It’s all her silly fiddle-faddle.”

“Never mind, let her sleep in another room.”

“There ain’t another room on the top floor that’s dry.”

“Then let her sleep on the floor below. She creeps about quietly enough, poor little timid thing. She won’t disturb me.”

Daniel grunted, and his master understood the grunt to mean obedient assent; but here Mr. Bascom was unhappily mistaken. The proverbial obstinacy of the pig family is as nothing compared with the obstinacy of a cross-grained old man, whose narrow mind has never been illuminated by education. Daniel was beginning to feel jealous of his master’s compassionate interest in the orphan girl. She was a sort of gentle clinging thing that might creep into an elderly bachelor’s heart unawares, and make herself a comfortable nest there.

“We shall have fine carryings-on, and me and my old woman will be nowhere, if I don’t put down my heel pretty strong upon this nonsense,” Daniel muttered to himself, as he carried the breakfast-tray to the pantry.

Maria met him in the passage.

“Well, Mr. Skegg, what did my master say?” she asked

breathlessly.

“Did he see anything strange in the room?”

“No, girl. What should he see? He said you were a fool.”

“Nothing disturbed him? And he slept there peacefully?” faltered Maria.

“Never slept better in his life. Now don’t you begin to feel ashamed of yourself?”

“Yes,” she answered meekly; “I am ashamed of being so full of fancies. I will go back to my room tonight, Mr. Skegg, if you like, and I will never complain of it again.”

“I hope you won’t,” snapped Skegg; “you’ve given us trouble enough already.”

Maria sighed, and went about her work in saddest silence. The day wore slowly on, like all other days in that lifeless old house. The scholar sat in his study; Maria moved softly from room to room, sweeping and dusting in the cheerless solitude. The mid-day sun faded into the grey of afternoon, and evening came down like a blight upon the dull old house.

Throughout that day Maria and her master never met. Anyone who had been so far interested in the girl as to observe her appearance would have seen that she was unusually pale, and that her eyes had a resolute look, as of one who was resolved to face a painful ordeal. She ate hardly anything all day. She was curiously silent. Skegg and his wife put down both these symptoms to temper.

“She won’t eat and she won’t talk,” said Daniel to the partner of his joys. “That means sulkiness, and I never allowed sulkiness to master me when I was a young man, and you tried it on as a young woman, and I’m not going to be conquered by sulkiness in my old age.”

Bed-time came, and Maria bade the Skeggs a civil good-night, and went up to her lonely garret without a murmur.

The next morning came, and Mrs. Skegg looked in vain for her patient hand-maiden, when she wanted Maria’s services in preparing the breakfast.

“The wench sleeps sound enough this morning,” said the old woman. “Go and call her, Daniel. My poor legs can’t stand them stairs.”

“Your poor legs are getting uncommon useless,” muttered Daniel testily, as he went to do his wife’s behest.

He knocked at the door, and called Maria—once, twice, thrice, many times; but there was no reply. He tried the door, and found it locked. He shook the door violently, cold with fear.

Then he told himself that the girl had played him a

trick. She had stolen away before daybreak, and left the door locked to frighten him. But, no; this could not be, for he could see the key in the lock when he knelt down and put his eye to the keyhole. The key prevented his seeing into the room.

“She’s in there, laughing in her sleeve at me,” he told himself; “but I’ll soon be even with her.”

There was a heavy bar on the staircase, which was intended to secure the shutters of the window that lighted the stairs. It was a detached bar, and always stood in a corner near the window, which it was but rarely employed to fasten. Daniel ran down to the landing, and seized upon this massive iron bar, and then ran back to the garret door.

One blow from the heavy bar shattered the old lock, which was the same lock the carter had broken with his strong fist seventy years before. The door flew open, and Daniel went into the attic which he had chosen for the stranger’s bed-chamber.

Maria was hanging from the hook in the wall. She had contrived to cover her face decently with her handkerchief. She had hanged herself deliberately about an hour before Daniel found her, in the early grey of morning. The doctor, who was summoned from Holcroft, was able to declare the time at which she had slain herself, but there was no one who could say what sudden access of terror had impelled her to the desperate act, or under what slow torture of nervous apprehension her mind had given way. The coroner’s jury returned the customary merciful verdict of “temporary insanity.”

