Thrilling Tales: An Evening of Victorian Ghost Stories for the Holidays

Hello, and welcome to the Thrilling Tales podcast: I'm your librarian reader, David Wright. Today, or tonight rather, as I hope you are listening to this by candlelight on some long dark Winter's night, we present a special edition of Thrilling Tales: An Evening of Victorian Ghost Stories for the Holidays. Nowadays, we're more likely to associate ghost stories with Halloween, whereas the Winter holidays' entertainments of our era are old Rankin Bass cartoon specials, or schmaltzy Hallmark movies. But for the Victorians, this was ghost story season, as you can see from this introductory passage from Jerome K Jerome's satiric roundel of ghost stories, Told After Supper.

It was Christmas Eve.
I begin this way because it is the proper, orthodox, respectable way to begin, and I have been brought up in a proper, orthodox, respectable way, and taught to always do the proper, orthodox, respectable thing; and the habit clings to me.
Of course, as a mere matter of information it is quite unnecessary to mention the date at all. The experienced reader knows it was Christmas Eve, without my telling him. It always is Christmas Eve, in a ghost story,
Christmas Eve is the ghosts' great gala night. On Christmas Eve they hold their annual fete. On Christmas Eve everybody in Ghostland who IS anybody—or rather, speaking of ghosts, one should say, I suppose, every nobody who IS any nobody—comes out to show himself or herself, to see and to be seen, to promenade about and display their winding-sheets and grave-clothes to each other, to criticise one another's style, and sneer at one another's complexion.
"Christmas Eve parade," as I expect they themselves term it, is a function, doubtless, eagerly prepared for and looked forward to throughout Ghostland, especially the swagger set, such as the murdered Barons, the crime-stained Countesses, and the Earls who came over with the Conqueror, and assassinated their relatives, and died raving mad.
Hollow moans and fiendish grins are, one may be sure, energetically practised up. Blood-curdling shrieks and marrow-freezing gestures are probably rehearsed for weeks beforehand. Rusty chains and gory daggers are over-hauled, and put into good working order; and sheets and shrouds, laid carefully by from the previous year's show, are taken down and shaken out, and mended, and aired.
Oh, it is a stirring night in Ghostland, the night of December the twenty-fourth!
Ghosts never come out on Christmas night itself, you may have noticed. Christmas Eve, we suspect, has been too much for them; they are not used to excitement. For about a week after Christmas Eve, the gentlemen ghosts, no doubt, feel as if they were all head, and go about making solemn

resolutions to themselves that they will stop in next Christmas Eve; while lady spectres are contradictory and snappish, and liable to burst into tears and leave the room hurriedly on being spoken to, for no perceptible cause whatever.

Ghosts with no position to maintain—mere middle-class ghosts— occasionally, I believe, do a little haunting on off-nights: on All-hallows Eve, and at Midsummer; and some will even run up for a mere local event—to celebrate, for instance, the anniversary of the hanging of somebody's grandfather, or to prophesy a misfortune.

He does love prophesying a misfortune, does the average British ghost. Send him out to prognosticate trouble to somebody, and he is happy. Let him force his way into a peaceful home, and turn the whole house upside down by foretelling a funeral, or predicting a bankruptcy, or hinting at a coming disgrace, or some other terrible disaster, about which nobody in their senses would want to know sooner than they could possibly help, and the prior knowledge of which can serve no useful purpose whatsoever, and he feels that he is combining duty with pleasure. He would never forgive himself if anybody in his family had a trouble and he had not been there for a couple of months beforehand, doing silly tricks on the lawn, or balancing himself on somebody's bed-rail.

Then there are, besides, the very young, or very conscientious ghosts with a lost will or an undiscovered number weighing heavy on their minds, who will haunt steadily all the year round; and also the fussy ghost, who is indignant at having been buried in the dust-bin or in the village pond, and who never gives the parish a single night's quiet until somebody has paid for a first-class funeral for him.

But these are the exceptions. As I have said, the average orthodox ghost does his one turn a year, on Christmas Eve, and is satisfied.

Why on Christmas Eve, of all nights in the year, I never could myself understand. It is invariably one of the most dismal of nights to be out in—cold, muddy, and wet. And besides, at Christmas time, everybody has quite enough to put up with in the way of a houseful of living relations, without wanting the ghosts of any dead ones mooning about the place, I am sure.

There must be something ghostly in the air of Christmas—something about the close, muggy atmosphere that draws up the ghosts, like the dampness of the summer rains brings out the frogs and snails.

And not only do the ghosts themselves always walk on Christmas Eve, but live people always sit and talk about them on Christmas Eve. Whenever five or six English-speaking people meet round a fire on Christmas Eve, they start telling each other ghost stories. Nothing satisfies us on Christmas Eve but to hear each other tell authentic anecdotes about spectres. It is a genial, festive season, and we love to muse upon graves, and dead bodies, and murders, and blood.

There is a good deal of similarity about our ghostly experiences; but this of course is not our fault but the fault of ghosts, who never will try any new performances, but always will keep steadily to old, safe business. The consequence is that, when you have been at one Christmas Eve party, and heard six people relate their adventures with spirits, you do not require to hear any more ghost stories. To listen to any further ghost stories after that would be like sitting out two farcical comedies, or taking in two comic journals; the repetition would become wearisome.

There is always the young man who was, one year, spending the Christmas at a country house, and, on Christmas Eve, they put him to sleep in the west wing. Then in the middle of the night, the room door quietly opens and somebody—generally a lady in her night-dress—walks slowly in, and comes

and sits on the bed. The young man thinks it must be one of the visitors, or some relative of the family, though he does not remember having previously seen her, who, unable to go to sleep, and feeling lonesome, all by herself, has come into his room for a chat. He has no idea it is a ghost: he is so unsuspicious. She does not speak, however; and, when he looks again, she is gone!

