Hollow Ash... Hall

BY MARGARET BLOUNT.

CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)

The rooms were all unfurnished; but in one, "The turret chamber," as it was called, though it was not built in turret fashion, Rose came upon a tangible relic of the past.

It was a large oaken cabinet, black with age. Its doors were open. As they approached it the setting sun broke from a bank of thin white fog, and filled the whole apartment with a ruddy glow. Rose, ever curious, was the first to search the cabinet.

There were several toilet ornaments in Venetian glass and gold upon the upper shelf. Upon the lower one lay a small yellow packet and a fragment of an old letter. Rose took it up eagerly and read these words traced in a delicate yet unformed handwriting:

"And so I send the gift, but I fear it will outlive your love. Last night, when you left me you forgot my goodbye kiss; and so this morning I thought——"

There the fragment ended. It was the old, old story, coming down from remote years. Woman's tender love—woman's pained recognition of a slight—woman's faith, mixed sweetly with woman's fear of losing what she prized far more than anything else the world had to bestow. Rose stood musing with the torn paper in her hand, till her father spoke.

"Poor little goose! I wonder where she and her lover are now? What is in the packet, Rose?"

The girl broke the string. A long tress of dark brown hair fell lightly over her hand. That was the "gift," no doubt, which was still fresh and glossy, while the head on which it grew was perhaps lying low in the grave.

Rose laid it reverently back beside the letter. Mr. Cowley fidgeted about a moment or two, and then said that they had better go. He had evidently seen enough for that day at least. As for Rose, the dead girl's words seemed sounding in her ear all the way home.

"Yet why dead?" She asked herself that, as she woke with a start at two o'clock the next morning.

Mrs. Cowley went back to the village hotel in a more agreeable frame of mind. She fondly imagined that the gloom and silence of the Hall had been too much even for the jovial spirits of her husband to encounter. Brighton looked nearer than ever, as she sank placidly to sleep that night.

But the next morning undeceived her. Mr. Cowley was up with the lark, and when she descended with the girls to the nine o'clock breakfast, he was not there. "He had gone to the Hall," meek Mrs. Grimes informed them with a courtesy.

"To the Hall!" gasped Mrs. Cowley in dire dismay, "What for?"

"Mr. Grimes went up with him, mum. They took out a lot of painters and plasterers, mum. Not to speak of the two charwomen as is to go next week."

"Mercy preserve us!" exclaimed the horrified British matron. 'Is the man in his senses? Can he think of living there after all that we saw last night?"

Mrs. Grimes shook her head and sighed.

"Men is that contrary, mum, that an angel from heaven would not well know what to do with them!" she observed, sympathizingly. And certainly, after living so many years with Simon Grimes, she ought to have been a judge.

Mrs. Cowley took her breakfast with what appetite she might. At noon her liege lord appeared—dusty, tired and cross. From him she learned that the workmen were progressing favorably, that the place would be ready for the charwomen by the end of that present week, instead of the next, and that everything would be finished by the last day of the month.

"So get ready to move on the first day of December, old lady," he added, merrily, "for we shall keep our Christmas there!"

The "old lady" groaned at the thought. What sort of a Christmas would it be in that dismal, lonely, haunted ruin?

But Mr. Cowley carried his point, as he always did. Day after day did he spend at the Hall, sometimes with Mr. Grimes, sometimes with the agent, but oftener alone with his workmen, who did their tasks in platoons, and would, on no account, stay on the premises a moment after sundown. Not so the charwoman who succeeded them. She was a stranger in the place, and felt no reverence for its traditions. Consequently she refused to believe in the ghosts; and when Mr. Cowley heard her avow her want of faith in a great strong voice and with a hearty laugh he was so enchanted with her good sense that he engaged her on the spot to remain at the Hall as servant till the scruples of the neighboring damsels should be sufficiently overcome to enable them to serve, with or under her, or perhaps to take her place. But for her opportune arrival, Mrs. Cowley might have been forced to make her own bed,get her own dinner and black her husband's boots—for no village girl could have been induced for love or money to engage at the Hall till it was fairly proved whether Queen Bess was there or not.

Mrs. Macarthy, however, was a host in herself, and the sight of her broad, smiling face was enough to put the most crabbed ghost into good humor if by chance she should happen to meet one. She worked with a will during the week of her occupancy. Carpets were put down, curtains hung up, beds aired and made, drawing and dining rooms swept and dusted; till, from the dismal shell, on which Mrs. Cowley had looked with such horror, a handsome, modern-looking dwelling place was deduced, possessing every comfort which the most fastidious taste could require—at least, for a short sojourn. Mr. Cowley might have been less liberal in furnishing any other house, but here his honor was in some measure at stake, and he was not satisfied till he had done his very best.

