

SUPPLEMENT TO THE GREEN SHEAF, No. 13.

A HORROR OF THE HOUSE
OF DREAMS.

BY

F. YORK-POWELL.

A HORROR OF THE HOUSE OF DREAMS.

I WAS staying for the first time at the country house of an old friend, whom I had not seen for years. It was late in the evening, and we were sitting in the smoking-room having a last pipe together before we went to bed. The room was panelled with dark wood, and the furniture was old. I felt sleepy as my friend talked, and gave him but short answers. Gradually I became conscious of an unpleasant feeling of vague discomfort, for which I could not account. This grew upon me more and more, till my sleepiness fell off me, and I began to wish that my friend would propose our going to bed. A feeling of fear, which seemed in some mysterious way to grow into a sense of something uncanny in the room itself, was, in fact, gradually mastering me.

As I was trying to find some excuse for escaping, there was a knock at the door, and my friend's butler came in with spirits and tumblers. He was an oldish man, who had been long in the family. We spoke to him, and my friend asked him to sit down and have a glass of spirits and water with us, which he did. After a little more talk we got up, intending to go to bed. The smoking-room was on the first floor, at one end of a long drawing-room, into which it opened by a door, a second door leading to a landing. We all went out on to this landing, where the candles were; but as I was turning to the great oak staircase, my friend suggested that we should go and say good-night to his aunt. I agreed, and we went back into the smoking-room, and through the long drawing-room, which I could see by the moonlight, the blinds being up in three or four tall windows, though the moon itself was not visible. As we passed these windows I could see the gardens, and a misty meadow beyond, against which the small, black, clipped trees of the terrace showed hard and distinct. The furniture was of the beginning of the nineteenth century—a harp, a large old-fashioned piano, chairs with flowered tapestry seats, and a light carpet with large flowers. There was a white marble mantelpiece, and the walls were painted in dark reddish-brown distemper, which seemed a little faded. A few water-colours were hung at wide intervals upon the walls.

Passing through this room close under the windows, and through a door opposite to that by which we had entered, we came into a boudoir, just like the smoking-room in shape and size, but furnished in the same old-fashioned style as the drawing-room, and lit by two large windows, in one of which the blinds were up. There were two candles burning on a little table, and a fire in the grate, in front of which sat a pleasant-looking old lady with grey hair, in a lace cap and purplish satin dress. A maid with a baby in her arms was sitting at the side of the room opposite the door by which we had come in. I was introduced to the old lady, sat down beside her, and we began talking, our faces to the fire, our backs to the candles.

I had totally forgotten my feeling of discomfort, and was interested in our conversation, when I noticed that the light in the room had become dim. The glow died out of the fire, leaving it dull; and when I looked round the candle flames had dwindled to the blue. I stood up, and saw my friend and the butler standing together at the door, holding it ajar, and craning their heads round it to look into the drawing-room, whence a bright light proceeded and fell flatly about their feet. I ran up to them. "What is it?" I asked; but they motioned me back. "You had better not look!" said my friend, in a curious, tuneless voice, tense with suppressed irritation. "Oh, nonsense!" said I, "I want to see!" Pushing past them, I went into the drawing-room; and there, a few paces in front of me, I saw a spare old gentleman in a dress of the time of George II., pale blue coat, pale yellow breeches, silk stockings, buckled shoes, and ruffled wrists. He stood in a pantaloon-like attitude, in his right hand a thin, polished, brown walking-stick, which seemed to me of about the fineness of the thin end of a billiard cue. I could see nothing of his face; but the end of his nose, which must have been long, was just visible beyond the profile of his cheek. He stood in the midst of an oval of light on the floor, very like that gleam which I have since noticed thrown by a tricycle lamp upon a dark road, but sharper in its outlines.

He walked slowly along to the wall, his footsteps making no sound; and as he drew near the side of the room, I observed that wherever the oval of light passed across the floor, or mounted up the wall, the decoration changed to an earlier style. The wall within the light now appeared a pale green, with panels of pale tinted landscape, bordered by *rococo* scroll work. In the centre, at the bottom of a panel, I could see the figure of a nymph reclining among reeds. The old gentleman stood before this panel, raised his stick, and rapped the centre of the tuft of reeds with such irritable violence that the stick snapped, and about eight inches of it fell on the floor; but all this without making the slightest noise. Immediately afterwards the light went out, and the decoration fell back into the flat red tint of the distemper. But I had kept my eyes fixed on the exact spot upon which the old gentleman had rapped, and, running forward to the wall, I clapped my hand on the place, which now showed like a grease spot, a little darker than the rest of the wall. "There, there!" I cried out; "if you break into the wall to-morrow you are sure to find something."

I turned excitedly towards my friend, who I thought had followed me; but I saw that he was still standing with the butler half behind the door. Between me and them I could see no one; only, on the floor between me and them, flitting silently about, were two small ovals of light. I knew that these marked the soundless footsteps of the old gentleman, now become invisible.

A horror, such as I had felt in the smoking-room, now suddenly again fell upon me; but in far greater force. How I got back, past those gleaming footprints as they moved silently about—back to the boudoir—I don't know. I only remember that I found myself standing by the fire, near the old lady, who had risen to her feet. I kept looking round at the window, wondering whether it would

be possible to escape through it; but I judged the height, at least twenty feet from the ground, too great for such a venture.

My friend and the butler were still at the door; and again I saw the great flat light, now brighter than ever, at their feet. They were as terror-stricken as I was myself. "What shall we do?" I heard someone say; and after a minute of silence my friend and the old lady began reciting with earnest but shaken voices some versicles of the Litany.

For a moment I thought perhaps their prayers might avail us, for the light seemed to ebb from the doorway; but at the end of the second verse I was completely panic-stricken as I heard the words, "Good Lord, deliver us!" slowly and distinctly repeated in a grating, mocking, old man's voice, which came from the other room; and, with this venomous echo still in my ears, I woke.

F. YORK-POWELL.