The young man relates the circumstance at the breakfast-table next morning, and asks each of the ladies present if it were she who was his visitor. But they all assure him that it was not, and the host, who has grown deadly pale, begs him to say no more about the matter, which strikes the young man as a singularly strange request.

After breakfast the host takes the young man into a corner, and explains to him that what he saw was the ghost of a lady who had been murdered in that very bed, or who had murdered somebody else there—it does not really matter which: you can be a ghost by murdering somebody else or by being murdered yourself, whichever you prefer. The murdered ghost is, perhaps, the more popular; but, on the other hand, you can frighten people better if you are the murdered one, because then you can show your wounds and do groans.

Then there is the sceptical guest—it is always 'the guest' who gets let in for this sort of thing, by-the-bye. A ghost never thinks much of his own family: it is 'the guest' he likes to haunt who after listening to the host's ghost story, on Christmas Eve, laughs at it, and says that he does not believe there are such things as ghosts at all; and that he will sleep in the haunted chamber that very night, if they will let him.

Everybody urges him not to be reckless, but he persists in his foolhardiness, and goes up to the Yellow Chamber (or whatever colour the haunted room may be) with a light heart and a candle, and wishes them all good-night, and shuts the door.

Next morning he has got snow-white hair.

He does not tell anybody what he has seen: it is too awful.

There is also the plucky guest, who sees a ghost, and knows it is a ghost, and watches it, as it comes into the room and disappears through the wainscot, after which, as the ghost does not seem to be coming back, and there is nothing, consequently, to be gained by stopping awake, he goes to sleep. He does not mention having seen the ghost to anybody, for fear of frightening them—some people are so nervous about ghosts,—but determines to wait for the next night, and see if the apparition appears again.

It does appear again, and, this time, he gets out of bed, dresses himself and does his hair, and follows it; and then discovers a secret passage leading from the bedroom down into the beer-cellar,- - a passage which, no doubt, was not unfrequently made use of in the bad old days of yore.

After him comes the young man who woke up with a strange sensation in the middle of the night, and found his rich bachelor uncle standing by his bedside. The rich uncle smiled a weird sort of smile and vanished. The young man immediately got up and looked at his watch. It had stopped at half-past four, he having forgotten to wind it.

He made inquiries the next day, and found that, strangely enough, his rich uncle, whose only nephew he was, had married a widow with eleven children at exactly a quarter to twelve, only two days ago, The young man does not attempt to explain the circumstance. All he does is to vouch for the truth of his narrative.

And, to mention another case, there is the gentleman who is returning home late at night, from a Freemasons' dinner, and who, noticing a light issuing from a ruined abbey, creeps up, and looks

through the keyhole. He sees the ghost of a 'grey sister' kissing the ghost of a brown monk, and is so inexpressibly shocked and frightened that he faints on the spot, and is discovered there the next morning, lying in a heap against the door, still speechless, and with his faithful latch-key clasped tightly in his hand.
All these things happen on Christmas Eve, they are all told of on Christmas Eve. For ghost stories to be told on any other evening than the evening of the twenty-fourth of December would be impossible in English society as at present regulated. Therefore, in introducing the sad but authentic ghost stories that follow hereafter, I feel that it is unnecessary to inform the student of Anglo-Saxon literature that the date on which they were told and on which the incidents took place was—Christmas Eve.

In the spirit of Jerome's essay, I invite you to curl up with a warm cup of something nice, for three haunting tales from long ago. First, a story reminiscent of the sensationalistic Penny Dreadfuls of the era: The Demon Spell, by Hume Nisbet.

It was about the time when spiritualism was all the craze in England, and no party was reckoned complete without a spirit-rapping seance being included amongst the other entertainments.

One night I had been invited to the house of a friend, who was a great believer in the manifestations from the unseen world, and who had asked for my special edification a well--known trance medium. 'A pretty as well as heaven-gifted girl, whom you will be sure to like, I know' he said as he asked me.

I did not believe in the return of spirits, yet, thinking to be amused, consented to attend at the hour appointed. At that time I had just returned from a long sojourn abroad, and was in a very delicate state of health, easily impressed by outward influences, and nervous to a most extraordinary extent.

To the hour appointed I found myself at my friend's house, and was then introduced to the sitters who had assembled to witness the phenomena. Some were strangers like myself to the rules of the table, others who were adepts took their places at once in the order to which they had in former meetings attended. The trance medium had not yet arrived, and while waiting upon her coming we sat down and opened the seance with a hymn.

We had just finished the second verse when the door opened and the medium glided in, and took her place on a vacant set by my side, joining in with the others in the last verse, after which we all sat motionless with our hands resting upon the table, waiting upon the

first manifestation from the unseen world.

Now, although I thought all this performance very ridiculous, there was something in the silence and the dim light, for the gas had been turned low down, and the room seemed filled with shadows; something about the fragile figure at my side, with her drooping head, which thrilled me with a curious sense of fear and icy horror such as I had never felt before.

I am not by nature imaginative or inclined to superstition, but, from the moment that young girl had entered the room, I felt as if a hand had been laid upon my heart, a cold iron hand, that was compressing it, and causing it to stop throbbing. My sense of hearing also had grown more acute and sensitive, so that the beating of the watch in my vest pocket sounded like the thumping of a quartz-crushing machine, and the measured breathing of those about me as loud and nerve-disturbing as the snorting of a steam engine.

Only when I turned to look upon the trance medium did I become soothed; then it seemed as if a cold-air wave had passed through my brain, subduing, for the time-being, those awful sounds.

'She is possessed,' whispered my host on the other side of me. 'Wait, and she will speak presently, and tell us whom we have got beside us.'

As we sat and waited the table moved several times under our hands, while knockings at intervals took place in the table and all round the room, a most weird and blood-curdling, yet ridiculous performance, which made me feel half inclined to run out with fear, and half inclined to sit still and laugh; on the whole, I think, however, that horror had the more complete possession of me.

Presently she raised her head and laid her hand upon mine, beginning to speak in a strange monotonous, far away voice, 'This is my first visit since I passed from earth-life, and you have called me here.'

