

Two Somerset Stories

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

A Watchet Story

Sometimes, when I have been staying down in the West Country, I have heard legends and stories which are characteristic of the wild and beautiful country-side. Some of these I have already told in my *Grey Ghost Book*, and others I have jotted down for future use.

The two that follow here concern Somerset. The Watchet story I owe to the kindness of Mrs. Forbes-William, a lady living in Somerset, whom I once heard give a most clever lecture on an occult subject some years ago at a London club, and who is an authority on local folk-lore and ghost stories. She has given me, at my request, an account of her experiences when she was asked to explore an old haunted house in Watchet, to try to account for certain mysterious noises that were constantly being heard. Getting into touch with the unseen world, she saw and heard some strange things, of which the following is her own description.

In a corner of Somersetshire is a small out-of-the-way village which has taken part from time to time in the history of England. At one period it sent two members to Parliament, and was an important seaport town and borough. It still retains the "Court Leet."

Watchet, so called from a word meaning "blue," has been mentioned by Chaucer, and poets of later date have come here.

It was from the sailors of Watchet that Coleridge got his information when he wrote his *Ancient Mariner*. The lines—

"Merrily did we drop
Below the kirk, below the bill,
Below the lighthouse top,"

refer to the church and lighthouse of Watchet. Many are the strange tales told by sailors of witches and other weird beings who are heard of in fairy stories.

Watchet also figures in *Lorna Doone*.

Few people know of this quaint old-world place, which still, in another way, plays a part in history. When the gales blow from the north-west the cliffs are washed away, revealing beautiful pink and white alabaster, and the big storm in 1900 completely wrecked the pier. Indeed, when the tide runs out far, in the spring and autumn, the remains of ancient buildings can be seen far below, and record says that under the sea lies a royal mint.

The waters have claimed large tracts of land, and the waves wash up right to the foot of the village street. In days of old the indentation of the coast gave every facility for smuggling, and it is about this time my story of Watchet really begins.

I was asked to visit a house in Swain Street, as a ghost was particularly lively there. At this time I knew nothing whatever about the village, being an entire stranger in these parts.

There are various classes of ghosts, and one has to be very careful in deciding to which category they belong.

Some are like cinematograph films, repeating themselves on the birthday of the event which brought them into being, or on certain days of the month, or at certain changes of the moon. Others are seen by dreamers, people living far away in other countries or other parts of the same country, who in their sleep appear to be drawn to the place they lived in during a past incarnation or previous existence.

Others, again, are thought-forms either of love or hate; if of love, they will often warn inhabitants of any danger connected with the house; if of hate, they are a menace to the owners.

One more class yet remains; they are the spirits themselves who, being earthbound, wander round the old places they lived in during their life on earth.

On going to the house in question, I found the whole place thrown open to me, the disturbances being noises of various kinds.

The upper room was in a sadly disturbed state. There had once been a murder there, two men having had a deadly quarrel, and, springing at each other's throats, had made the room full of etheric disturbance, one being eventually killed.

We followed the track of the disturbance till we got to the cellar of a warehouse close by. A strange and solemn procession we were, going down the dark corridors with lighted candles, silently following the highly vibratory etheric track, and arriving at last at a trap-door. Here the owner and myself descended a ladder, the rest waiting above, holding lights for us to see the way. Down we went, and, relighting our candles, I found we were in what really looked more like a room than a cellar. We walked carefully round it.

"You see," said the owner, "this is all. We cannot get any further."

But, still keeping to the track, I heard beyond enough sounds and saw enough sights to make me feel sure there had originally been an opening in one part of the wall, which, on being tapped, proved to be quite hollow, and we traced a doorway big enough to admit a man.

As we could not go any further, I went to see some of the old inhabitants of Watchet, to find out if they had ever heard that the cellar had an opening to the sea. From them I gathered where the opening was—through a trap-door in the roadway, under an old arch. The arch originally had a door, which was bolted and barred at night. There was another egress to the sea, giving two ways of access and two ways of escape as well.

To make a long story short, I saw the murder grimly and horribly enacted before me in the upper room. The body of the slain man was dragged away by the murderer, and, following the track, I was led to the closed-up wall, which I found was connected by a subterranean passage with the sea. As I have said, there were two ways of access to the sea, and two of escape.

I also saw distinctly men in bright-coloured shirts, long stockings and short trunk-hose moving casks and bales of goods. Some of the casks were rolled in full, and others rolled down empty. It was evident that heavy smuggling work was going on. The casks were dark coloured, so as to attract less attention at night.

I saw picture after picture of these silent smugglers. Sometimes the dresses were of another period, and large hats were worn. Some of the men were tall and fair, typical of the Anglo-Saxon race; others of the type so often met with in seaport towns—darker, smaller and foreign-looking.