The girl’s melancholy fate darkened the rest of Michael Bascom’s life. He fled from Wildheath Grange as from an accursed spot, and from the Skeggs as from the murderers of a harmless innocent girl. He ended his days at Oxford, where he found the society of congenial minds, and the books he loved. But the memory of Maria’s sad face, and sadder death, was his abiding sorrow. Out of that deep shadow his soul was never lifted.

Contextual Documents

*A Journal Entry from Arthur Munby*¹¹

Arthur Munby was born in York in 1828. He was educated at Trinity College, in Cambridge, graduating with a

Notes

11. Hudson, Derek. *Munby: Man of Two Worlds; The Life and Diaries of Arthur J. Munby*. (Boston: Gambit, 1972) 99.

Bachelor’s of the Arts in 1851. He worked as a lawyer, like his father, for some years before becoming a civil servant for the Ecclesiastical Commissioner’s office from 1858-1888. During this time, Munby was known for his poetry *Benoni* and *Verses New and Old*. In 1854, he met his future wife while wandering the streets, Hannah Cullwick. In 1873, Munby wed Cullwick, though their relationship was anything but normal. With her working class status in society, she remained a domestic servant while at the same time being married to Munby. Even though they’d been married for many years, she was still kept in the shadows. No one knew of this intricate relationship until his will was released to his family. In 1877, Munby and Cullwick separated, but didn’t stop seeing one another until Cullwick’s death in 1909.

Arthur Munby became known for his fetishistic obsession with working-class women, particularly those who did hard physical labor. Munby’s favorite pastime was to wander the streets, looking for working women to interview and photograph. He asked them about their lives and the details of their work, all the while noting their appearance, such as clothing and dialects. He entered these observations into his journals, in which he was known to describe the women and then draw them. He often depicted them as big, black blobs with coats and trousers, along with large hands (referenced in this entry) and large feet.

In this journal entry, we read about Munby’s eye for detail as he describes a young milkwoman that is in the market square. He describes her with large hands and glowing red skin. Is this Munby’s way of saying that these women who do the work of a man are more sexual than those of a woman who stays at home? His obsession with fetishism and dirt carried over into his relationship with Cullwick, with whom he had a love affair—but a slightly different love affair for the time. Munby is known to have had Cullwick as a “domestic servant,” rather than a wife, once they finally married in secret. The two became known for their age-play and infantilism (the sexual role play of a person who acts or is treated like an infant). This entry goes on to speak about a woman that Munby is observing, wondering about the reason that she takes such pride in the work she does. He firstly refers to the woman as a wench, who is a woman of the “dirty” working class. The word “wench” refers to the fact that this woman might be doing other work such as sexual favors, besides going to the market for groceries. This references

Munby’s life because at that same time Munby was having Cullwick serve him sexually. Thus, Munby’s use of the word “wench” reflects his sexualization of women’s labor. This obsession with the working class drove Munby to study and, thus, to assert power in multiple ways over the working class women that he sought out and coerced. We see in “A Shadow in the Corner,” a young woman working as a maid in the house of the Master. By referencing this journal entry, we see Munby’s sexualization of working class women helps us contextualize Braddon because his sexualization is fixated on the ghostliness of the female working class—his journal entry is obsessed with the way working class women transgress different forms of category and boundary-like race, class, and gender.

.....

Tuesday, 11 June . . . in Trafalgar Square, I noticed a young milkwoman who was just commencing her career under the auspices of an old one, probably her mother. The débutante was standing by the railings of the Union Club. She was a ruddy blooming wench of eighteen or so, scarcely formed yet, but clean-limbed and muscular. Her large hands were in colour a glowing red; the skin coarse and rugged without, showing no vein or dimple, and tough & leathery in the palms, hardening into yellow callosities—*corns*, she would call them—at the roots of the fingers. Can a girl of eighteen possess such hands and have a lover? I should think so! She wore the usual plain straw bonnet, woolen shawl, and clean cotton frock: but her bonnet wanted the thick white cap, her boots were effeminately thin—hardly so strong as a shooting boot—and her frock came down to her ankles! Can it be that fashion is infecting the London milkwomen, noblest of conservative caryatides? So she stood, awkward and happy, a picture of ungainly strength. A lady came mincing past at the moment, with tiny hands cased in lavender kid: the contrast was delicious. Then her mother returned, and the daughter, with her help, adjusted the yoke upon her own square shoulders. It was a brand-new yoke, with her master’s name in large letters upon it; whereby as she walks all the world may know that she belongs to ‘Sims, 122 Jermyn St.’ She walked thus away between her heavy cans, the old mentor keeping at her side and guiding her to the next customer’s on the milk walk. Doubtless, when she first walked along the streets this afternoon, she felt proud of wearing a new yoke with big letters on it, and clean brown straps and bright

