

Sarah Fletcher

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

I have to thank Mrs. M. Chester Ffoulkes, i, Saville Court, Brompton Square, S.W., the well-known writer and collaborator in several books of royal memoirs, for the following story. Mrs. Ffoulkes, who is much interested in everything psychic, told me the first part of the story herself and obtained for me the rest of the particulars.

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“A year ago,” said Mrs. Ffoulkes, “I was reading a book in which a very curious epitaph in a country church was quoted. The lady mentioned in it was put down as a victim of nerves. Chance soon after led me to take a country cottage near the river close to the church in question, and on realizing that fact I went over to the village to try and find the tombstone.

“I did find it. The epitaph on it was as follows—

‘Reader

If thou hast a heart famed for Tenderness and Pity, contemplate this Spot. In which are deposited the remains of a Young Lady, whose artless Beauty, Innocence of Mind and gentle Manners once obtained her the Love and esteem of all who knew her. But when nerves were too delicately spun to bear the rude shakes and jostlings which we meet with in this transitory World, Nature gave way” She sank and died a Martyr to Excessive Sensibility

MRS. SARAH FLETCHER,

Wife of Captain Fletcher,

Departed this Life at the Village of C—
on the 7th of June, 1799, in the 29th year of her age.

May her soul meet that peace in heaven which this earth denied her.’

“The lettering was very worn, and seemed to be in danger of disappearing altogether, so I wrote to the vicar and suggested that such a strange epitaph should surely be preserved. My feeling was one of great pity for the young wife who had died such an untimely death, and I also felt that I *must* find out something more about her.

“The vicar wrote back to me, saying that the late Mrs. Fletcher was not the victim of nerves, but of her husband’s cruelty, and that there was a ghost story connected with the house where she had lived.

"I at once tried to find out where the house was, and, by making inquiries in the neighbourhood, I found it, and wrote to the vicar of the parish in which it stood, asking him to kindly give me a few details about Mrs. Sarah Fletcher.

"He replied to my letter, it is true, but in such an unsatisfactory way that I was blankly discouraged. But I still persevered, and after a good deal of bother I succeeded in getting into the house and going all over it.

"It was a large, roomy house, three storeys I high, with a fiat, leaded roof. The building, though high, was curiously shallow; and a more unhappy house cannot possibly be imagined. When I entered the square hall I felt that Sarah Fletcher was near me, and that she was unutterably miserable. I longed to speak to her. I felt that if I had known her in life I should have loved her. I could hardly tear myself away from the hall, but I went upstairs, with the lady in charge, to see what is called the 'Suicide's Room.'

"It was situated on the top floor, at one end of a very long passage. All the rooms on this floor had windows opening into the passage over the tops of the doors. As we went along towards the haunted room, I saw Sarah Fletcher in my mind's eye, her auburn hair entwined with blue ribbons, and she seemed to be running down the passage, and was most unhappy—that was the impression I had. The place seemed saturated with tears.

"I saw the room in which she had killed herself. There was the atmosphere of suffering, but nothing remarkable in the room itself. I was shown the place in the wall from behind which a large nail or rod had been removed, from which she had hanged herself.

"Going downstairs, I had tea with the lady in charge, and asked her to tell me the whole story, but she said she never talked about it.

"The story, I soon found, was common gossip in the village, and that there were various accounts of the haunting—of lights seen in the house when it was quite empty, of footsteps and loud shrieks at night, and of the front door having been opened to a visitor by a ghost. I never came across anything that fascinated me so much. The place seemed to hold me, and, instead of returning to town, I stayed on at the cottage longer than I had intended.

"I heard that the Rev. E. Crake, a clergyman in Sussex, who had formerly lived in the house, had once tried to unravel the mystery. By this time I was so curious that I felt I simply must go on with it, so I procured his address, and through him got to know the whole facts of the story.

"The strange thing about it all is that in an unpublished novel Mr. Crake wrote about Sarah Fletcher, she is described by him, long before he knew me, as an auburn-haired woman—in fact, in every small detail she is like the woman I had mentally seen in the old house. Mr. Crake, in talking to me about it, told me he always longed for her to come and speak to him. His feeling towards her, like my own, was of tender compassion. He was sure she never meant to worry anybody, but was a sweet and loving girl who suffered intensely.

"I afterwards saw the vicar of the church in which Mrs. Fletcher was buried. He was very kind, and said there was a story to the effect that some years after the tragedy a woman was cleaning the church, when a gentleman in black came into it and began looking round. The woman, who was fond of talking and gossiping, said, 'Are you looking at our curious tombstone, sir?' and began to tell him the story, adding, 'and it was through her husband's cruelty she killed herself.'

