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SUSAN HILL

THE WOMAN IN BLACK

THE WOMAN IN BLACK

Arthur Kipps, a junior solicitor, is summoned to attend the funeral of Mrs Alice Drablow, the sole inhabitant of Eel Marsh House. The house stands at the end of a causeway, wreathed in fog and mystery, but it is not until he glimpses a wasted young woman, dressed all in black, at the funeral, that a creeping sense of unease begins to take hold, a feeling deepened by the reluctance of the locals to talk of the woman in black – and her terrible purpose.

'Heartstoppingly chilling'
Daily Express

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SUSAN HILL

Susan Hill has been a professional writer for over fifty years. Her books have won awards and prizes including the Whitbread, the John Llewellyn Rhys and the Somerset Maugham, and have been shortlisted for the Booker. Her novels include *Strange Meeting*, *I'm the King of the Castle*, *In the Springtime of the Year* and *The Mist in the Mirror*. She has also published autobiographical works and collections of short stories, as well as the Simon Serrailler series of crime novels. The play of her ghost story *The Woman in Black* is one of the longest-running in the history of London's West End. In 2020 she was awarded a damehood (DBE) for services to literature. She has two adult daughters and lives in north Norfolk.

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The Woman in Black

And Other Ghost Stories

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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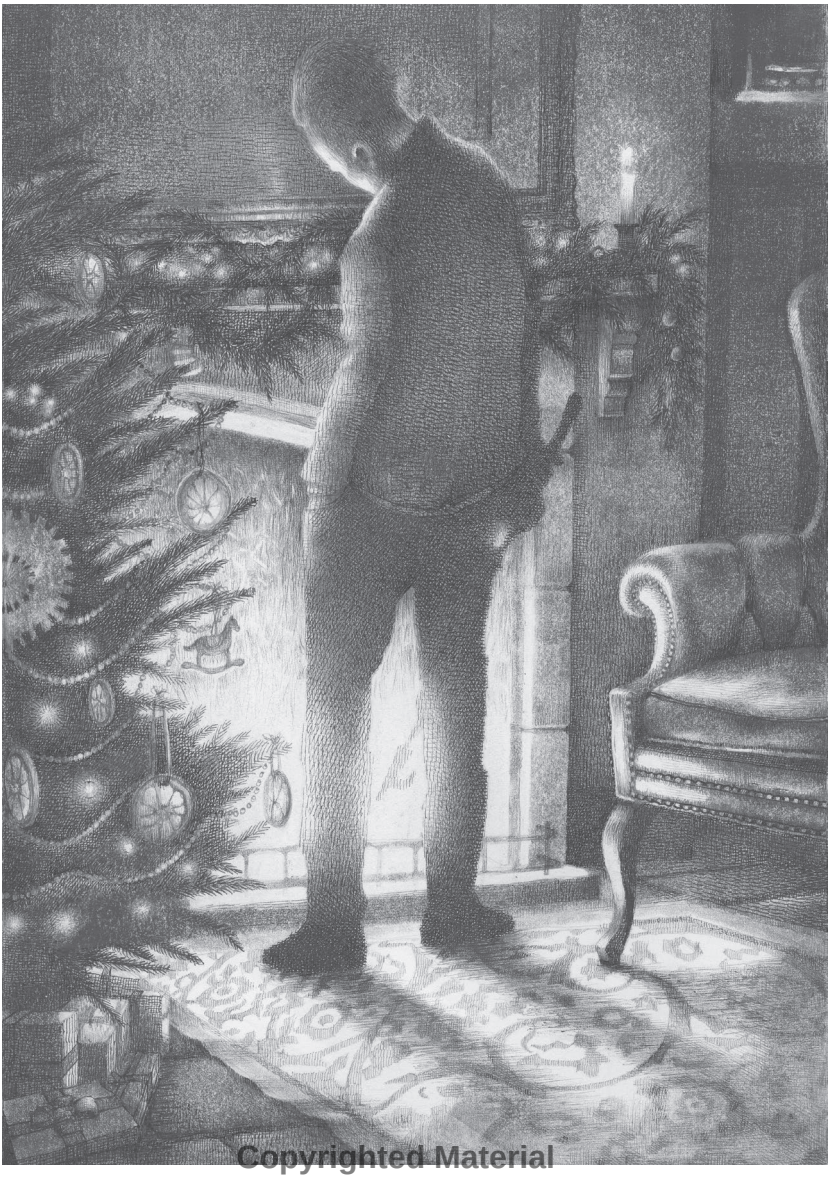
THE WOMAN IN BLACK

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Christmas Eve

It was nine-thirty on Christmas Eve. As I crossed the long entrance hall of Monk's Piece on my way from the dining room, where we had just enjoyed the first of the happy, festive meals, towards the drawing room and the fire around which my family were now assembled, I paused and then, as I often do in the course of an evening, went to the front door, opened it and stepped outside.