hooks and buckles; as proud as a cart horse in his May-day harness. Long may she feel such pride! She will work in that year out of doors six hours a day, in all weathers, with never a holiday from year’s end to year’s end: she will nevertheless be as merry as a lark, yet stronger and healthier every year, and marry and breed us sons strong and fullblooded like herself.

*A Journal Entry from Hannah Cullwick*¹²

The following contextual document helps provide insight into the true nature of domestic servitude and the many tasks one was expected to accomplish in a day’s work. While Braddon’s narrative does not give much insight into the specific activities Maria would have been working on each day in the story itself, this diary entry allows us to understand the nature of the daily chores of a woman in her position. Hannah Cullwick wrote this entry on her birthday; she details her daily activities, which would be similar to those that Maria, the girl in “The Shadow in the Corner,” would have been expected to complete as well.

Hannah Cullwick was born and raised into a life of domestic servitude. From an early age, she contributed to the family’s income. Orphaned by the age of fourteen, along with her four siblings, Cullwick had no choice but to carry on in her duties as a housemaid for well-known families of the time. Through her service to such a family, she came in contact with Arthur Munby in 1854, a meeting that would impact her life and aid her in finding her own place in history. Their meeting would later lead not only to a relationship but a secret marriage between the two.

This relationship was chronicled through her diary, in which she calls him her “Massa” and states that she is able to carry him “as if he was a child,” a strength we are told he admired in working-class women. She, though his wife, acted as housemaid of their home, often writing him letters about the details of the work she had done throughout the day. Such a letter is provided below. The nature of their relationship also brings to light that Cullwick’s position in life kept her in the shadows. Though the two married, they did so in secret, and they divorced in 1877 but remained in contact while she continued working as a domestic servant until shortly before Hannah’s death in 1909 at the age of 71.

.....
Friday 26 May My birthday, & it was a fine morning. I got up early & lighted the fire after I’d brush’d the grate. Swept the kitchen floor & shook the carpets. Did the dining room grate up & laid the fire. Swept the carpet. Clean’d the front steps on my knees. Shook the mats. Wash’d me & got our breakfast. Receiv’d letters from my two sisters, & two little books as presents. I was just a little disappointed at getting no letter from Massa as he’d promised me one, but I thought it’d come early in the day so I wasn’t vex’d & I made myself quite happy – wi’ giving the kitchen an extra scrub on my knees, after I’d clean’d the tables & dresser down, & clean’d the cupboards out. Got the dinner by ½ pas 1 & clear’d away after.

Wash’d up in the scullery, & had our tea at 5 with some seedcake I’d made for my birthday – not so much for myself, but the other servants like cake & puddings so much. They wish’d me the usual wish of many happy returns o’ the day. There was no letter from M, & I couldn’t rest to write or sew, for I was afraid he’d gone to the Derby & perhaps something had happend. If he’d not promised me a lter I shd just o’ thought he’d forgot the day, so as I couldn’t sit down I set on & clean’d the kitchen win-down outside & in. I had my striped apron & cap on & my cotton frock, & while I was standing up outside I’ the window cleaning it, a lad went by & says, ‘Come down, you young hussy.’ I was rather pleas’d at him saying it tho’ he was rude, & I thought, ‘Ah, lad, you wouldn’t say that if you knew I’m 38 years old today.’ I was enjoying the work & it was pleasnt out in the air, but a bit draughty being in the ear & one’s apt to catch cold. Still I liked it, & I’d no better way to enjoy myself.