" 'Say no more, woman,' said the stranger. 'I am that unhappy man!' "

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With Mrs. ffoulkes' kind help and from material with which, through Mr. Crake, she has kindly supplied me, including a copy of the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research, I find that the story of the tragedy and the subsequent haunting is as follows—

A certain Captain Fletcher, said to be one of the Fletchers of Saltoun, lived in the house with his beautiful and amiable young wife. She appears, from all accounts, to have been a most charming and sweet-tempered girl, and so it is all the more astonishing that her husband was most cruel and utterly unfaithful to her. The story goes that he gave out news of his death abroad, but he returned in secret, and, pretending he was a bachelor, he actually made an offer of marriage to a lady living in the neighbourhood. The proposal was accepted, and the ceremony had actually begun, when Mrs. Fletcher appeared on the scene and forbade its completion. Captain Fletcher went away to sea, and his wife returned home, and, in her distress, hanged herself in a room at the extreme angle of the top storey of the house.

The following paragraph appeared among the obituary notices in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, under the date of June 1799—

“At C , Mrs. Sarah Fletcher, who put an end to her life by hanging herself with her pocket-handkerchief, which she fastened to a small piece of cord and affixed it to the curtain-rod of the bedstead in which she usually slept. After a full investigation of the previous conduct of the deceased, and the derangement of her mind appearing very evident from the testimony of the gentleman at whose house this unfortunate affair happened, as well as from many other circumstances, the jury, without hesitation, found a verdict of lunacy. Her husband is an officer in the Navy, and now on his passage to the East Indies.”

A similar notice appeared in *Jackson's Oxford Journal* for Saturday, June 15, 1799. The wording is practically identical, and probably the *Gentleman's Magazine*, which gave a monthly *résumé* of remarkable happenings all over England, copied the paragraph from the local paper—the only one existing at that time.

As the chief people concerned in the tragedy were of such good position, every effort was naturally made to hush things up and avoid a scandal. A kindly verdict of lunacy was returned. The owner of the house gave evidence of “the derangement of her mind,” and a most ambiguous epitaph, calculated to make all its readers believe that Sarah Fletcher died of “nerves,” was put over her tombstone. She was also buried in a church at some distance from her home. In those days suicides did not receive Christian burial, and were interred “without the pale,” but as the verdict of the coroner's jury was to the effect that her desperate act was due to “lunacy,” Sarah Fletcher (who deliberately killed herself, if ever anybody did) was buried with Christian rites in the aisle of the church itself.

About half a century after her death, Mr. Crake's father, who was a private schoolmaster, was made an offer of the house in which the Fletchers had lived, at the suspiciously low rental of twenty pounds a year.

It was then said to be haunted, and was in a very neglected state, with the garden like a wilderness. The carriage drive was often flooded in winter. The house itself, however, was in good repair and the walls very thick. Rumours of a ghost in it had reached Mr.

Crake's father, so he decided to go and spend a night in the house. Nothing appeared, he experienced no ghostly sight or sound, and he accordingly took possession of the place.

One night, about seven years later, when Mr. A. D. Crake, Mr. Crake's brother, was nearly seventeen, he was sleeping in the ante-room, a small bedroom that opened out of a larger one, called "the lower room," in which some of the boys slept. As he lay quietly thinking, he heard peculiar steps, like those from high-heeled boots, descend the stairs and enter the outer room. They then approached his door, and as he was wondering whom it could possibly be walking about in the darkness, the village clock struck three.

Next night he was lying awake at the same hour, and the same incident occurred again, the clock three as before. The footsteps retreated when close to his door.

The following night he made up his mind to lie awake with his door open and watch. Again he heard the steps descend and he heard the outer door open. Somebody pushed back the open door of a wardrobe which stood in the way, with great force, and shut it. The steps went deliberately round the beds where some of the boys were sleeping, but, to Mr. Crake's amazement, though they came close to his own bed he could see no one. Calling but, "Who is it?" he sprang out of bed and looked about, searching the room and the passages, but everything was as quiet as the grave.

When Mr. Crake told his companions next morning, he found that his "discovery" was already known (in secret) to nearly every one in the school. Every morning, at a quarter to three, footsteps walked through the house from the room on the top floor, where the suicide took place, to the room below, where he slept. There was no getting away from it. His younger brother, lying awake ill, had heard them by his bedside. An assistant master had met them coming downstairs, and felt a cold wind on his face at the same time. Everybody agreed that the head of the house must not be told, as it might vex and worry him.