I shivered as her hand touched mine, but had not strength to withdraw it from her light, soft grasp.

'I am what you would call a lost soul; that is, I am in the lowest sphere. Last week I was in the body, but met my death down Whitechapel way. I was what you call an unfortunate, aye, unfortunate enough. Shall I tell you how it happened?'

The medium's eyes were closed, and whether it was my distorted imagination or not, she appeared to have grown older and decidedly debauched-looking since she sat down, or rather as if a light, filmy mask of degrading and soddened vice had replaced the former delicate features.

No one spoke, and the trance medium continued: 'I had been out all that day and without any luck or food, so that I was dragging my wearied body along through the slush and mud for it had been wet all day, and I was drenched to the skin, and miserable, ah, ten thousand times more wretched than I am now, for the earth is a far worse hell for such as I than our hell here.

'I had importuned several passers by as I went along that night, but none of them spoke to me, for work had been scarce all this winter, and I suppose I did not look so tempting as I have been; only once a man answered me, a dark-faced, middle-sized man, with a soft voice, and much better dressed than my usual companions.

'He asked me where I was going, and then left me, putting a coin into my hand, for which I thanked him. Being just in time for the last public-house, I hurried up, but on going to the bar and looking at my hand, I found it to be a curious foreign coin, with outlandish figures on it, which the landlord would not take, so I went out again to the dark fog and rain without my drink after all.

'There was no use going any further that night. I turned up the court where my lodgings were, intending to go home and get a sleep, since I could get no food, when I felt something touch me softly from behind like as if someone had caught hold of my shawl; then I stopped and turned about to see who it was.

'I was alone, and with no one near me, nothing but fog and the half light from the court lamp. Yet I felt as if something had got hold of me, though I could not see what it was, and that it was gathering about me.

'I tried to scream out, but could not, as this unseen grasp closed upon my throat and choked me, and then I fell down and for a moment forgot everything.

'Next moment I woke up, outside my own poor mutilated body, and stood

watching the fell work going on--as you see it now.'

Yes I saw it all as the medium ceased speaking, a mangled corpse lying on a muddy pavement, and a demoniac, dark, pock-marked face bending over it, with the lean claws outspread, and the dense fog instead of a body, like the half formed incarnation of muscles.

'That is what did it, and you will know it again.' she said, 'I have come for you to find it.'

'Is he an Englishman?' I gasped, as the vision faded away and the room once more became definite.

'It is neither man nor woman, but it lives as I do, it is with me now and may be with you to-night, still if you will have me instead of it, I can keep it back, only you must wish for me with all your might.'

The seance was now becoming too horrible, and by general consent our host turned up the gas, and then I saw for the first time the medium, now relieved from her evil possession, a beautiful girl of about nineteen, with I think the most glorious brown eyes I had ever before looked into.

'Do you believe what you have been speaking about?' I asked her as we were sitting talking together.

'What was that?'

'About the murdered woman.'

'I don't know anything at all. Only that I have been sitting at the table. I never know what my trances are.' Was she speaking the truth? Her dark eyes looked truth, so that I could not doubt her. That night when I went to my lodgings I must confess that it was some time before I could make up my mind to go to bed. I was decidedly upset and nervous, and wished that I had never, gone to this spirit meeting, making a mental vow, as I threw off my clothes and hastily got into bed, that it was the last unholy gathering I would ever attend.

For the first time in my life I could not put out the gas, I felt as if the room was filled with ghosts, as if this pair of ghastly spectres, the murderer and his victim, had accompanied me home, and were at that moment disputing the possession of me, so instead, I

pulled the bedclothes over my head, it being a cold night, and went that fashion off to sleep.

Twelve o'clock! and the anniversary of the day that Christ was born. Yes, I heard it striking from the street spire and counted the strokes, slowly tolled out, listening to the echoes from other steeples, after this one had ceased, as I lay awake in that gas-lit room, feeling as if I was not alone this Christmas morn.

Thus, while I was trying to think what had made me wake so suddenly, I seemed to hear a far off echo cry 'Come to me.' At the same time the bedclothes were slowly pulled from the bed, and left in a confused mass on the floor.

'Is that you, Polly?' I cried, remembering the spirit seance, and the name by which the spirit had announced herself when she took possession.

Three distinct knocks resounded on the bedpost at my ear, the signal for 'Yes.'

'Can you speak to me?'

'Yes,' an echo rather than a voice replied, while I felt my flesh creeping, yet strove to be brave.

'Can I see you?'

'No!'

'Feel you?'

Instantly the feeling of a light cold hand touched my brow and passed over my face.

'In God's name what do you want?'

'To save the girl I was in tonight. It is after her and will kill her if you do not come quickly.'

In an instant I was out of the bed, and tumbling my clothes on any way, horrified through it all, yet feeling as if Polly were helping me to dress. There was a Kandian dagger on my table which I had brought

from Ceylon, an old dagger which I had bought for its antiquity and design, and this I snatched up as I left the room, with that light unseen hand leading me out of the house and along the deserted snow-covered streets.

I did not know where the trance medium lived, but I followed where that light grasp led me through the wild, blinding snow-drift, round corners and through short cuts, with my head down and the flakes falling thickly about me, until at last I arrived at a silent square and in front of a house which by some instinct, I knew that I must enter.

Over by the other side of the street I saw a man standing looking up to a dimly-lighted window, but I could not see him very distinctly and I did not pay much attention to him at the time, but rushed instead up the front steps and into the house, that unseen hand still pulling me forward.

How that door opened, or if it did open I could not say, I only know that I got in, as we get into places in a dream, and up the inner stairs, I passed into a bedroom where the light was burning dimly.

It was her bedroom, and she was struggling in the thug-like grasp of those same demon claws, and the rest of it drifting away to nothingness.