When the window was done I wash’d my red stuff frock after I picked the body from the skirt, & then it was supper time. I got the beer from the corner public house & laid the cloth. At 9 o’clock a letter came from M., kind but short. It was such a relief, for I’d nearly made my mind up to set off by the train, just there & back in a hurry to see if M. was in or no. After prayers I wrote a short letter to him & posted it by twelve o’clock & to bed soon after.

I am 38 years old today, but I don’t *feel* so old, nor look it – folks generally take me for 28 or 9 – and I’m as strong as ever. I can heave my Master easy & carry him as if he was a child nearly, & he’s 11 stone7 lbs. I am thankful to God for my health & strength & the rest of the bless-

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12. Stanley, Liz. *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick, Victorian Maidservant*. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984) 166-67.

ings I have. I feel that I am better servant now nor ever I was, 'cause I've had more experience, & seem to have more sense to see what one is born for, & to be satisfied, & thankful for a home, & *pleas'd* to have work to do for a living, & of more patience to bear with the different tempers & little things one continually has in life to try one. So when I went to bed I knelt down & prayed that I might go on improving till I was perfect, as far as it's possible to be perfect, & especially that I may be a comfort to Massa, & love him always as I do now, with all my heart - & in loving him I should the more love God who made me for him. So I laid me down at rest & felt quite happy.

*An Excerpt From the “Buried Alive” Chapter of “Lady Audley’s Secret”*¹³

Mary Elizabeth Braddon was a praised writer in the mid-to-late 1800’s in England. As her writing career grew, Braddon met publisher and editor John Maxwell. Though Maxwell was married, Braddon and he had a more than professional relationship. With his wife in an asylum, Maxwell allowed his relationship with Braddon to grow. After Maxwell’s wife died, he and Braddon married (Tromp, Gilber, Haynie xxiii). It was through her skills and publications that Braddon helped her husband save his floundering publishing company. Together, Maxwell and Braddon published many works, including *Lady Audley’s Secret*, which was released in parts in Maxwell’s *Sixpenny Magazine* (Tromp, Gilber, Haynie xxv).

Much of Braddon’s work explored her feminist ideas—specifically the oppression of domestic labor females and married women, sometimes veiled by supernatural themes, as seen in “The Shadow in the Corner.” One subject Braddon was drawn to in particular was that of live burial. According to Holly Furneaux, Braddon was inspired by Walter Scott, Charlotte Brontë, and Wilkie Collins who wrote of live burial before her (426). The social obsession with live burial stemmed from the burial reforms in the 1850s, laws that were “intended not only to protect the living from the unhealthy effects of exposure to dead bodies, but also to protect the dead from desecration” (Thorsheim 42). This fear of premature burial resulted in petitions for “waiting mortuaries” who some called “an asylum for doubtful life” (Furneaux 426-27). Consequently, the fears manifested in multiple

literary works of the era. In 1850, Edgar Allen Poe even wrote a short story titled “The Premature Burial.”

While many live burial works were literal, Braddon often used the idea and fear in a more metaphorical sense to illustrate the confining and sometimes traumatizing aspects of becoming an invisible specter of a woman in the domestic and working class of the Victorian Era. In her novel, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon has an entire chapter titled “Buried Alive,” yet no burial actually occurs. Furneaux argues, “Braddon recruits resonant images of live burial to explore and realign relations of gender and power in her society...[S]he draws upon and subverts a long cultural genealogy of live burial narratives in which the victim is invariably gendered female” (427). In many instances in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon utilizes horrific live burial images to describe the legal coffin of marriage and women’s domestic labor. Through this imagery, “Braddon rejects the institutionalized expectation that a married woman should suffer the complete obliteration of her individual identity” (Furneaux 431). Braddon’s writing throughout *Lady Audley’s Secret* acts as a feminist commentary on marriage and divorce in 19th century England. Marriage stripped a woman of her identity and placed blame on her for adultery, and there was no escape from her matrimonial coffin unless she could prove physical harm.

Braddon’s attraction to the buried alive motif often played a role in other works. In a more abstract, metaphorical sense, “The Shadow in the Corner” can arguably be labeled as a buried alive story. Throughout the story, we see Mr. and Mrs. Skeggs stuck in a home that they have been maintaining for years. Mrs. Skeggs has spent the last twenty years in her premature grave. When Mr. Skeggs asks Michael for help in maintain the house, he says, they need “a girl to trot about and wash up, and help the old lady. She’s getting weak on her legs, poor soul. We’ve none of us grown younger in the last twenty years... my missus must have a girl. She can’t go on trotting up and down these everlasting passages, and standing in that stone scullery year after year, just as if she was a young woman.” Clearly, within the last two decades, Mrs. Skeggs has become too old to take the stairs of her coffin—the walls of the mansion confining her to her “grave” of domestic duties.