He came home late on the evening of the thirtieth of November, and announced, with a pleasant smile, that all was ready for the removal. Rose scarcely knew whether to be glad or sorry that her often repeated wish was about to be granted. In her heart she began to feel a little timid, though she would have gone to the stake rather than acknowledge it. Catharine shed some tears, but her father only laughed at her. As for Mrs. Cowley, she packed her trunks as if for an expedition to the Fejee Islands, and Mrs. Grimes assisted her, groaning dismally the while over the "contrariness of them men."

At two p. m., all was ready, but Mr. Cowley never made his appearance till five. Then, taking a mournful farewell of Mrs. Grimes, the devoted wife and mother entered the fly and drove heroically away.

The gates of the Hall stood wide open this time to receive them, and Mrs. Macarthy was smiling and bowing at the door. Lamps were lit in the hall and fires burned in every room. Beautiful carpets, curtains and furniture, together with books and pictures, and a piano, so transformed the gloomy drawing-room that the girls scarcely recognized it. Mr. Cowley was in ecstasies at their exclamations of surprise.

"I knew you would like it," he kept repeating, as he rubbed his hands together; "and I have spared no expense in making it pleasant and comfortable for you. Now, my dear, if you will go upstairs and take off your things, Mrs. Macarthy will give us some tea. I, for one, am as hungry as a hunter. My love, I am glad you like the place so well. Was I not right in urging you to come? I knew you would see it in the end—and you do!"

CHAPTER IV.

But did they "see it," after all?

Grave enough was Mrs. Cowley's face as she sat down to that first meal in her new house. The tea was hot and strong—the toast nicely buttered—the cold ham cut with Vauxhall nicety, yet she could not eat. If a door creaked, she started nervously in her chair—if a mouse gnawed at a wainscot, she looked as if she was about to faint. Yet the habit of obedience to her husband's wishes was so strongly implanted within her breast that she never dreamed of saying how uncomfortable she felt. Mr. Cowley had made up his mind to live in a haunted house—consequently a haunted house must be the best place possible to live in. She was serving her fellow creatures by proving to them that the doctrine of ghosts must be false. No martyr ever underwent more agony for the sake of a good cause than she.

At last the meal was over, and the ex-charwoman had cleared away. The group drew around the blazing fire. Mrs. Cowley took her knitting; Miss Catherine, with an air of making herself at home, performed wonderful feats with her crochet needles; Mr. Cowley pished and pshawed over the columns of his Times, which in the hurry of removal, he had not had an opportunity to read before. All were employed except Rose, and she evidently found it very hard to settle to anything. She walked about the room, till her father growled out a request that she would not fidget him; so then she lifted the curtain and gazed out for a long time upon the bare and desolate lawn, looking more desolate still beneath the pale light of the wintry moon.

A thought struck her as she stood there. She gave a little delicious shiver, then left the room and went upstairs.

The turret chamber had been prepared for her by special request. Miss Cowley's room was exactly opposite, so that the sisters could easily communicate with each other if necessary. Mr. and Mrs. Cowley had chosen a large, square chamber at the back of the house, and the revolver was already lying on a table close beside the bed. Fires were blazing brightly in all these rooms. They looked exceedingly snug and cozy in the ruddy glow. Still, not the less for fire and candle, did Rose feel the unseen presence of some former inhabitant of the place. She hurried nervously down the passage, entered her own room, took a book from her dressing bag and retreated without daring even to give a glance at the oaken cabinet in the corner. Quicker and quicker she went on her way back, breathing short and feeling terribly frightened, though ashamed that she should do so. She to live in a haunted house, and have no more nerve than this? The thing was ridiculous—she would be more sensible. And making a brave effort to feel collected at the head of the stairs, she heard or fancied she heard one breathing close behind her—felt, or fancied she felt, the touch of a cold, light hand upon her own. She shrieked wildly, and ran headlong down, only to find the whole family in the hall, looking pale and frightened, and evidently ready to face twenty ghosts, for the benefit of whose fleshless noses Mr. Cowley grasped the tongs.

"Good gracious, Rose!" exclaimed her mother, trembling from head to foot. "What is it? Have you seen anything?"

"No," said Rose, looking extremely silly; "but I was all in the dark at the head of the stairs, and I fancied some one touched me!"

"I wish to goodness you would be sure of your danger, young lady, before you scare us all out of our wits another time!" said Mr. Cowley, leading the way back to the drawing-room and disposing of the tongs in their place once more. "I made sure by your squalling that old Queen Bess, at the very least, was after you. If you are going to fancy ghosts in every direction, you had better go back and take shelter with Mrs. Grimes as soon as you can. Why, here's Kitty, who couldn't bear the idea of this house, and look at her now. She don't like it, and she may believe there are ghosts here, but I don't think she would invent them for herself beforehand, as you seem to have done. No more nonsense, Rose, if you please, or every one in Banley shall know that you, who were so eager to get here, were the first to cry out 'Wolf!' half an hour after you came."