I saw it all at a glance, her half-naked form, with the disarranged bedclothes, as the unformed demon of muscles clutched that delicate throat, and then I was at it like a fury with my Kandian dagger, slashing crossways at those cruel claws and that evil face, while blood streaks followed the course of my knife, making ugly stains, until at last it ceased struggling and disappeared like a horrid nightmare, as the half-strangled girl, now released from that fell grip, woke up the house with her screams, while from her releasing hand dropped a strange coin, which I took possession of.

Thus I left her, feeling that my work was done, going downstairs as I had come up, without impediment or even seemingly, in the slightest degree, attracting the attention of the other inmates of the house, who rushed in their nightdresses towards the bedroom from whence the screams were issuing.

Into the street again, with that coin in one hand and my dagger in the

other I rushed, and then I remembered the man whom I had seen looking up at the window. Was he there still? Yes, but on the ground in a confused black mass amongst the white snow as if he had been struck down.

I went over to where he lay and looked at him. Was he dead? Yes. I turned him round and saw that his throat was gashed from ear to ear, and all over his face--the same dark, pallid, pock-marked evil face, and claw-like hands, I saw the dark slashes of my Kandian dagger, while the soft white snow around him was stained with crimson life pools, and as I looked I heard the clock strike one, then I turned and fled blindly into the darkness.

THE END

Next, an excellent and startling tale of a more subtle variety by Edith Nesbit. Although she was better known as an author of such children's books as *The Railway Children* and *Five Children and It,* Nesbit was a masterful writer of scary stories. In fact, you can find a number of Nesbit's other tales in our own archives: just Google Thrilling Tales Podcast. (While you're there, search out A.M. Burrage's wonderfully scary Holiday ghost story, *Smee*, from last Winter's podcast.) This next not-quite-ghost story is to my mind her most haunting, and it is framed around the Victorian tradition of gathering around during the holidays to share ghost stories.

And now, **The Shadow, by E. Nesbit.**

THIS is not an artistically rounded off ghost story and nothing is explained in it; and there seems to be no reason why any of it should have happened. But that is no reason why it should not be told. You must have noticed that all the real ghost stories you ever come close to are like this in these respects: no explanation, no logical coherence. Here is the story.
There were three of us—and another. But she had fainted suddenly at the second extra of the Christmas Dance, and had been put to bed in the dressing-room next to the room which we three shared. It had been one of those jolly old-fashioned dances, where nearly everybody stays the night, and the big country house is stretched to its utmost containing power; guests harbouring on sofas, couches, cots, and even mattresses on the floor. Some of the young men, even, I believe, slept on the great dining table. We had talked of our partners, as girls will, and then the stillness of the Manor House, broken only by the whisper of the wind in the cedar branches, and the scraping of their lean fingers against our window panes, had pricked us to such a luxurious confidence in our surroundings of bright chintz and candle-flame and firelight, that we had dared to talk of ghosts—in which, said we all, we did not believe one bit. We had told the story of the phantom coach, and the horribly strange bed, and the lady in the sacque, and the house in Berkeley Square. Not one of us believed in ghosts, but my heart, at least, seemed to leap to my throat and choke me, when a tap came to our door—a tap faint, but not to be mistaken.

"Who's there?" said the youngest of us, craning a lean neck towards the door. It opened slowly—and I give you my word the instant of suspense that followed is still reckoned among my life's least confident moments. Almost at once the door opened fully, and Miss Eastwich, my aunt's housekeeper, companion and general standby, looked in on us.

We all said "Come in," but she stood there. She was, at all normal hours, the most silent woman I have ever known. She stood and looked at us. and shivered a little. So did we—for in those days corridors not warmed by hot-water pipes, and the air from the door was keen.

"I saw your light," she said at last, "and I thought it was late for you to be up—after all this gaiety. I thought perhaps—" her glance turned towards the door of the dressing room.

"No," I said, "she's fast asleep." I should have added a "goodnight," but the youngest of us forestalled my speech. She did not know Miss Eastwich as we others did. Did not know how her persistent silence had built a wall round her, a wall that no one dared to break down with the commonplaces of talk or the littlenesses of mere human relationship. Miss Eastwich's silence had taught us to treat her as a machine, and as other than a machine we never dreamed of treating her. But the youngest of us had seen Miss Eastwich for the first time that day. She was young and crude and ill-balanced, and the victim of blind calf-like impulse. She was also the heiress of a rich tallow-chandler, but that has nothing to do with this part of the story. She jumped up from the hearthrug, her unsuitably rich silk, lace-trimmed dressing gown falling back from her lean neck, and ran to the door, and put an arm round Miss Eastwich's prim neck. I gasped. I should as soon have dared embrace Big Ben.

"Come in," said the youngest of us, "come in and get warm. There's lots of cocoa left." She drew Miss Eastwich in and shut the door.

The vivid light of pleasure in the housekeeper's pale eyes went through my heart like a knife. It would have been so easy to put an arm round her neck if one had only thought she wanted it. But it was not I who had thought that, and, indeed, my arm might not have brought the light invoked by the lean arm of the youngest of us.

"Now," the youngest went one eagerly, "you shall have the very biggest, nicest chair, and the cocoa pot's here on the hob as hot as hot, and we've all been telling ghost stories, only we don't believe in them a bit, and when you get warm you ought to tell one too."

Miss Eastwich, that model of decorum and decently done duties, tell a ghost story! The child was mad!

"You're sure I'm not in your way?" Miss Eastwich said, stretching her hands to the blaze. I wondered whether housekeepers have fires in their rooms even at Christmas time.

"Not a bit," I said it and I hope I said it as warmly as I felt it. "I—Miss Eastwich—I'd have asked you to come in other times—only I didn't think you'd care for girls' chatter."

The third girl, who was really of no account, and that's why I have not said anything about her before, poured cocoa for our guest; I put my fleecy Madeira shawl round her shoulders. I could not think of anything else to do for her, and I suddenly found myself wishing desperately to do something. The smile she gave us was quite pretty. People can smile prettily at 40 or 50, or even later, though girls don't realize this. It occurred to me, and this was another knife-thrust, that I had never seen Miss Eastwich smile—a real smile—before. The pale smiles of dutiful acquiescence were not of the same blood as this dimpling, happy transfiguring look.

