

The Lady in Black

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

The following perfectly true story was lately related to me by the lady I have named Mrs. Neville. It is not her real name, because she would rather her own name did not appear, as her husband was a well-known clergyman in a very high position, and for obvious reasons she prefers to remain incognito. But I heard the story from her own lips, just as it is given here, and I can assure my readers, knowing the teller, of it as I do, that every word is true, and that the lady in question is the last person in the world to invent or imagine a ghost story. Her only wish is for some satisfactory explanation.

Here is the story, as I took it down from her dictation—

“We lived for many years in the North Island of New Zealand, and while there had the following uncanny experiences: It was the first and only time I have seen what I believe to be a ghost, and as other members of the household saw it too, as well as various friends and neighbours, there can be no doubt whatever that the place was haunted. ‘Seeing is believing,’ and other testimony was too strong to be discredited.

“The first occasion on which anything happened was when my son Robert was a boy of twelve. He was rather ill at the time, and his father was sleeping in his room on another bed, in what was usually a spare room. The door, which faced the door of my own room, was wide open and so was my door just across the landing. There was no light in either room, as we had all been asleep for some time, but there was a candle on a table on the landing, just outside my son’s room, and its light shone on his bed, which was just inside the door on the left.

“All at once, in the middle of the night, I was awakened by hearing Robert screaming at the top of his voice, ‘There’s a woman looking at me! I jumped up and went to him, and his father and I tried to soothe him by telling him he had been dreaming—as, indeed, we concluded he had—but he was trembling all over, and could not get to sleep again for hours. He persisted that he had been wide awake and had seen her features quite plainly, bending forward, with the light of the candle behind her, and said she had long black hair and a white face. We told him he had had nightmare because he was ill, and next day we moved him back into his own room. He said no more about the woman, but he never forgot the smallest detail of that night, as you will see presently. The room opposite mine was, as a matter of fact, rather uncanny, though nothing had been actually seen there. People used to hurry past it, for no particular reason, and although we never worried ourselves in the least about ‘Robert’s dream,’ as we called it, I confess to having often felt an unaccountable feeling of terror.

“About a year after we had, one evening, a number of guests to dinner. One of them, whom I will call Mr. Kay, was the head master of a Maori school, and was a very intelligent and unimaginative man. While at dinner he said that something greatly puzzled him, and when I asked him what it was he said—

“ ‘Just now, when I was coming up your garden path and was passing the old willow tree, I saw a lady close to me on the path. I moved to the left, to leave her room to pass, and she moved to the right, so I raised my hat and said, “I beg your pardon.” As I did so, she disappeared. Where can she have gone? I was near—almost touching her. It was not

dark, but twilight, and I saw her face most distinctly. She was all in black and looked pale. The part of the path where we met was quite open, and there was no tree near but the old willow. What can have become of her? It is a perfect mystery.'

"He got very excited about it and, of course, I listened and was politely interested, but thought he had imagined that the lady had disappeared, though I wondered who the stranger could be and why she was walking in our garden.

"Some time after I saw the lady in black myself. It was a Sunday evening, and everybody, including the servants, had gone to church, except my son Robert, now just grown up, and myself. We were sitting in an upstairs room and I was just opening a book to begin to read aloud, when I got up to shut the window, and, looking out, I saw a little woman dressed in black coming up the path towards the front door. Robert, who came to help me with the window, saw her too, and exclaimed, 'Here comes a visitor.'

"Knowing the servants were out, I went down and opened the door, but nobody was there. In great astonishment I went round the house—there were three other doors—but there was not a sign of anything. This time I began to feel nervous and went upstairs. Robert asked where the visitor was, and I said that nobody had called.

" 'Oh, but, mother, I watched her from the window come right up to the front door while you were going down. How did you manage to miss her? Did you open the door quickly enough?'

"I said something evasive, and Robert said the whole thing was very extraordinary. I, who had heard Mr. Kay's story, thought it still more so, but naturally I kept my thoughts to myself. Robert, as I found out later, had also formed his own ideas on the subject, but did not wish to alarm me.

"A few months later, a man named Tom Mason, who had once been a very bad character but was now reformed and very sincere in his efforts to lead an upright life and had joined the Church, came to the house one morning to ask my husband if he would lend him a small tent which we used for bathing. He was told he could certainly have it, and said he would call for it that evening.

"He came for it as arranged, and I gave him the tent. My husband was always glad to help him, as he took a great interest in the man. Tom walked off with the tent, profuse in his thanks, and went down the garden path with his burden.

"Next day he came to the house again and asked to see me. When I saw him he seemed very much upset and said—

" 'Oh, dear! I had an awful fright last night.'

" 'Had you, Tom?' I said.

" 'Yes, indeed. When I got as far as the willow tree a lady passed me and I said "Good evening, ma'am." Instead of speaking to me she disappeared all of a sudden. I can't understand it at all; she seemed to go into nowhere.'