I have always liked to take a breath of the evening, to smell the air, whether it is sweetly scented and balmy with the flowers of midsummer, pungent with the bonfires and leaf-mould of autumn, or crackling cold from frost and snow. I like to look about me at the sky above my head, whether there are moon and stars or utter blackness, and into the darkness ahead of me; I like to listen for the cries of nocturnal creatures

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and the moaning rise and fall of the wind, or the pattering of rain in the orchard trees, I enjoy the rush of air towards me up the hill from the flat pastures of the river valley.

Tonight, I smelled at once, and with a lightening heart, that there had been a change in the weather. All the previous week, we had had rain, chilling rain and a mist that lay low about the house and over the countryside. From the windows, the view stretched no farther than a yard or two down the garden. It was wretched weather, never seeming to come fully light, and raw, too. There had been no pleasure in walking, the visibility was too poor for any shooting and the dogs were permanently morose and muddy. Inside the house, the lamps were lit throughout the day and the walls of larder, outhouse and cellar oozed damp and smelled sour, the fires sputtered and smoked, burning dismally low.

My spirits have for many years now been excessively affected by the ways of the weather, and I confess that, had it not been for the air of cheerfulness and bustle that prevailed in the rest of the house, I should have been quite cast down in gloom and lethargy, unable to enjoy the flavour of life as I should like and irritated by my own susceptibility. But Esmé is merely stung by inclement weather into a spirited defiance, and so the preparations for our Christmas holiday had

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this year been more than usually extensive and vigorous.

I took a step or two out from under the shadow of the house so that I could see around me in the moonlight. Monk's Piece stands at the summit of land that rises gently up for some four hundred feet from where the little River Nee traces its winding way in a north to south direction across this fertile, and sheltered, part of the country. Below us are pastures, interspersed with small clumps of mixed, broadleaf woodland. But at our backs for several square miles it is a quite different area of rough scrub and heathland, a patch of wildness in the midst of well-farmed country. We are but two miles from a good-sized village, seven from the principal market town, yet there is an air of remoteness and isolation which makes us feel ourselves to be much further from civilization.

I first saw Monk's Piece one afternoon in high summer, when out driving in the trap with Mr Bentley. Mr Bentley was formerly my employer, but I had lately risen to become a full partner in the firm of lawyers to which I had been articled as a young man (and with whom, indeed, I remained for my entire working life). He was at this time nearing the age when he had begun to feel inclined to let slip the reins of responsibility, little by little, from his own hands into mine, though he continued to travel up to our chambers in

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London at least once a week, until he died in his eighty-second year. But he was becoming more and more of a country-dweller. He was no man for shooting and fishing but, instead, he had immersed himself in the roles of country magistrate and churchwarden, governor of this, that and the other county and parish board, body and committee. I had been both relieved and pleased when finally he took me into full partnership with himself, after so many years, while at the same time believing the position to be no more than my due, for I had done my fair share of the donkey work and borne a good deal of the burden of responsibility for directing the fortunes of the firm with, I felt, inadequate reward – at least in terms of position.

So it came about that I was sitting beside Mr Bentley on a Sunday afternoon, enjoying the view over the high hawthorn hedgerows across the green, drowsy countryside, as he let his pony take the road back, at a gentle pace, to his somewhat ugly and over-imposing manor house. It was rare for me to sit back and do nothing. In London I lived for my work, apart from some spare time spent in the study and collecting of watercolours. I was then thirty-five and I had been a widower for the past twelve years. I had no taste at all for social life and, although in good general health, was prone to occasional nervous illnesses and conditions, as a result of the experiences I will come to

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relate. Truth to tell, I was growing old well before my time, a sombre, pale-complexioned man with a strained expression – a dull dog.

I remarked to Mr Bentley on the calm and sweetness of the day, and after a sideways glance in my direction he said, 'You should think of getting yourself something in this direction – why not? Pretty little cottage – down there, perhaps?' And he pointed with his whip to where a tiny hamlet was tucked snugly into a bend of the river below, white walls basking in the afternoon sunshine. 'Bring yourself out of town some of these Friday afternoons, take to walking, fill yourself up with fresh air and good eggs and cream.'