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After what I saw in the old haunted house, I looked up old maps and engravings, read old books on local topography, and had many an interesting interview with some of the oldest inhabitants. I tried to find out every detail of the secret passages, and succeeded in doing so, though they have long since been walled up. There were, as I had seen, many proofs that smugglers had used the place frequently for storing their treasures.

I found that the whole of Watchet was simply a honeycomb of underground passages leading, at almost right angles, from the sea to some sunken lanes called, to this day, "Smugglers' Lanes," which, in their turn, led to farmhouses and old inns, where casks of brandy were constantly being taken.

The men ran their casks up full and took them down empty, taking them over the Channel to have them refilled. This accounted for the double to and fro movement which seemed so puzzling.

On subsequent inquiry I found that the particular warehouse into which we went had been, in later times, used as a wholesale store for merchandise. Boats brought in bales of goods for sale. They were brought to this particular store, and people from all the country round came in to buy, the small stores in other villages being refilled from this large central supply. This accounted for the bales of goods and the different dresses of the men.

The men I saw seemed to love their work. It was certainly contraband, but that made it spicy. There was much rough good-nature while they hauled in their casks. Government was rich, they implied, and therefore could not want the money. Why should they not have some on their own account? Indeed, some of the farm land was very poor, and could not have produced enough for their wives and families without a little help from the smuggled brandy.

As one goes all along this interesting and indented coast, and, indeed, into nearly all the old cottages in Watchet, one will be told of skeletons walled up or found in old passages, and of gruesome murders done for the gain of gold. Traders who brought silver were put away down the shuffle-board, for the sake of the spoons or coffee-pots or other goods which they possessed. Some of the ill-gotten silver is in the possession of the people of Watchet to this day.

Being a seaport, this little town was made the headquarters for smuggling goods. Often they were landed in a cave called "Little Silver" to await distribution. As you go over the surrounding country, these living pictures, the earth's cinematograph shows, are visible to those who have eyes to see when the moon's new or full, in winter or autumn, for these are the smugglers' particular seasons.

The high tides run the boats further into the caves, nearer cover; on misty nights the whole place becomes alive for those who can see or hear. The smugglers rolling up their casks, the great wagons with silent movement, having their wheels and the hoofs of the horses well padded, still pass up the old smugglers' lanes in silence, and you may still hear the rock-rider, on his horse, going to intercept them in their silent work.

One wonders whether the ghosts or the living men were most silent.

These things are written where all deeds are recorded, on the tablets or soul of the earth, in which all thoughts and actions are registered, so that, in very deed, do the stones cry out their own long-past history.

The Whistling Ghost of Minehead

Beautiful Minehead, the favourite resort of summer tourists, has a remarkable ghost story, which concerns a witch-woman named Mother Leakey. The odd part of the story is that Mrs. Leakey in her lifetime was kind and good, and reserved her vile doings until after her death, thus forming a curious comment on Shakespeare's line, "The evil that men do lives after them." In her case she did good in her life and evil only after her death; and the following is her story—

There once lived in Minehead a certain gentlewoman named Mrs. Leakey. Her son Alexander, who did a considerable trade between Minehead and Waterford, and owned several ships and was worth eight or ten thousand pounds, lived with her, and so did his wife, Elizabeth, and their son John. Mrs. Leakey was of a very bright, sociable disposition, so much so that her friends and neighbours used to say what a pity it was that such a good-natured old lady would have to die, and how much they would miss her when she did so. One day a neighbour said something of this sort to the old lady, who replied—

"Ah, you may find pleasure in my company now, but methinks you would not greatly like to see or converse with me after my death, though I believe you may have that satisfaction."

In due course she died, but before doing so made a will, leaving her husband some household furniture worth about twenty pounds and two bonds. After her death and funeral the ghost of the old lady was repeatedly seen by night and by noonday; so often, indeed, that the whole neighbourhood was aroused.

About six weeks after her death, her daughter-in-law, young Mrs. Leakey, heard a violent noise and knocking, which she described as "like a drove of cattle," near her bed.

Three weeks later, just before Easter, when she went into her bedroom to go to bed, she saw her mother-in-law sitting in a chair, dressed as usual, with a book in her hand, and looking exactly as she had done when living. Elizabeth Leakey was so astounded that she could neither speak nor stir. She stood petrified for what she estimates to be about a quarter of an hour, but which was probably a much shorter space of time.

