

# The Lady in the Lace Cap

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

The West Country is famous for ghosts and legendary lore, but the following incident has never before been in print. It has been kindly related to me by the lady to whom it happened, and on whom it has made a never-fading impression.

“When I was about sixteen,” she said, “I came from Africa, with my mother and sister, and went down to live in Devonshire. We had never been allowed to talk of ghosts, because my mother strictly forbade anything of the kind, and although I had seen some funny things while in South Africa, I kept my experiences to myself.

“What led up to the true incident I am going to tell you was a very commonplace thing, but I must tell it, as it relates to what followed.

“I had a hen, and my sister May had one too, and we were naturally very anxious that they should both lay eggs. In fact, there was a friendly rivalry between us on that account, and my sister’s hen, to my disgust, carried off all the honours in that direction.

“One day I rushed up to my hen’s nest and, to my joy, found a new-laid egg in it. Taking it in my hand, I flew off to the house to show it to my mother. I remember it was a bright, sunshiny day, about noon, very hot, and in the middle of August.

“While I was running towards the house I met my sister, and cried out, ‘My hen’s laid an egg. Where’s mother? I want to show it to her.’

“‘Mother’s indoors,’ said my sister rather coldly, for she was a little bit jealous that my hen had at last awakened to a sense of duty.

“‘Perhaps she’s in the kitchen,’ I said, and, panting with haste, I ran to the kitchen door and pushed it open.

“There stood a lady in black, near the coal-cellar door, with both her hands stretched up to a high shelf. She had on a long, old-fashioned gown, with lace down the front, and wore a lace cap. Her face was in profile, and I saw it quite distinctly.

“I was not a bit frightened, and was just going to say, ‘What do you want?’ when, to my horror, she began to slowly fade away. I could see the stone sink, with its pails and brushes, right through her. As I stood, petrified with fear, I watched her body dissolve into shadow, and the last thing to go—how well I remember it!—was the end of her gown, which remained visible for some time after the rest of her had disappeared. I remained glued to the spot, fascinated by the sight, and could not move a muscle.

“Then, as the last shadowy trace of the black gown disappeared, I turned round and fled upstairs, shouting for my mother. Down she came to meet me, and in a few words I told her what I had just seen. Of course, she said what mothers are bound to say on such occasions: ‘Don’t be silly! You’re tired,’ and told me to go and lie down.

“I protested that I was *not* tired and that I *had* seen the lady in black, whereupon my mother said, ‘Well, don’t say a word of this to May or the maids, or we shall never be able to leave the house for a moment. Nobody will stay alone in it. Now promise me, Queenie.’

“Naturally I promised, and I kept my word.

“Some few weeks later my mother and I were calling on some neighbours who lived a little distance from us, and, as my sister was not present, my mother told our hostess and

her daughter, to amuse them, the story of my ghostly experience in the kitchen of the house we were living in.

“They looked rather strangely at one another, and then said that what I had seen was evidently the ghost; for the house was well known to be haunted. Before we lived there it had been owned by an eccentric lady, who had spent practically her whole life in it. When she became old her friends did not like the idea of her living alone in a house much too large for one inmate, and persuaded her to sell it and take a smaller one. She was very much averse to doing so, and appears to have been worried into it, for her heart clung to the old house in which her girlhood had been spent.

“On the very day on which it was arranged that she should leave the house she died quite suddenly, practically, as one may say, of a broken heart. She fell back dead in the kitchen, just as she was reaching up to some shelves to see if something she wanted to take with her had been left behind.

“We often saw her after that, and although my mother and I anxiously tried to keep the secret from my sister that the house was haunted, May came one day to my mother, with a very white face, and said, ‘I’ve just been out in the kitchen, and there was such a queer old lady there. She has gone into the coal-cellar. I am sure she is not a real person.’

“ ‘You must have imagined it,’ said my mother; ‘anyhow, don’t tell Queenie.’

“So we two sisters, May and Queenie, having both seen the ghost, hid the fact from one another until one day, after we grew up, when we happened to be comparing notes. I must add that the description I gave our neighbours of the old lady’s appearance coincided in every detail with that of the late owner of the house, whom they had known quite well and visited frequently.

“I have had, as I told you, some queer experiences of ghosts in South Africa and elsewhere, but what impressed me so particularly in the case of the old lady in black was the wonderfully slow way in which she faded, and the fact that a portion of her dress remained visible after she had disappeared. It was the most uncanny thing I ever saw.”