Mr. Cowley, having delivered his lecture, resumed the perusal of the Times. Catherine said nothing, it is true, but even her crochet needles, as she worked, seemed to assume an air of superiority over Rose. That young lady sat, looking sulky beside the fire. Human nature prompted her to throw her book at Catherine's head, but young lady nature came to the rescue, and prevented any such untoward act. At last her sense of injury subsided as she drew near the lamp and began to read.

Certainly she had chosen the queerest volume possible for such a place. It was Mrs. Crowe's "Night Side of Nature," a book well calculated to give a sound nightmare even to the most incredulous opponent of the ghost theory.

For some minutes she was very quiet; but Mrs. Cowley, looking up from her knitting, got a glimpse of the illustrated cover, where, beside the old hall clock, and by the light of a splendid harvest moon, a genuine orthodox ghost, in a winding sheet, is appearing to a terrified maid-servant, just preparing to faint upon the floor.

One look was enough for Mrs. Cowley. She uttered an exclamation that drew every eye to the unlucky book. Mr. Cowley looked over his spectacles at his daughter, as if he had thought she had suddenly gone mad.

"What could have possessed you to bring that horrible thing here?" he asked sternly. "It is the greatest nonsense, only fit to go into the fire. I have half a mind to make you put it there now!"

Miss Rose, at that moment, owed her entire family a grudge; and, having frightened herself to death with the grisly tales she had been reading, suddenly determined to frighten them also.

"If I can't sleep a wink tonight for thinking of these dreadful things, neither shall Catharine," was her amiable resolve. So, putting on her sweetest smile, she looked up from the obnoxious book into her father's face.

"Dear papa, you are just a little prejudiced against Mrs. Crowe—you know you are."

(To be continued.)

An Island of Sulphur.

In the Bay of Plenty, New Zealand, is situated White Island, which consists mostly of sulphur mixed with gypsum and a few other minerals. Over this island, which is about three miles in circumference, and which rises between 800 and 900 feet above the sea, floats continually an immense cloud of vapor, attaining an elevation of 10,000 feet. In the center is a boiling lake of acidulated water, covering fifty acres, and surrounded with blowholes from which steam and sulphurous fumes are emitted with great force and noise. With care a boat can be navigated on the lake. The sulphur from White Island is very pure, but little effort has yet been made to procure it for commercial purposes.

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Now that Queen Victoria is dead, Francis Joseph of Austria holds the record of the longest reign in Europe, or, indeed, in the world. He has been on the throne more than fifty-two years and is in the seventy-first year of his life. But Francis Joseph is by no means the oldest ruler. The possessor of this distinction is neither the emperor of Austria nor, as is generally supposed, King Christian of Denmark, who is 82, and has reigned thirty-seven years. The oldest living ruler is a lesser known personality, the Grand Duke Adolphus of Luxembourg, who came into the world in 1817.

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Mrs. Haven's Second Letter.

"DEAR MRS. PINKHAM:—I wish to express my gratitude for what your medicine has done for me. I suffered for four years with womb trouble. Every month I flowed very badly. I got so bad that I could hardly do my work. Was obliged to sit or lie down the most of the time. I doctored for a long time, but obtained no relief. I began using your remedies—Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, Blood Purifier, Sanative Wash and Liver Pills—and now feel like a new woman."—MRS. EMMA HAVEN, 2508 South Ave., Council Bluffs, Iowa. (Feb. 1, 1900.)

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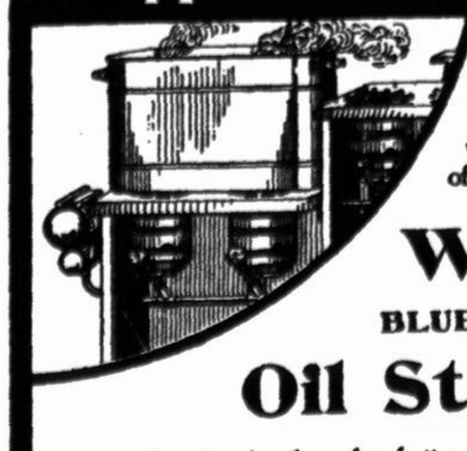

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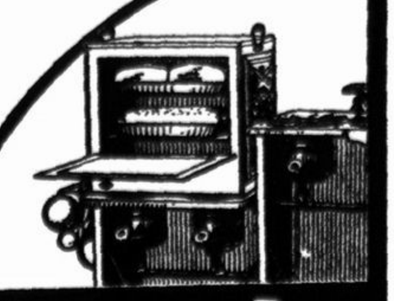

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