"This is very pleasant," she said, and it seemed to me that I had never before heard her real voice. It did not please me to think that at the cost of cocoa and fire and my arms round her neck I might have heard this new voice any time these six years.
"We've been telling ghost stories," I said, "the worst of it is we don't believe in ghosts. No one anyone knows has ever seen one."
"It's always what somebody told somebody who told somebody, you know," said the youngest of us.
"And you can't believe that, can you?"
"What the soldier said is not evidence," said Miss Eastwich. Will it be believed that the little Dickens quotation pierced me more keenly than the new smile or the new voice?
"And all ghost stories are so beautifully rounded off—a murder committed on the spot—or a hidden treasure or a warning—I think that makes them harder to believe. The most horrid ghost story I ever heard was one that was quite silly."
"Tell it."
"I can't—it doesn't sound anything to tell. Mrs Eastwich ought to tell one."
"Oh, do!" said the youngest of us, and her salt-cellars loomed dark as she stretched her neck eagerly and laid an entreating arm on our guest's knee.
"The only thing that I ever knew of was—was hearsay," she said slowly, "'til just the end."
I knew she would tell her story, and I knew she had never before told it, and I knew she was only telling it now because she was proud, and this seemed the only way to pay for the fire and the cocoa and the laying of that thin arm round her neck.
"Don't tell it," I said suddenly, "I know you'd rather not."
"I daresay it would bore you," she said meekly, and the youngest of us, who after all, did not understand everything, glared resentfully at me.
"We should just love it," she said, "do tell us. Never mind if it isn't a real proper fixed-up story. I'm certain anything you think ghostly would be quite too beautifully horrid for anything."
Miss Eastwich finished her cocoa and reached up to set the cup on the mantelpiece.
"It can't do any harm," she said to herself, "they don't believe in ghosts, and it wasn't exactly a ghost either. And they're all over twenty—they're not babies." There was a breathing time of hush and expectancy. The fire crackled and the gas flared higher because the billiard lights had been put out. We heard the steps and voices of the men going along the corridors.
"It is really hardly worth telling," Miss Eastwich said doubtfully, shading her faded face from the fire with her thin hand.
We all said, "Go on; oh, go on, do!"
"Well," she said, "twenty years ago, and more than that, I had two friends, and I loved them more than anything in the world. And they married each other."
She paused, and I knew just in what way she had loved each of them. The youngest of us said. "How awfully nice for you! Do go on."
She patted the youngest's shoulder, and I was glad that I had understood what the youngest of all hadn't. She went on.
"Well, after they married I didn't see much of them for a year or two, and then he wrote and asked me to come and stay, because his wife was ill, and I should cheer her up, and cheer him up as well, for it was a gloomy house, and he himself was growing gloomy too."
I knew as she spoke that she had every line of that letter by heart.

"Well, I went. The address was in Lee, near London, and in those days there streets and streets of new villa-houses growing up round old brick mansions standing in their own grounds, with red walls round, you know, and a sort of flavor of coaching days and post-chaises and Blackheath highwaymen about them. He had said the house was was gloomy, and it was called 'The Firs,' and I imagined my cab going through a dark winding shrubbery and drawing up in front of one of those sedate old square houses. Instead, we drew up in front of a large, smart villa, with iron railings, gay, encaustic tiles leading from the iron gate to the stained-glass-panelled door, and for shrubbery, only a few stunted cypresses and acubas in the tiny front garden. But inside it was all warm and welcoming. He met me at the door.

She was gazing into the fire, and I knew she had forgotten us. But the youngest girl of all still thought that it was to us she was telling her story.

"He met me at the door," she said again, "and thanked me for coming, and asked me to forgive the past."

"What past?" asked that high priestess of the inapropos, the youngest of all.

"Oh, I suppose he meant because they hadn't invited me before, or something," said Miss Eastwich, worriedly. "But it's a very dull story, I find, after all, and—"

"Do go on," I said. Then I kicked the youngest of us and got up to re-arrange Miss Eastwich's shawl, and said in blatant dumb show, over the shawled shoulders.

"Shut up, you little idiot!"

After another silence the housekeeper's new voice went on:

"They very glad to see me, and I was very glad he to be there. You girls now have such troops of friends, but these two were all I had, all I had ever had. Mabel wasn't exactly ill, only wreak and excitable. I thought he seemed more ill than she did. She went to bed early, and before she went, she asked me to keep him company through his last pipe, so we went into the dining room and sat in the two armchairs on each side of the fireplace. They were covered with green leather, I remember. There were bronze groups of horses and a black marble clock on the mantelpiece—all wedding presents. He poured out some whisky for himself, but he hardly touched it. He sat looking into the fire. At last I said:

"'What's wrong? Mabel looks as well as you could expect.'

"He said 'Yes, but I don't know from one day to another that she won't begin to notice something wrong. That's why I wanted you to come. You were always so sensible and strong-minded, and Mabel's like a little bird, or a flower.'

"I said 'Yes, of course,' and waited for him to go on. I thought he must be in debt or in trouble of some sort. So I just waited. Presently he said:

"'Margaret, this is a very peculiar house.' He always called me Margaret; you see, we'd been such old friends. I told him I thought the house was very pretty, and fresh, and homelike, only a little too new, but that fault would mend with time. He said:

"'It is new; that's just it. We're the first people who've ever lived in it. If it were an old house, Margaret, I should think it was haunted.'

"I asked if he had seen anything. 'No,' he said, 'not yet.'

"'Heard, then?' said I.