The idea had a charm, but only a distant one, seemingly unrelated to myself, and so I merely smiled and breathed in the warm scents of the grasses and the field flowers and watched the dust kicked up off the lane by the pony's hooves and thought no more about it. Until, that is, we reached a stretch of road leading past a long, perfectly proportioned stone house, set on a rise above a sweeping view down over the whole river valley and then for miles away to the violet-blue line of hills in the distance.

At that moment, I was seized by something I cannot precisely describe, an emotion, a desire – no, it was rather more, a knowledge, a simple *certainty*, which gripped me, and all so clear and striking that I cried

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out involuntarily for Mr Bentley to stop, and, almost before he had time to do so, climbed out of the pony trap into the lane and stood on a grassy knoll, gazing first up at the house, so handsome, so utterly right for the position it occupied, a modest house and yet sure of itself, and then looking across at the country beyond. I had no sense of having been here before, but an absolute conviction that I would come here again, that the house was already mine, bound to me invisibly.

To one side of it, a stream ran between the banks towards the meadow beyond, whence it made its meandering way down to the river.

Mr Bentley was now looking at me curiously, from the trap. 'A fine place,' he called.

I nodded, but, quite unable to impart to him any of my extreme emotions, turned my back upon him and walked a few yards up the slope from where I could see the entrance to the old, overgrown orchard that lay behind the house and petered out in long grass and tangled thicket at the far end. Beyond that, I glimpsed the perimeter of some rough-looking, open land. The feeling of conviction I have described was still upon me, and I remember that I was alarmed by it, for I had never been an imaginative or fanciful man and certainly not one given to visions of the future. Indeed, since those earlier experiences I had deliberately

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avoided all contemplation of any remotely non-material matters, and clung to the prosaic, the visible and tangible.

Nevertheless, I was quite unable to escape the belief – nay, I must call it more, the certain knowledge – that this house was one day to be my own home, that sooner or later, though I had no idea when, I would become the owner of it. When finally I accepted and admitted this to myself, I felt on that instant a profound sense of peace and contentment settle upon me such as I had not known for very many years, and it was with a light heart that I returned to the pony trap, where Mr Bentley was awaiting me more than a little curiously.

The overwhelming feeling I had experienced at Monk's Piece remained with me, albeit not in the forefront of my mind, when I left the country that afternoon to return to London. I had told Mr Bentley that if ever he were to hear that the house was for sale, I should be eager to know of it.

Some years later, he did so. I contacted the agents that same day and hours later, without so much as returning to see it again, I had offered for it, and my offer was accepted. A few months prior to this, I had met Esmé Ainley. Our affection for one another had been increasing steadily, but, cursed as I still was by my indecisive nature in all personal and emotional

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matters, I had remained silent as to my intentions for the future. I had enough sense to take the news about Monk's Piece as a good omen, however, and a week after I had formally become the owner of the house, travelled into the country with Esmé and proposed marriage to her among the trees of the old orchard. This offer, too, was accepted and very shortly afterwards we were married and moved at once to Monk's Piece. On that day, I truly believed that I had at last come out from under the long shadow cast by the events of the past and saw from his face and felt from the warmth of his handclasp that Mr Bentley believed it too, and that a burden had been lifted from his own shoulders. He had always blamed himself, at least in part, for what had happened to me – it had, after all, been he who had sent me on that first journey up to Crythin Gifford, and Eel Marsh House, and to the funeral of Mrs Drablow.

But all of that could not have been further from my conscious thought at least, as I stood taking in the night air at the door of my house, on that Christmas Eve. For some fourteen years now Monk's Piece had been the happiest of homes – Esmé's and mine, and that of her four children by her first marriage, to Captain Ainley. In the early days I had come here only at weekends and holidays but London life and business began to irk me from the day I bought the place and I

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was glad indeed to retire permanently into the country at the earliest opportunity.

And, now, it was to this happy home that my family had once again repaired for Christmas. In a moment, I should open the front door and hear the sound of their voices from the drawing room – unless I was abruptly summoned by my wife, fussing about my catching a chill. Certainly, it was very cold and clear at last. The sky was pricked over with stars and the full moon rimmed with a halo of frost. The dampness and fogs of the past week had stolen away like thieves into the night, the paths and the stone walls of the house gleamed palely and my breath smoked on the air.

