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# Haunted House

*Gladys Mitchell*

Seen through the window the landscape was wintry and bare. 'Better in spring,' said John Graham. He turned away from the window and looked at the fire of logs. 'But it's cosy enough in here. How do you like it, Morag?'

'I like it very well,' his wife replied, 'but you did not tell me it was haunted.'

'Haunted? Who said so?'

'It was the agent. He said it was nothing to hurt.'

'Oh that!' Her husband laughed it off. 'It was just his nonsense. You've been seeing too much of him, Morag. He did say something to me. Just sounds, he said, as one gets in any old house.'

'Yes, John, but what about the footprints?'

John Graham frowned.

'If you don't think you'll be happy here—' he began. But she laughed and called him her darling and said that she liked the house well.

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One day Morag broached the subject of the haunting to the agent when he came for the rent.

He denied the rumours hotly, but admitted that the house had a bad name in the neighbourhood.

‘But maybe folk have been frightened,’ she suggested.

‘Well, I don’t know about that,’ he answered, accepting the hint. ‘What are a few odd noises? There’s no danger, I can assure you.’ He got up to go, but she detained him.

‘Francis, I know you won’t deceive me. Have you heard anything yourself?’

He hesitated; then he answered.

‘Twice, but it didn’t amount to much. Just noises and something that sounded like footsteps, you know.’

‘What about the footprints splashed with blood?’

‘I never heard of any such thing, nor saw it, either. It’s old wives’ tales you’ve been hearing.’

Time passed, spring drew near and the agent became a less frequent visitor. Nothing ghostly was seen or heard.

Then rumour began again. The village at that time of the year had little to gossip about, so it continued to remark upon the number of times the agent still visited the house, and to speculate, not too kindly, upon the reason.

The gossip was kept from Morag this time, but between her and her husband something hovered in the air, something intangible, invisible and silent.

She proposed that they should give a little party to the half-dozen friends they had made. He agreed – heavily, she thought.

But the party was not a success.

When the first guests left, it was snowing. Between the black of the night and the glow from the house the large flakes swirled and melted, spinning like stars or softly falling like leaves. Huddling their coats against the snowfall, the departing guests stole away, themselves no more than ghosts as the snow settled down on their shoulders.

At last only one guest was left, the agent, Francis. At half-past eleven he, too, declared that he must go. He went for his coat and scarf. Graham went to the front and looked out. The snow was already in drift and was falling faster than before.

Graham withdrew from the door, closed it and put his back against it. When Francis came into the hall he said in belligerent tones:

‘You’ll never reach home. You’ll never get through tonight. You’d better have our room. Morag can sleep in the warm down here on the settee, and I have a camp bed I use when I come in late.’

The house, supposed to be haunted, had no near neighbours, so that no one except the three who slept there that night could say when the sounds began. They had retired at just after midnight – both witnesses were agreed upon that. But after that their stories varied, although they were taken over them time and again. One man, the police decided, was lying, and the other was telling the truth.

Graham told the sergeant in charge that he had found Morag, his wife, dead on the dining-room floor when he went to call her in the morning. She had been sleeping in the drawing room on the settee.

He had rushed out for the village doctor, hoping against hope that something could be done. Morag Graham had been stabbed and had been dead for several hours by the time the doctor arrived. Graham had then collapsed, and Francis had run for the police.

Later, when the police had seen and photographed the body and the room in which it had been found, and had taken fingerprints and looked for clues, Graham told his full story.

He said that the three of them – himself, Morag and Francis, had separated at just after midnight, and that Morag had had a cup of cocoa and the two men had each drunk a nightcap of whisky and water. As it had proved impossible for Francis to get home that night, he had been offered a bed.

Graham knew no more until he had gone to wake his wife and suggest that it was time for a cup of tea and breakfast. He had found her stabbed in the back, her progress from the drawing room being marked by her own bloodstained footprints.

‘You think, then,’ said the inspector, ‘that your wife was attacked in the drawing room, staggered into the dining room and there collapsed and died?’

Graham did think so, and appeared to be deeply affected.

The police then asked Francis for a statement. He gave substantially the same account as Graham had done, except for one particular. He had been awakened, he alleged, at about four in the morning by sounds which he could not interpret.

Asked to describe the sounds, he said that they resembled scuffling and moaning. He had lighted his bedside candle and had sat up to listen. He had also looked at his watch.