"'No, nor heard either,' he said, 'but there's a sort of feeling, I can't describe it. I've seen nothing and I've heard nothing, but I've been so near to seeing and hearing! Just not, that's all. And something

follows me about—only when I turn round there's never anything but my shadow. And I always feel that I shall see the thing, or hear it, next minute; but I never do, not quite, it's always just not visible.'
"I thought he'd been working rather hard, and I tried to cheer him up by making light of all this. 'It was just nerves,' I said. Then he said he had thought I could help him. and did I think anyone he had wronged could have laid a curse on him, and did I believe in curses? I said I didn't, and the only person anyone could have said he had wronged forgave him freely, I knew, if there was anything to forgive. So I told him this too."
It was I, not the youngest of us. who knew the name of that person wronged and forgiving.
"So then I said 'He ought to take Mabel away from the house and have a complete change.' But he said, 'No, Mabel had got everything in order, and he could never manage to get her away just now without explaining everything, and above all,' he said, 'she mustn't guess there's anything wrong. I daresay I shall not feel quite such a lunatic now you're here.'
"So we said 'Good-night.'"
"Is that all the story?" said the third girl, striving to convey that even as it stood it was a good story.
"That is only the beginning," said Miss Eastwich. "Whenever I was alone with him, he used to tell me the same thing over and over again, and at first when I began to notice things I tried to think that it was his talk that had upset my nerves. The odd thing was that it wasn't only at night—but in broad daylight, and particularly on the stairs and passages. On the staircase the feeling used to be so awful that I have had to bite my lips till they bled, to keep myself from running up the stairs at full speed. Only I knew if I did I should go mad at the top. There was always, something behind me—exactly as he had said—something that one could just not see. And a sound,, that one could just not hear. There was a long corridor at the top of the house. I have sometimes almost seen something—you go know how one sees things without looking but if I turned round it seemed as if the thing dropped and melted into my shadow. There was a little window at the end of the corridor.
"Downstairs there was another corridor, something like it, with a cupboard at one end and the kitchen at the other. One night I went down into the kitchen to warm some milk for Mabel. The servants had gone to bed. As I stood by the fire waiting for the milk to boil I glanced through the open door and along the passage. I never could keep my eyes on what I was doing, in that house. The cupboard door was partly open; they used to keep empty bottles and things in it. And as I looked I knew that now it was not going to be 'almost' any more. Yet I said 'Mabel?' not because I thought it could be Mabel who was crouching down there, half in and half out of the cupboard. The thing was gray at first and then it was black. And when I whispered 'Mabel,' it seemed to sink down till it lay like a pool of ink on the floor, and then its edges drew in, and it seemed to flow, like ink, when you tilt up the paper you have spilt it on, and it flowed into the cupboard till it was all gathered into the shadow there. I saw it go quite plainly. The gas was full on in the kitchen. I screamed aloud, but even then I'm thankful to say I had enough sense to upset the boiling milk, so that when he came downstairs three steps at a time, I had the excuse for my scream of a scalded hand. The explanation was satisfactory to Mabel, but next night he said:
"'Why didn't you tell me? It was that cupboard. All the horror of the house comes out of that. Tell me, have you seen anything yet? Or is it only the nearly seeing and nearly hearing still?'
"I said. 'You must tell me first what you've seen.' He told me, and his eyes wandered as he spoke to the shadows by the curtains, and I turned up all three gaslights and lit the candles on the

mantelpiece. Then we looked at each other and said we were both mad, and thanked God that Mabel was at least sane. For what he had seen was what I had seen.
"After that I hated to be alone with a shadow, because at any moment I might see something that would crouch and sink and be like a black pool and then slowly draw itself into the shadow that was nearest. Often that shadow was my own. The thing came first at night, but afterwards there was no hour safe from it. I saw it at dawn, and at noon, in the dusk and in the firelight, and always it crouched and sank, and was a pool that flowed into some shadow and became part of it. And always I saw it with a straining of the eyes, a pricking and aching. It seemed as though I could only just see it, as if my sight, to see it, had to be strained to the uttermost. And still the sound was in the house, the sound that I could just not hear. At last one morning early I did hear it. It was close behind me, and it was only a sigh. It was worse than the thing that crept among the shadows.
"I don't know how I bore it. I couldn't have borne it if I hadn't been so fond of them both. But I knew in my heart that if he had no one to whom he could speak openly he would go mad, or tell Mabel. His was not a very strong character. Very sweet and kind and gentle, but not strong. He was always easily led. So I stayed on and bore up, and we were very cheerful and made little jokes and tried to be amusing when Mabel was with us. But when we were alone we did not try to he amusing.
"And sometimes a day or two would go by without our seeing or hearing anything, and we should perhaps have fancied that we had fancied what we had seen and heard, only there was always the feeling of there being something about the house that one could just not hear and not see. Sometimes we used to try not to talk about it, but generally we talked of nothing else at all. And the weeks went by, and Mabel's baby was born. The nurse and the doctor said that both mother and child doing well. He and I sat late in the dining-room that night. We had neither of us seen or heard anything for three days—our anxiety about Mabel was lessened. We talked of the future: it seemed then so much brighter than the past. We arranged that the moment she was fit to be moved he should take her away to the sea, and I should superintend the moving of their furniture into the new house he had already chosen. He was gayer than I had seen him since his marriage--almost like his old self. When I said 'good-night' to him he said a lot of things about my having been a comfort to them both. I hadn't done anything much of course, but still I am glad he said that.
"Then I went upstairs—almost for the first time without that feeling of something following me. I listened at Mabel's room. Everything was quiet. I went on towards my own room, and in an instant I felt that then was something behind me. I turned. It was crouching there: it sank, and the black fluidness of it seemed to be sucked under the floor of Mabel's room.
"I went back. I opened the door a listening inch. All was still. And then I heard a sigh—close behind me. I opened the door and went in. The nurse and the baby were asleep. Mabel was asleep, too; she looked so pretty, like a tired child—the baby was cuddled up into one of her arms with its tiny head against her side. I prayed then that Mabel might never know the terrors that he and I had known—that those little ears might never hear any but pretty sounds, those dear eyes never see any but pretty sights. I did not dare to pray for a long time after that. Because my prayer was answered. She never saw, never heard anything more in this world. And now I could do nothing more for him or for her.
"When they had put her in her coffin I lighted wax candles round her, and laid the horrible white flowers that people will send, near to her, and then I saw he had followed me. I took his hand to lead him away.