"The man could not possibly have heard any stories about the lady in black, and he mentioned the matter to me as if it was a thing that had frightened and puzzled him, but not as if he knew the place was haunted. We had all kept the facts carefully to ourselves, and so had Mr. Kay, the schoolmaster.

"I said something commonplace to Tom about his probably having seen a shadow and mistaken it for a lady, but he was quite positive, and said he saw her features quite plainly, that she was small and dressed in black with a little round black hat. His description, which was minute, tallied exactly with that of the lady I had myself seen.

“Two or three years later another uncomfortable episode happened. It was a wild, windy morning, raging and blowing. About eleven o’clock I went into the dining-room, where my husband was talking to a visitor, Canon Horton, and while I was in the room Canon Horton said, ‘There’s a strange clergyman in town.’ I remembered his words presently when I went back into the study, where my daughter was writing, for on going to shut the window, because it was raining, I saw a figure in a black cloak, like those clergymen wear, coming up the garden path to the front door. The figure was underneath the old willow which overhung the path, and I could not see the head because it was hidden by some of the boughs, but I could see that the stranger carried a letter in one hand.

“My daughter was at the window with me, and I said to her—

“ ‘There’s the clergyman Canon Horton mentioned just now. He is coming here to call.’

“My daughter said, ‘Where, mother? There isn’t anybody there.’

“As she said the words, the figure disappeared.

“I said nothing more, though I had seen it quite distinctly, and this time in broad daylight. It gave me a horrible feeling that the house was indeed haunted and that for some reason I was doomed to see the ghost while my daughter saw nothing.¹

“Soon after, a friend of ours—the wife of a local doctor—was walking in the road near our garden with her dogs. It was a bright sunshiny day, and there was no wind at all.

“As she was near the old willow tree, the dogs began to fight and she stopped to separate them. I must tell you that our lawn and garden were higher than the road, which ran below them. When she had quieted the dogs she looked up, and there, standing underneath the willow tree in our garden, was a lady in a long black cloak.

“ ‘Is that Mrs. Neville?’ she thought, as she told me afterwards, and she advanced to speak to me. But as she looked at it the figure disappeared, and she was very much upset.

“On a subsequent occasion my daughter and a girl friend were walking down the garden together. The girl had been spending the day with us, and was expecting her mother to call for her early in the evening. All at once she said to my daughter—

“ ‘There’s mother!’

“ ‘Where? I don’t see any one,’ said my daughter.

“ ‘Why, here—coming up the path,’ said the girl, but as she uttered the words the figure disappeared.

“Soon after we left the house and went to live abroad. Before we left, other people in the neighbourhood saw the ghost, but I never saw it again after that morning in the study. The curious part of it was that the house was not an old one. It had been built shortly before we came to live in it, and we were its first occupants, but on making inquiries I found that an old church had once stood where our front garden was, and had been pulled down. People attending it used to walk past the old willow tree on the lawn to get to the porch. The willow tree itself was supposed to be the oldest tree in the town. It is strange that the lady in black nearly always disappeared under it, and if we had dug near its roots I wonder what we should have found! However, we did not excavate or search. We were heartily glad to get away from the house, as it was an uncanny dwelling, full of strange weird sounds.

¹ I have come across many cases of the kind.

“We never fathomed who the lady in black had been in her lifetime or why she haunted the house. Was she murdered in the Maori War of 1866? Nobody knows. All I do know is that we saw her most distinctly.”

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Some fresh evidence bearing on the above has been kindly given me by another friend, whose home is in New Zealand and who lived for a time in the same town in which the lady in black appeared, and was on very friendly terms with Mr. and Mrs. Neville. Her story is as follows— “We lived close to the vicarage, but our house, unlike the vicarage, was a very old one.

“Five years ago I had a dreadful shock. I had just gone to bed and was about to fall asleep when I felt a curious sensation that there was some one in the room, and looking up I saw a woman standing at the foot of my bed looking at me. She was not staring fixedly at me, but looking in an odd, impersonal sort of way. She had a long, sallow face, black hair and large, dark eyes. There was no light in the room, but a grey light behind her threw her into clear relief. I particularly noticed her long, sinuous hair and black drapery. At first I was more puzzled than frightened, wondering who she could be, but as she did not speak I became terrified. I could not call out or scream, and my eyes were drawn to hers. As I watched her she got nearer the wall, backwards, and disappeared.

“I told Robert Neville about her, as we were friends and neighbours.

“He said my experience was the same as one he had had in his bedroom at night when he was a boy. Before I described the figure, he said, ‘Had she long, snaky hair? Had she dark eyes? Did she stare at you? Was her face long and very pale?’ He then told me about her appearance to him in his boyhood, of which he had never forgotten a single detail, as it had made such a vivid~ and horrible impression on him.

“I am glad to say I never saw the Lady in Black again.”