Mr. Crake and his senior assistant master agreed to sit up and keep watch, and they sat in a room partitioned off from the "Suicide's Room." The evening passed slowly, and as time went on and the dawn was beginning to appear, Mr. Crake said, "If it doesn't come soon, there will be nothing to-night," when, as he uttered the words, the steps were distinctly heard in the next room. Then they went into the passage and passed the door. Mr. Crake and his friend opened the door and looked along the passage. The steps were going down it, slowly and deliberately, but there was no form to be seen. They followed, a few feet behind, and the steps firmly descended the stairs, "which almost seemed to bend under their tread." Mr. Crake followed, while his friend remained above to see there was no trickery. There was a landing and then a second flight of stairs, and then, on the right, the door of the lower room. The watcher, following, distinctly saw the handle turn and the door open. He still followed, and the door was slammed in his face. He pushed it open and went into the lower room. The boys were all sleeping peacefully, and nobody else was to be seen. It was now nearly three o'clock, and, feeling convinced that the affair was supernatural, Mr. Crake and the assistant master went back to bed.

Within a year the footsteps ceased, and for a long season the house was undisturbed. Mr. Crake often watched just before 3 p.m., but nothing happened. His father and mother retired from the school, and his brother, Mr. E. E. Crake, now married, came to live in the old house, and he himself was ordained a priest and became chaplain of a large school.

Just before the Christmas holidays he received a letter from his brother, asking him to return home and help to investigate the ghostly disturbances, which, he said, were now

worse than ever. They did not always take place exactly at three o'clock, though they centred round that hour.

The house was now frightfully haunted, and everybody in it had evidence of the fact. Some boys who slept in the "Suicide's Room"—it was never called by that name, nor did the present pupils know the story—cried out one night loudly in terror, and when Mr. E. E. Crake rushed upstairs they declared that a woman without a head had just entered the room. It was then exactly a quarter to three. He told them they had been dreaming.

Mr. Crake's sister, sleeping one night in the fatal chamber, was awakened by hearing a loud cry from the girl cousin who slept with her, and who did not know the story. She went into violent hysterics, and when she recovered she said that a woman without a head had come into the room. The time was exactly a quarter to three.

A nurse—a complete stranger in the neighbourhood—slept in the room, and next morning asked to be allowed to sleep in another, saying she preferred, if this was not possible, to sleep on a doormat somewhere else! However, after some persuasion, she coloured, as if ashamed of her fears, and said she would try the room again. Next day she said she simply *must* move out of it, for some one came into the room each night and threw herself down on an empty bed, and when she struck a light there was no one in the room.

Mr. A. D. Crake and his brother, Mr. E. E. Crake, and their two sisters experienced the most awful and blood-curdling disturbances.

One night Mr. A. D. Crake was awakened several times by the most deafening noises and shocks. A large box outside his room on the top floor appeared, by the sound, to be lifted up several feet and allowed to crash down again three times. Everybody in the house was roused and heard three heavy smashes. Their doors were tried at night, and they distinctly saw the handles turn; steps paraded the passages, the furniture was shifted by invisible hands, and when one of the boys, who was ill and left behind during the holidays, died of congestion of the lungs, such dismal sounds issued from the room where he lay dead that Mr. and Mrs. Crake could not sleep in the adjoining one, but had to move into another.

One night Mrs. Crake, while her husband was away in town, heard sounds as if a number of workmen were taking down the beds and other furniture and laying iron lathes down on the floor, as if preparatory to a move. The move did come not long after, fortunately for those in the house, and the school was shifted to a well-known seaside place on the south coast.

The assistant master who sat up with Mr. A. D. Crake to listen for the mysterious footsteps has described them as very firm and determined, and like those made by the high-heeled boots of a woman. He remained upstairs, as I have said, to see that there was no trickery, while Mr. A. D. Crake followed the footsteps downstairs into the large dormitory to the door of the ante-room, back between the rows of beds and up the stairs again.

He also remembers, on more than one occasion, hearing in the night sounds as if some unwieldy body was being dragged up the stairs—something soddened and ponderous—then a shuffling of muffled feet, a scratching as of iron talons on the door of an unoccupied room, and the fall of a heavy body. Once there was a fierce scuffle over a part of the floor where some stains had been boarded over, and then the footsteps

retreated. This occasion turned out, from the date on the tomb, to be the anniversary of the night of the suicide.

The Rev. E. E. Crake has no objection to my mentioning his name as authenticating the above story, in which he and other members of his family were concerned. An extract in his brother's diary, not written for publication, proves that the writer heard the ghostly disturbances, and that on one occasion he said a prayer against evil spirits, after which everything was still and he slept comfortably till daybreak. He also affirmed confidently that he saw the door handle turn without human agency, and followed the steps through the house. Mr. E. E. Crake gives a general confirmation of the facts, adding that during his wife's illness, while sitting up late in his study, he would, nearly every night, hear the steps of Sarah Fletcher going along the passage and down the two flights of stairs.