"At the door we both turned. It seemed to us that we heard a sigh. He would have sprung to her side in I don't know what mad glad hope. But at that instant we both saw it. Between us and the coffin, first gray, then black, it crouched an instant, then sank and liquefied, and was gathered together and drawn till it ran into the nearest shadow. And the nearest shadow was the shadow of Mabel's coffin. I left the next day. His mother came. She had never liked me."
Miss Eastwich paused. I think she had quite forgotten us.
"Didn't you see him again?" asked the youngest of all.
"Only once," Miss Eastwich answered, "and something black crouched then between him and me. But it was only his second wife crying beside his coffin. It's not a cheerful story, is it? And it doesn't lead anywhere. I've never told anyone else. I think it was seeing his daughter that brought it all back."
She looked toward the dressing-room door. "Mabel's baby," said the youngest of all.
"Yes, and exactly like Mabel, only with his eyes."
The youngest of all had Miss Eastwich's hands and was petting them.
Suddenly the woman wrenched her hands away and stood at her gaunt height, hands clenched, eyes straining. She was looking at something that we could not see, and I know now what the man in the Bible meant when he said "the hair of my flesh stood up—"
What she saw seemed not quite to reach the height of the dressing-room door handle. Her eyes following it down, down, widened and widened. Mine followed hers, and all the nerves of my eyes seemed strained to the uttermost—and I almost saw—or did I quite see? I can't be certain. But we all heard the long-drawn, quivering sigh. And to each of us it seemed to be breathed just behind each.
It was I who caught up the candle—it dropped wax all over my trembling hands—it was I who was dragged by Miss Eastwich to the side of the girl who had fainted during the second extra. But it was the youngest of all whose lean arms were round the housekeeper when we turned away, and that have been round her many a time since in the new home where she keeps house for the youngest of us all.
The doctor, who came in the morning, said that Mabel's daughter had died of heart disease, which she inherited from her mother. That was what made her faint during the second extra. But I have sometimes wondered whether she may not have inherited something from her father. I have never been able to forget the look on her dead face.
The End.

Of course, above all, Christmas is a time of wonder for children, a fact brought startlingly to life in our final little tale, **Their Dear Little Ghost, by Elia W. Peattie**

THE first time one looked at Elsbeth, one was not prepossessed. She was thin and brown, her nose turned slightly upward, her toes went in just a perceptible degree, and her hair was perfectly straight. But when one looked longer, one perceived that she was a charming little creature. The straight hair was as fine as silk, and hung in funny little braids down her back; there was not a flaw in her soft brown skin; and her mouth was tender and shapely. But her particular charm lay in a look which she habitually had, of seeming to know curious things -- such as it is not allotted to ordinary persons to know. One felt tempted to say to her:

"What are these beautiful things which you know, and of which others are ignorant? What is it you see with those wise and pellucid eyes? Why is it that everybody loves you?"

Elsbeth was my little godchild, and I knew her better than I knew any other child in the world. But still I could not truthfully say that I was familiar with her, for to me her spirit was like a fair and fragrant road in the midst of which I might walk in peace and joy, but where I was continually to discover something new. The last time I saw her quite well and strong was over in the woods where she had gone with her two little brothers and her nurse to pass the hottest weeks of summer. I followed her, foolish old creature that I was, just to be near her, for I needed to dwell where the sweet aroma of her life could reach me.

One morning, when I came from my room, limping a little, because I am not so young as I used to be, and the lake wind works havoc with me, my little godchild came dancing to me, singing:

"Come with me and I'll show you my places, my places, my places!"

Miriam, when she chanted by the Red Sea, might have been more exultant, but she could not have been more bewitching. Of course I knew what "places" were, because I had once been a child myself; but unless you are acquainted with the real meaning of "places," it would be useless to try to explain. Either you know "places" or you do not -- just as you understand the meaning of poetry or you do not. There are things in the world which cannot be taught.

Elsbeth's two tiny brothers were present, and I took one by each hand and followed her. No sooner had we got out-of-doors in the woods than a sort of mystery fell upon the world and upon us. We were cautioned to move silently, and we did so, avoiding the crunching of dry twigs.

"The fairies hate noise," whispered my little godchild, her eyes narrowing like a cat's.

"I must get my wand first thing I do," she said, in an awed undertone. "It is useless to try to do anything without a wand."

The tiny boys were profoundly impressed, and, indeed, so was I. I felt that at last I should, if I behaved properly, see the fairies, which had hitherto avoided my materialistic gaze. It was an enchanting moment, for there appeared, just then, to be nothing commonplace about life.

There was a swale nearby, and into this the little girl plunged. I could see her red straw hat bobbing about among the tall rushes, and I wondered if there were snakes.

"Do you think there are snakes?" I asked one of the tiny boys.

"If there are," he said with conviction, "they won't dare hurt her."

He convinced me. I feared no more. Presently Elsbeth came out of the swale. In her hand was a brown "cattail," perfectly full and round. She carried it as queens carry their scepters -- the beautiful queens we dream of in our youth.

"Come," she commanded, and waved the scepter in a fine manner. So we followed, each tiny boy gripping my hand tight. We were all three a trifle awed. Elsbeth led us into a dark underbrush. The branches, as they flew back in our faces, left them wet with dew. A wee path, made by the girl's dear feet, guided our footsteps. Perfumes of elderberry and wild cucumber scented the air. A bird, frightened from its nest, made frantic cries above our heads. The underbrush thickened. Presently the gloom of the hemlocks was over us, and in the midst of the shadowy green a tulip-tree flaunted its leaves. Waves boomed and broke upon the shore below. There was a growing dampness as we went on, treading very lightly. A little green snake ran coquettishly from us. A fat and glossy squirrel chattered at us from a safe height, stroking his whiskers with a complaisant air.