Upstairs, in the attic bedrooms, Isobel's three young sons – Esmé's grandsons – slept, with stockings tied to their bedposts. There would be no snow for them on the morrow, but Christmas Day would at least wear a bright and cheerful countenance.

There was something in the air that night, something, I suppose, remembered from my own childhood, together with an infection caught from the little boys, that excited me, old as I was. That my peace of mind was about to be disturbed, and memories awakened that I had thought forever dead, I had, naturally, no idea. That I should ever again renew my close acquaintance, if only in the course of vivid recollections and

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dreams, with mortal dread and terror of spirit, would have seemed at that moment impossible.

I took one last look at the frosty darkness, sighed contentedly, called to the dogs, and went in, anticipating nothing more than a pipe and a glass of good malt whisky beside the crackling fire, in the happy company of my family. As I crossed the hall and entered the drawing room, I felt an uprush of well-being, of the kind I have experienced regularly during my life at Monk's Piece, a sensation that leads on naturally to another, of heartfelt thankfulness. And indeed I did give thanks, at the sight of my family ensconced around the huge fire which Oliver was at that moment building to a perilous height and a fierce blaze with the addition of a further great branch of applewood from an old tree we had felled in the orchard the previous autumn. Oliver is the eldest of Esmé's sons, and bore then, as now, a close resemblance both to his sister Isobel (seated beside her husband, the bearded Aubrey Pearce) and to the brother next in age, Will. All three of them have good, plain, open English faces, inclined to roundness and with hair and eyebrows and lashes of a light chestnut brown – the colour of their mother's hair before it became threaded with grey.

At that time, Isobel was only twenty-four years old but already the mother of three young sons, and set fair to produce more. She had the plump, settled air of

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a matron and an inclination to mother and oversee her husband and brothers as well as her own children. She had been the most sensible, responsible of daughters, she was affectionate and charming, and she seemed to have found, in the calm and level-headed Aubrey Pearce, an ideal partner. Yet at times I caught Esmé looking at her wistfully, and she had more than once voiced, though gently and to me alone, a longing for Isobel to be a little less staid, a little more spirited, even frivolous.

In all honesty, I could not have wished it so. I would not have wished for anything to ruffle the surface of that calm, untroubled sea.

Oliver Ainley, at that time nineteen, and his brother Will, only fourteen months younger, were similarly serious, sober young men at heart, but for the time being they still enjoyed all the exuberance of young puppies, and indeed it seemed to me that Oliver showed rather too few signs of maturity for a young man in his first year at Cambridge and destined, if my advice prevailed with him, for a career at the Bar. Will lay on his stomach before the fire, his face aglow, chin propped upon his hands. Oliver sat nearby, and from time to time a scuffle of their long legs would break out, a kicking and shoving, accompanied by a sudden guffawing, for all the world as if they were ten years old all over again.

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The youngest of the Ainleys, Edmund, sat a little apart, separating himself, as was his wont, a little distance from every other person, not out of any unfriendliness or sullen temper but because of an innate fastidiousness and reserve, a desire to be somewhat private, which had always singled him out from the rest of Esmé's family, just as he was also unlike the others in looks, being pale-skinned, and long-nosed, with hair of an extraordinary blackness, and blue eyes. Edmund was then fifteen. I knew him the least well, understood him scarcely at all, felt uneasy in his presence, and yet perhaps in a strange way loved him more deeply than any.

The drawing room at Monk's Piece is long and low, with tall windows at either end, close-curtained now, but by day letting in a great deal of light from both north and south. Tonight, festoons and swags of fresh greenery, gathered that afternoon by Esmé and Isobel, hung over the stone fireplace, and intertwined with the leaves were berries and ribbons of scarlet and gold. At the far end of the room stood the tree, candlelit and bedecked, and beneath it were piled the presents. There were flowers, too, vases of white chrysanthemums, and in the centre of the room, on a round table, a pyramid of gilded fruit and a bowl of oranges stuck all about with cloves, their spicy scent filling the air and mingling with that of the branches and the woodsmoke to be the very aroma of Christmas.

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I sat down in my own armchair, drew it back a little from the full blaze of the fire, and began the protracted and soothing business of lighting a pipe. As I did so, I became aware that I had interrupted the others in the midst of a lively conversation, and that Oliver and Will at least were restless to continue.

'Well,' I said, through the first, cautious puffs at my tobacco, 'and what's all this?'

There was a further pause, and Esmé shook her head, smiling over her embroidery.

'Come . . .'