‘How long did the sounds continue?’ he was asked.

‘About three or four minutes, but it might have been longer.’

‘Why didn’t you go and investigate?’

‘I knew the house was said to be haunted, so I didn’t bother.’

‘Didn’t it occur to you that one of the Grahams might have been taken ill?’

‘No, it never occurred to me, and if it had, I should have thought it no business of mine as there would have been the other one there.’

‘What happened after that?’

‘Nothing, so far as I know. I just lay down and went to sleep again. We’d had rather a lot to drink during the evening so I may still have been a bit fuddled.’

‘I see. Now what about these sleeping arrangements. Who made them?’

‘It was Graham himself.’

‘Not Mrs Graham?’

‘Well, they may have talked it over in the kitchen. I wouldn’t know about that. It was certainly Graham who mentioned them to me.’

‘Didn’t they seem to you rather peculiar?’

‘Yes, but it wasn’t any business of mine.’

Graham was recalled.

‘Who decided that Francis should occupy the double bed?’

‘My wife and I agreed about it. Francis was a wee bit drunk and we thought maybe he would tumble out of the camp bed or off the settee. We didn’t want that. It would have frightened my wife.’

‘Better be frightened than dead,’ thought the officer grimly, but naturally did not give voice to this opinion. There seemed no other evidence available.

The medical evidence agreed well enough with the time given by Francis, and the snow had ceased at just after two in the morning, so that it was clear that no stranger had approached the house.

All the footprints in the snow could be identified as being those of the two men and the police. It was a curious and baffling case. Even the weapon did not help.

Mrs Graham had been stabbed with a Zulu assegai which had been hanging on the drawing-room wall. It had been wiped clear of fingerprints and hung up again, and it was sufficiently long for the murderer to have avoided getting blood on his clothing, although both men’s garments had been meticulously examined.

‘Well, there it is,’ said the inspector to the Chief Constable.

‘One of them did it, sir, and of course there’s no trouble about the motive. It’s a sex crime all right. There appears to have been a rare lot of gossip about it in the village – the affair between Mrs Graham and Francis, I mean.

‘Personally, I’d put my money on Graham. He seems to have had a lot to put up with, if rumour can be believed. But there’s no actual evidence one way or the other so far as I can see. You can’t hang a man on probability only. The

only thing I can suggest is to arrest them both, charge them jointly, and let the magistrates sort it out.'

'You know, it's that arrangement about the sleeping that puzzles me,' said the Chief Constable. 'I mean, is it reasonable to hand over the only comfortable bed in the house to a man guest and expect your wife to sleep on the settee?'

'It may have been the wife's arrangement, you know, sir.'

'Yes, there's that, of course. I wonder why she made for the dining room when she was attacked? And why there was no blood on the settee?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'I wonder whether we ought to attach any importance to the fact that none of the three could have known beforehand that Francis was going to stay the night?'

'I don't really think so, sir. One of them suddenly saw an opportunity and seized it. I should say. And, of course, they were both pretty drunk, apparently, and men will do things under the influence which normally they wouldn't think of doing, however much they might secretly want to.'

'That's true enough, but it doesn't help us if they were both drunk. It means it's as long as it's broad. Let's go over it again. There might be something we've overlooked. Yes! By Jove! I think we've got him! Have him in again.'

Graham looked haggard but defiant.

'Can't you leave me alone?' he asked. 'I've told you over and over again that I don't know anything more.'

'I'm going to tell you, not ask you, this time,' said the



Chief Constable. ‘I’ll tell you exactly what happened. You can correct me if I go wrong.

‘I suggest that you deliberately arranged the sleeping so that you could confirm your suspicions of your wife and Francis. You thought she would take the risk of going to him in that double bed. Instead of going to the camp bed you sneaked into the kitchen from where you could keep track of the proceedings.

‘Your suspicions proved to be well-founded. As soon as your wife rose from the settee you rushed in and snatched down the assegai. She fled from you – not up the stairs (for she realised that that would not save her) but into the dining room where she hoped to be able to slam the door on you. You were a little too quick for her.

‘I’m sorry for you, Graham, but the officer must make his arrest. She *must* have got up off that settee, for there was no blood on it.’

This reasoning broke Graham down.

‘There’s one thing, sir,’ said the inspector soberly. Whether that house was haunted before this happened I wouldn’t really care to say, but I reckon it’s haunted now.’