At length we reached the "place." It was a circle of velvet grass, bright as the first blades of spring, delicate as fine sea-ferns. The sunlight, falling down the shaft between the hemlocks, flooded it with a

softened light and made the forest round about look like deep purple velvet. My little godchild stood in the midst and raised her wand impressively.

"This is my place," she said, with a sort of wonderful gladness in her tone. "This is where I come to the fairy balls. Do you see them?"

"See what?" whispered one tiny boy.

"The fairies."

There was a silence. The older boy pulled at my skirt.

"Do *you* see them?" he asked, his voice trembling with expectancy.

"Indeed," I said, "I fear I am too old and wicked to see fairies, and yet -- are their hats red?"

"They are," laughed my little girl. "Their hats are red, and as small -- as small!" She held up the pearly nail of her wee finger to give us the correct idea.

"And their shoes are very pointed at the toes?"

"Oh, very pointed!"

"And their garments are green?"

"As green as grass."

"And they blow little horns?"

"The sweetest little horns!"

"I think I see them," I cried.

"We think we see them too," said the tiny boys, laughing in perfect glee.

"And you hear their horns, don't you?" my little godchild asked, somewhat anxiously.

"Don't we hear their horns?" I asked the tiny boys.

"We think we hear their horns," they cried. "Don't you think we do?"

"It must be we do," I said. "Aren't we very, very happy?"

We all laughed softly. Then we kissed each other, and Elsbeth led us out, her want high in the air.

And so my feet found the lost path to Arcady.

The next day I was called to the Pacific coast, and duty kept me there till well into December. A few days before the date set for my return to my home, a letter came from Elsbeth's mother.

"Our little girl is gone into the Unknown," she wrote -- "that Unknown in which she seemed to be forever trying to pry. We knew she was going, and we told her. She was quite brave, but she begged us to try some way to keep her till after Christmas. 'My presents are not finished yet,' she made moan. 'And I did so want to see what I was going to have. You can't have a very happy Christmas without me, I should think. Can you arrange to keep me somehow till after then?' We could not 'arrange' either with God in heaven or science upon earth, and she is gone."

She was only my little godchild, and I am an old man, with no business fretting over children, but it seemed as if the medium of light and beauty had been taken from me. Through this crystal soul I had perceived whatever was loveliest. However, what was, was! I returned to my home and took up a course of Egyptian history, and determined to concern myself with nothing this side the Ptolemies.

Her mother has told me how, on Christmas Eve, as usual, she and Elsbeth's father filled the stockings of the little ones, and hung them, where they had always hung, by the fireplace. They had little heart for the task, but they had been prodigal that year in their expenditures, and had heaped upon the two tiny boys all the treasures they thought would appeal to them. They asked themselves how they could have been so insane previously as to exercise economy at Christmas time, and what they meant by not getting Elsbeth the autoharp she had asked for the year before.

"And now -- " began her father, thinking of harps. But he could not complete this sentence, of course, and the two went on passionately and almost angrily with their task. There were two stockings and two piles of toys. Two stockings only, and only two piles of toys! Two is very little!

They went away and left the darkened room, and after a time they slept -- after a long time. Perhaps that was about the time the tiny boys awoke, and, putting on their little dressing-gowns and bed slippers, made a dash for the room where the Christmas things were always placed. The older one carried a candle which gave out a feeble light. The other followed behind through the silent house. They were very impatient and eager, but when they reached the door of the sitting-room they stopped, for they saw that another child was before them.

It was a delicate little creature, sitting in her white night-gown, with two rumpled funny braids falling down her back, and she seemed to be weeping. As they watched, she arose, and, putting out one slender finger as a child does when she counts, she made sure over and over again -- three sad times -- that there were only two stockings and two piles of toys! Only those and no more.

The little figure looked so familiar that the boys started toward it; but just then, putting up her arm and bowing her face in it, as Elsbeth had been used to do when she wept or was offended, the little thing glided away and went out. That's what the boys said. It went out as a candle goes out.

They ran and woke their parents with the tale, and all the house was searched in a wonderment, and disbelief, and hope, and tumult! But nothing was found. For nights they watched. But there was only the silent house. Only the empty rooms. They told the boys they must have been mistaken. But the boys shook their heads.

"We know our Elsbeth," said they. "It was our Elsbeth, cryin' 'cause she hadn't no stockin' an' no toys, and we would have given her all ours, only she went out -- jus' went out!"

Alack!

The next Christmas I helped with the little festival. It was none of my affair, but I asked to help, and they let me, and when we were all through there were three stockings and three piles of toys, and in the largest one was all the things that I could think of that my dear child would love. I locked the boys' chamber that night, and I slept on the divan in the parlor off the sitting-room. I slept but little, and the night was very still -- so windless and white and still that I think I must have heard the slightest noise. Yet I heard none. Had I been in my grave I think my ears would not have remained more unsaluted.

Yet when daylight came and I went to unlock the boys' bedchamber door, I saw that the stocking and all the treasures which I had bought for my little godchild were gone. There was not a vestige of them remaining.

Of course we told the boys nothing. As for me, after dinner I went home and buried myself once more in my history, and so interested was I that midnight came without my knowing it. I should not have looked up at all, I suppose, to become aware of the time, had it not been for a faint, sweet sound as of a child striking a stringed instrument. It was so delicate and remote that I hardly heard it, but so joyous and tender that I could not but listen, and when I heard it a second time it seemed as if I caught the echo of a child's laugh. At first I was puzzled. Then I remembered the little autoharp I had placed among the other things in that pile of vanished toys. I said aloud:

"Farewell, dear little ghost. Go rest. Rest in joy, dear little ghost. Farewell, farewell."

That was years ago, but there has been silence since. Elsbeth was always an obedient little thing. The End.

Thank you for joining us. We'll be back next month with more Thrilling Tales.