In the chapter excerpt from *Lady Audley’s Secret* that

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13. Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*. (London: Tinsley Bros., 1862).

follows, Braddon equates the institutionalization of Lady Audley to a live burial punishment for her crimes. In the earlier events of the novel, Lady Audley is discovered to actually be a woman named Helen Talboys—the supposed dead wife of Sir Audley’s friend George who, upon visiting England and meeting Lady Audley, mysteriously disappears. Lady Audley, when she was still known as Helen, had previously been “buried alive” under the domestic duties and anxiety of debt when George left her for three years in hopes of returning with gold. A captive in her coffin of life as Helen Talboys, she felt her only escape was to fake her death and find a new husband who could financially support her. The feminist themes and fear of premature burial provide a prime example of Braddon’s personal ideals and beliefs. Throughout all of her writing, Braddon’s commentary is prevalent, and through the veil of horror and supernatural, readers can undeniably see Braddon herself.

My lady had not spoken during the journey, except to decline some refreshments which Robert had offered her at a halting place upon the road. Her heart sunk when they left Brussels behind, for she had hoped that city might have been the end of her journey, and she had turned with a feeling of sickness and despair from the dull Belgian landscape.

She looked up at last as the vehicle jolted into a great stony quadrangle, which had been the approach to a monastery once, but which was now the court yard of a dismal hotel, in whose cellars legions of rats skirmished and squeaked even while the broad sunshine was bright in the chambers above.

Lady Audley shuddered as she alighted from the diligence, and found herself in that dreary court yard. Robert was surrounded by chattering porters, who clamored for his “baggages,” and disputed among themselves as to the hotel at which he was to rest. One of these men ran away to fetch a hackney-coach at Mr. Audley’s behest, and reappeared presently, urging on a pair of horses—which were so small as to suggest the idea that they had been made out of one ordinary-sized animal—with wild shrieks and whoops that had a demoniac sound in the darkness.

Mr. Audley left my lady in a dreary coffee-room in the care of a drowsy attendant while he drove away to some distant part of the quiet city. There was official business to be gone through before Sir Michael’s wife could be

quietly put away in the place suggested by Dr. Mosgrave. Robert had to see all manner of important personages; and to take numerous oaths; and to exhibit the English physician’s letter; and to go through much ceremony of signing and countersigning before he could take his lost friend’s cruel wife to the home which was to be her last upon earth. Upward of two hours elapsed before all this was arranged, and the young man was free to return to the hotel, where he found his charge staring absently at a pair of wax-candles, with a cup of untasted coffee standing cold and stagnant before her.

Robert handed my lady into the hired vehicle, and took his seat opposite to her once more.

“Where are you going to take me?” she asked, at last. “I am tired of being treated like some naughty child, who is put into a dark cellar as a punishment for its offenses. Where are you taking me?”

“To a place in which you will have ample leisure to repent the past, Mrs. Talboys,” Robert answered, gravely.

They had left the paved streets behind them, and had emerged out of a great gaunt square, in which there appeared to be about half a dozen cathedrals, into a small boulevard, a broad lamp-lit road, on which the shadows of the leafless branches went and came tremblingly, like the shadows of a paralytic skeleton. There were houses here and there upon this boulevard; stately houses, *entre cour et jardin*, and with plaster vases of geraniums on the stone pillars of the ponderous gateways. The rumbling hackney-carriage drove upward of three-quarters of a mile along this smooth roadway before it drew up against a gateway, older and more ponderous than any of those they had passed.

My lady gave a little scream as she looked out of the coach-window. The gaunt gateway was lighted by an enormous lamp; a great structure of iron and glass, in which one poor little shivering flame struggled with the March wind.

The coachman rang the bell, and a little wooden door at the side of the gate was opened by a gray-haired man, who looked out at the carriage, and then retired. He reappeared three minutes afterward behind the folding iron gates, which he unlocked and threw back to their full extent, revealing a dreary desert of stone-paved courtyard.