The figure of Mrs. Leakey vanished suddenly, with a loud groan, which brought the maid up from the kitchen below to see if anything ailed her mistress. Young Mrs. Leakey, however, said nothing, and when her husband returned, about an hour later, and noticed that she seemed upset, she did not tell him the reason. Because it was his mother's ghost that had appeared, she naturally felt loth to speak about it. A day or two after, Mr. Heathfield, the curate of Minehead, called, and Mrs. Leakey told him what she had seen and asked his advice.

As in duty bound, he said it was only her fancy, and told her that her troubles had preyed upon her mind. She begged him, however, to put the case before some other clergyman, but Mr. Heathfield told nobody until he had seen the apparition for himself.

The second time Mrs. Leakey saw the apparition was about All Hallows E'en, at a storehouse of her husband's about a furlong from the house, but she then had only a glimpse of it.

The third time she saw the ghost was about six weeks before Christmas. Her husband was away at Weymouth, and it was about nine o'clock in the morning. Mrs. Leakey was getting ready to go out, and went to a certain cupboard to get her outdoor clothes. There was only room between the bed and the wall for one person to pass, and, as she shut the cupboard, she proceeded to tidy her hair, but, as she was looking into the glass, she distinctly saw her mother-in-law's face looking over her shoulder.

Although horribly afraid, she plucked up courage to address the ghost, and said—

"In the name of God, do me no hurt."

To this the ghost replied in such a loud voice that the maidservant below heard the tones, though not the words—

"I cannot. God is with thee." As the figure did not move, Mrs. Leakey said—

"In the name of God, what would you have? Is there anything I can do for you?"

The reply came: "Go to Lorelsneare" (her daughter-in-law at Barnstaple) "and deliver her a bond and ask her for a gold chain, and give up the bond and deliver the chain to Alexander."

"In the name of God," said Mrs. Leakey, "if there is anything else, tell me, that I may have peace."

"Go to Joan Atherton, in Ireland" (old Mrs. Leakey's daughter), "bid her do these things and see they are done."

"Good mother," said her daughter-in-law, "tell me whether you be in heaven or hell?"

At this the ghost, with a loud groan, vanished, and Mrs. Leakey found herself alone.

When she went downstairs the maid asked her who had been talking to her, but she said nobody, and would not tell her what had happened. She did, however, confide in her husband, but would not reveal the secret message she was charged to give to Joan Atherton, "because," she thought, "it may be hurtful to Joan and her husband and hers." She resolved, however, to go over to Ireland in the spring and keep the promise she had made to the ghost.

Not content with appearing to her daughter-in-law, old Mrs. Leakey would appear openly on the quay at Minehead, and cry, "A boat, a boat, ho! a boat, a boat, ho!" If any boatman or seaman saw her and did not come they were certain to be drowned, but if they did come they were cast away all the same, for it was impossible to please her. Worse still, as soon as any of her son's ships from Ireland neared the harbour her well-remembered form, clad in her usual garb, would stand at the mainmast and blow a whistle, and though it might be a dead calm, yet a dreadful storm would immediately arise and break the ships, scattering them in thousands of pieces. Only the seamen escaped perdition, for she had no power over their souls.

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This went on for some years, until Alexander Leakey had neither ships nor credit, and was a ruined man. His fortune was all buried in the sea, and if he only had cargo to the extent of a few pounds in any other merchant's ship the whistling ghost would appear and raise a storm, however calm the weather; and so at last no one would have any dealings with the unfortunate man.

This diabolical vindictiveness is hard to understand, for there is no reason to believe that Alexander was otherwise than a good son, and his mother had left him provided for in her will.

But worse still was to come, and this time the victim was a young boy.

John Leakey, son of Alexander, a boy of fourteen, began to sicken of "a languishing disease," and while sick complained that he could get no peace on account of being disturbed day and night by his grandmother. At last he died, crying out that he saw the devil, and afterwards black marks were found on his neck and other parts of his body.

The apparition had now become a serious menace to the peace of the neighbourhood.

One morning a doctor who was walking in the fields met old Mrs. Leakey near a stile. Having been away from the neighbourhood for a time and not having heard of her death, he spoke civilly to her and handed her over a stile. She also spoke, but he noticed that her lips did not move, and when she turned her head her eyes remained fixed. Becoming suspicious and very much afraid, he tried to get rid of her, but at the next stile she planted herself in his way and barred his passage. At last, with some difficulty, he managed to evade her and run away, but not before he had received a sound kicking from the irate old witch.