Then Oliver got to his feet and began to go about the room rapidly switching off every lamp, save the lights upon the Christmas tree at the far end, so that, when he returned to his seat, we had only the immediate firelight by which to see one another, and Esmé was obliged to lay down her sewing – not without a murmur of protest.

'May as well do the job properly,' Oliver said with some satisfaction.

'Oh, you boys . . .'

'Now come on, Will, your turn, isn't it?'

'No, Edmund's.'

'Ah-ha,' said the youngest of the Ainley brothers, in an odd, deep voice. 'I could an' if I would!'

'*Must* we have the lights out?' Isobel spoke as if to much smaller boys.

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'Yes, Sis, we must, that's if you want to get the authentic atmosphere.'

'But I'm not sure that I do.'

Oliver gave a low moan. 'Get on with it then, someone.'

Esmé leaned over towards me. 'They are telling ghost stories.'

'Yes,' said Will, his voice unsteady with both excitement and laughter. 'Just the thing for Christmas Eve. It's an ancient tradition!'

'The lonely country house, the guests huddled around the fireside in a darkened room, the wind howling at the casement . . .' Oliver moaned again.

And then came Aubrey's stolid, good-humoured tones. 'Better get on with it then.' And so they did, Oliver, Edmund and Will vying with one another to tell the horridest, most spine-chilling tale, with much dramatic effect and mock-terrified shrieking. They outdid one another in the far extremes of inventiveness, piling agony upon agony. They told of dripping stone walls in uninhabited castles and of ivy-clad monastery ruins by moonlight, of locked inner rooms and secret dungeons, dank charnel houses and overgrown graveyards, of footsteps creaking upon staircases and fingers tapping at casements, of howlings and shriekings, groanings and scuttlings and the clanking of chains, of hooded monks and headless horsemen, swirling mists and

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sudden winds, insubstantial spectres and sheeted creatures, vampires and bloodhounds, bats and rats and spiders, of men found at dawn and women turned white-haired and raving lunatic, and of vanished corpses and curses upon heirs. The stories grew more and more lurid, wilder and sillier, and soon the gasps and cries merged into fits of choking laughter, as each one, even gentle Isobel, contributed more ghastly detail.

At first, I was amused, indulgent, but as I sat on, listening, in the firelight, I began to feel set apart from them all, an outsider to their circle. I was trying to suppress my mounting unease, to hold back the rising flood of memory.

This was a sport, a high-spirited and harmless game among young people, for the festive season, and an ancient tradition, too, as Will had rightly said, there was nothing to torment and trouble me, nothing of which I could possibly disapprove. I did not want to seem a killjoy, old and stodgy and unimaginative, I longed to enter into what was nothing more nor less than good fun. I fought a bitter battle within myself, my head turned away from the firelight so that none of them should chance to see my expression which I knew began to show signs of my discomfiture.

And then, to accompany a final, banshee howl from Edmund, the log that had been blazing on the hearth collapsed suddenly and, after sending up a light

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spatter of sparks and ash, died down so that there was near-darkness. And then silence in the room. I shuddered. I wanted to get up and go round putting on every light again, see the sparkle and glitter and colour of the Christmas decorations, have the fire blazing again cheerfully, I wanted to banish the chill that had settled upon me and the sensation of fear in my breast. Yet I could not move, it had, for the moment, paralysed me, just as it had always done, it was a long-forgotten, once too-familiar sensation.

Then, Edmund said, 'Now come, stepfather, your turn,' and at once the others took up the cry, the silence was broken by their urgings, with which even Esmé joined.

'No, no.' I tried to speak jocularly. 'Nothing from me.'

'Oh, Arthur . . .'

'You must know at least *one* ghost story, stepfather, everyone knows *one* . . .'

Ah, yes, yes, indeed. All the time I had been listening to their ghoulish, lurid inventions, and their howling and groans, the one thought that had been in my mind, and the only thing I could have said was, 'No, no, you have none of you any idea. This is all nonsense, fantasy, it is not like this. Nothing so blood-curdling and becreepered and crude – not so . . . so laughable. The truth is quite other, and altogether more terrible.'

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'Come *on*, stepfather.'

'Don't be an old spoilsport.'

'Arthur?'

'Do your stuff, stepfather, surely you're not going to let us down?'

I stood up, unable to bear it any longer.

'I am sorry to disappoint you,' I said. 'But I have no story to tell!' And went quickly from the room, and from the house.