The coachman led his wretched horses into the courtyard, and piloted the vehicle to the principal doorway of the house, a great mansion of gray stone, with several long ranges of windows, many of which were dimly light-

ed, and looked out like the pale eyes of weary watchers upon the darkness of the night.

My lady, watchful and quiet as the cold stars in the wintry sky, looked up at these casements with an earnest and scrutinizing gaze. One of the windows was shrouded by a scanty curtain of faded red; and upon this curtain there went and came a dark shadow, the shadow of a woman with a fantastic head dress, the shadow of a restless creature, who paced perpetually backward and forward before the window.

Sir Michael Audley’s wicked wife laid her hand suddenly upon Robert’s arm, and pointed with the other hand to this curtained window.

“I know where you have brought me,” she said. “This is a MAD-HOUSE.”

Mr. Audley did not answer her. He had been standing at the door of the coach when she addressed him, and he quietly assisted her to alight, and led her up a couple of shallow stone steps, and into the entrance-hall of the mansion. He handed Dr. Mosgrave’s letter to a neatly-dressed, cheerful-looking, middle-aged woman, who came tripping out of a little chamber which opened out of the hall, and was very much like the bureau of an hotel. This person smilingly welcome Robert and his charge: and after dispatching a servant with the letter, invited them into her pleasant little apartment, which was gayly furnished with bright amber curtains and heated by a tiny stove.

“Madam finds herself very much fatigued?” the Frenchwoman said, interrogatively, with a look of intense sympathy, as she placed an arm-chair for my lady.

“Madam” shrugged her shoulders wearily, and looked round the little chamber with a sharp glance of scrutiny that betokened no very great favor.

“WHAT is this place, Robert Audley?” she cried fiercely. “Do you think I am a baby, that you may juggle with and deceive me—what is it? It is what I said just now, is it not?”

“It is a maison de santé, my lady,” the young man answered, gravely. “I have no wish to juggle with or to deceive you.”

My lady paused for a few moments, looking reflectively at Robert.

“A maison de santé,” she repeated. “Yes, they manage these things better in France. In England we should call it a madhouse. This is a house for mad people, this, is it not, madam?” she said in French, turning upon the woman, and tapping the polished floor with her foot.

“Ah, but no, madam,” the woman answered with a shrill scream of protest. “It is an establishment of the most agreeable, where one amuses one’s self—”

She was interrupted by the entrance of the principal of this agreeable establishment, who came beaming into the room with a radiant smile illuminating his countenance, and with Dr. Mosgrave’s letter open in his hand.

It was impossible to say how enchanted he was to make the acquaintance of M’sieu. There was nothing upon earth which he was not ready to do for M’sieu in his own person, and nothing under heaven which he would not strive to accomplish for him, as the friend of his acquaintance, so very much distinguished, the English doctor. Dr. Mosgrave’s letter had given him a brief synopsis of the case, he informed Robert, in an undertone, and he was quite prepared to undertake the care of the charming and very interesting “Madam—Madam—”

He rubbed his hands politely, and looked at Robert. Mr. Audley remembered, for the first time, that he had been recommended to introduce his wretched charge under a feigned name.

He affected not to hear the proprietor’s question. It might seem a very easy matter to have hit upon a heap of names, any one of which would have answered his purpose; but Mr. Audley appeared suddenly to have forgotten that he had ever heard any mortal appellation except that of himself and of his lost friend.

Perhaps the proprietor perceived and understood his embarrassment. He at any rate relieved it by turning to the woman who had received them, and muttering something about No. 14, Bis. The woman took a key from a long range of others, that hung over the mantel-piece, and a wax candle from a bracket in a corner of the room, and having lighted the candle, led the way across the stone-paved hall, and up a broad, slippery staircase of polished wood.

The English physician had informed his Belgian colleague that money would be of minor consequence in any arrangements made for the comfort of the English lady who was to be committed to his care. Acting upon this hint, Monsieur Val opened the outer door of a stately suite of apartments, which included a lobby, paved with alternate diamonds of black and white marble, but of a dismal and cellar-like darkness; a saloon furnished with gloomy velvet draperies, and with a certain funereal splendor which is not peculiarly conducive to the elevation of the spirits; and a bed-chamber, containing a bed

so wondrously made, as to appear to have no opening whatever in its coverings, unless the counterpane had been split asunder with a pen-knife.