Mr. Heathfield, the curate, had by this time personal evidence of the ghost. He had prayed with old Mrs. Leakey when she was on her sickbed, "and was well aware she was a Protestant and a regular attendant at church." After young Mrs. Leakey had told him she had seen the ghost of her mother-in-law, he had naturally disbelieved her; but one evening, about nine o'clock, when he was at Alexander Leakey's house, he saw the ghost himself, just outside the kitchen door, within four feet of him. She was dressed in her usual apparel, to wit, "in a black gowne, a kerchiefe, and a white stomacher," and he saw her face quite plainly by the light of a candle standing on the kitchen table. Being very frightened, he excused himself and left the house suddenly, and two days after, when young Mrs. Leakey asked him why he had left so suddenly, he made some excuse. She pressed him, however, and then he told her the cause, whereupon she said she had known it, for she had seen the ghost go forth after him.

A woman named Elizabeth Langston, of Minehead, a farm-servant of old Mrs. Leakey's, also saw and spoke to the ghost of her mistress, which appeared to her when she was sitting over her fire with four children on Christmas Eve, in the shape of a woman with a pale, wrinkled face standing before her. Elinor Fluellin, maid to Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Leakey, who had never known old Mrs. Leakey in her life, also saw her one day in the parlour, dressed in a black gown and white stomacher and wearing a kerchief.

Loncottely, an Italian mountebank, and a sailor named Garland, who had sailed in a barque of Alexander Leakey's, also saw the apparition, and so did hundreds of people living in Minehead.

Old Mrs. Leakey, in short, tormented every one who had been acquainted with her in life, and the scandal became so great that in 1637 the Bishop of Bath and Wells presided

over a commission appointed to inquire into the matter. The report will be found in State Papers Domestic, Charles I, under the heading of "The Examination of the business concerninge the reported apparition at Minehead in the County of Somerset." Elizabeth Leakey kept to her original account and detailed the various appearances of the ghost, but she refused to say what message she had been told to deliver to Joan Atherton, her sister-in-law, and said she would reveal it to nobody except the King, and that not unless he ordered her to do so. The Commission next arraigned Mr. Heathfield, Elizabeth Langston, Elinor Fluellin and Alexander Leakey, but the latter excused himself, saying he was down with the gout when the affair happened, and on being sent for again was nowhere to be found.

The Commission decided that young Mrs. Leakey, although "an understanding woman," was contradictory in her evidence, for she had told a certain Mr. Bryan that John Leakey had been pinched and almost choked by the ghost, and yet said before them that there was no print of a hand on the child's neck, only blackness. Also that, as regards the gold chain (of which she said she had heard from the ghost for the first time), she had known quite well that it had been sent from the Bermudas, although she pretended to her sister Lorelsneare, at Barnstaple, that she did not know she had it.

Concerning Mr. Heathfield, they found him "a very phantastical man," and the fact that he was a friend of the Leakeys went against him, so they gave no credit whatever to his report.

Mrs. Langston, they were credibly informed, was "a very silly and poor woman and very often distempered with drink, and doth not know what she sayth." So her evidence also went for nothing. Eliza Fluellin, the maid, who deposed to having heard her mistress talking with the ghost and supported her in all she said, they were informed was "a wanderer," and was also "a fitt instrument to report any thinge that is putt to her."

The doctor who had so ungallantly refused to assist the ghost over the stile does not appear to have been called before the Commission. His attendance, however, is related by John Dunton, who tells the story of old Mrs. Leakey at great length in his very rare and scarce book, under the heading of "Apparition Evidence." Sir Walter Scott accuses Dunton of inventing it (or contriving), so Scott cannot have been aware of the Royal Commission, as he never alludes to it, but gives Dunton's version of the hauntings, which differs very much from the facts brought by the various witnesses before the Commission. For example, he quotes from Dunton that young Mrs. Leakey received a message from the ghost to deliver to Atherton, Bishop of Waterford, who afterwards died by the hands of the executioner. This, as we know, was not he, but Joan Waterford. Also Dunton relates that the strangled child was a girl of five or six, who was throttled in her truckle bed, and not a boy.

Dunton's story appeared in his book *Athenianism*, published in 1710. Scott wrote his own version in *Demonology and Witchcraft*, and also tells the story briefly in Note VII to the second canto of *Rokeby*. Had Scott known of the Royal N Commission he would hardly have accused Dunton of being the narrator and probably the "contriver of the story, for the whole matter was very seriously taken up by the State.

The Commission reported: "We doe believe that there was never any such apparition at all, but that it was Imposture devised and framed for some endes, but what they are we know not." And Archbishop Laud endorsed the statement with his signature.

But the men of Somerset still cling to the old tradition, and local belief in Old Mother Leakey's Ghost is as strong to-day as it ever was. When the wind howls and the sea is lashed into foam they declare that, above the voice of the tempest, rises the shrill cry of the old witch calling, "A boat, a boat, ho! a boat, ho!" and woe betide the mariner who puts out to sea when the Whistling Ghost is abroad on the face of the waters.