My lady stared dismally round at the range of rooms, which looked dreary enough in the wan light of a single wax-candle. This solitary flame, pale and ghost-like in itself, was multiplied by paler phantoms of its ghostliness, which glimmered everywhere about the rooms; in the shadowy depths of the polished floors and wainscot, or the window-panes, in the looking-glasses, or in those great expanses of glimmering something which adorned the rooms, and which my lady mistook for costly mirrors, but which were in reality wretched mockeries of burnished tin.

Amid all the faded splendor of shabby velvet, and tarnished gilding, and polished wood, the woman dropped into an arm-chair, and covered her face with her hands. The whiteness of them, and the starry light of diamonds trembling about them, glittered in the dimly-lighted chamber. She sat silent, motionless, despairing, sullen, and angry, while Robert and the French doctor retired to an outer chamber, and talked together in undertones. Mr. Audley had very little to say that had not been already said for him, with a far better grace than he himself could have expressed it, by the English physician. He had, after great trouble of mind, hit upon the name of Taylor, as a safe and simple substitute for that other name, to which alone my lady had a right. He told the Frenchman that this Mrs. Taylor was distantly related to him—that she had inherited the seeds of madness from her mother, as indeed Dr. Mosgrave had informed Monsieur Val; and that she had shown some fearful tokens of the lurking taint that was latent in her mind; but that she was not to be called “mad.” He begged that she might be treated with all tenderness and compassion; that she might receive all reasonable indulgences; but he impressed upon Monsieur Val, that under no circumstances was she to be permitted to leave the house and grounds without the protection of some reliable person, who should be answerable for her safe-keeping. He had only one other point to urge, and that was, that Monsieur Val, who, as he had understood, was himself a Protestant—the doctor bowed—would make arrangements with some kind and benevolent Protestant clergyman, through whom spiritual advice and consolation might be secured for the invalid lady; who had especial need, Robert added, gravely, of such advantages.

This—with all necessary arrangements as to pecuniary matters, which were to be settled from time to time between Mr. Audley and the doctor, unassisted by any agents whatever—was the extent of the conversation between the two men, and occupied about a quarter of an hour.

My lady sat in the same attitude when they re-entered the bedchamber in which they had left her, with her ringed hands still clasped over her face.

Robert bent over to whisper in her ear.

“Your name is Madam Taylor here,” he said. “I do not think you would wish to be known by your real name.”

She only shook her head in answer to him, and did not even remove her hands from over her face.

“Madam will have an attendant entirely devoted to her service,” said Monsieur Val. “Madam will have all her wishes obeyed; her reasonable wishes, but that goes without saying,” monsieur adds, with a quaint shrug. “Every effort will be made to render madam’s sojourn at Villebrumeuse agreeable. The inmates dine together when it is wished. I dine with the inmates sometimes; my subordinate, a clever and a worthy man always. I reside with my wife and children in a little pavilion in the grounds; my subordinate resides in the establishment. Madam may rely upon our utmost efforts being exerted to insure her comfort.”

Monsieur is saying a great deal more to the same effect, rubbing his hands and beaming radiantly upon Robert and his charge, when madam rises suddenly, erect and furious, and dropping her jeweled fingers from before her face, tells him to hold his tongue.

“Leave me alone with the man who has brought me here,” she cried, between her set teeth. “Leave me!”

She points to the door with a sharp, imperious gesture; so rapid that the silken drapery about her arm makes a swooping sound as she lifts her hand. The sibilant French syllables hiss through her teeth as she utters them, and seem better fitted to her mood and to herself than the familiar English she has spoken hitherto.

The French doctor shrugs his shoulders as he goes out into the lobby, and mutters something about a “beautiful devil,” and a gesture worthy of “the Mars.” My lady walked with a rapid footstep to the door between the bed-chamber and the saloon; closed it, and with the handle of the door still in her hand, turned and looked at Robert Audley.

“You have brought me to my grave, Mr. Audley,” she cried; “you have used your power basely and cruelly, and have brought me to a living grave.”

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