Some fifteen minutes later, I came to my senses and found myself on the scrubland beyond the orchard, my heart pounding, my breathing short. I had walked about in a frenzy of agitation, and now, realizing that I must make an effort to calm myself, I sat down on a piece of old, moss-covered stone, and began to take deliberate, steady breaths in on a count of ten and out again, until I felt the tension within myself begin to slacken and my pulse become a little steadier, my head clearer. After a short while longer, I was able to realize my surroundings once again, to note the clearness of the sky and the brightness of the stars, the air's coldness and the crispiness of the frost-stiffened grass beneath my feet.

Behind me, in the house, I knew that I must have left the family in a state of consternation and bewilderment, for they knew me normally as an even-tempered man of predictable emotions. Why they had aroused

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my apparent disapproval with the telling of a few silly tales and prompted such curt behaviour, the whole family would be quite at a loss to understand, and very soon I must return to them, make amends and endeavour to brush off the incident, renew some of the air of jollity. What I would not be able to do was explain. No. I would be cheerful and I would be steady again, if only for my dear wife's sake, but no more.

They had chided me with being a spoilsport, tried to encourage me to tell them the one ghost story I must surely, like any other man, have it in me to tell. And they were right. Yes, I had a story, a true story, a story of haunting and evil, fear and confusion, horror and tragedy. But it was not a story to be told for casual entertainment, around the fireside upon Christmas Eve.

I had always known in my heart that the experience would never leave me, that it was now woven into my very fibres, an inextricable part of my past, but I had hoped never to have to recollect it, consciously, and in full, ever again. Like an old wound, it gave off a faint twinge now and again, but less and less often, less and less painfully, as the years went on and my happiness, sanity and equilibrium were assured. Of late, it had been like the outermost ripple on a pool, merely the faint memory of a memory.

Now, tonight, it again filled my mind to the exclusion

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of all else. I knew that I should have no rest from it, that I should lie awake in a chill of sweat, going over that time, those events, those places. So it had been night after night for years.

I got up and began to walk about again. Tomorrow was Christmas Day. Could I not be free of it at least for that blessed time, was there no way of keeping the memory, and the effects it had upon me, at bay, as an analgesic or a balm will stave off the pain of a wound, at least temporarily? And then, standing among the trunks of the fruit trees, silver-grey in the moonlight, I recalled that the way to banish an old ghost that continues its hauntings is to exorcise it. Well then, mine should be exorcised. I should tell my tale, not aloud, by the fireside, not as a diversion for idle listeners – it was too solemn, and too real, for that. But I should set it down on paper, with every care and in every detail. I would write my own ghost story. Then perhaps I should finally be free of it for whatever life remained for me to enjoy.

I decided at once that it should be, at least during my lifetime, a story for my eyes only. I was the one who had been haunted and who had suffered – not the only one, no, but surely, I thought, the only one left alive, I was the one who, to judge by my agitation of this evening, was still affected by it deeply, it was from me alone that the ghost must be driven.

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I glanced up at the moon, and at the bright, bright Pole star. Christmas Eve. And then I prayed, a heartfelt, simple prayer for peace of mind, and for strength and steadfastness to endure while I completed what would be the most agonizing task, and I prayed for a blessing upon my family, and for quiet rest to us all that night. For, although I was in control of my emotions now, I dreaded the hours of darkness that lay ahead.

For answer to my prayer, I received immediately the memory of some lines of poetry, lines I had once known but long forgotten. Later, I spoke them aloud to Esmé, and she identified the source for me at once.

'Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
This bird of dawning singeth all night long.
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No Fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is that time.'

As I recited them aloud, a great peace came upon me, I was wholly myself again yet stiffened by my resolution. After this holiday when the family had all departed, and Esmé and I were alone, I would begin to write my story.

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When I returned to the house, Isobel and Aubrey had gone upstairs to share the delight of creeping about with bulging stockings for their young sons, Edmund was reading, Oliver and Will were in the old playroom at the far end of the house, where there was a battered billiard table, and Esmé was tidying the drawing room, preparatory to going to bed. About that evening's incident, nothing whatsoever was said, though she wore an anxious expression, and I had to invent a bad bout of acute indigestion to account for my abrupt behaviour. I saw to the fire, damping down the flames, and knocked out my pipe on the side of the hearth, feeling quiet and serene again, and no longer agitated about what lonely terrors I might have to endure, whether asleep or awake, during the small hours of the coming night.

Tomorrow was Christmas Day, and I looked forward to it eagerly and with gladness, it would be a time of family joy and merrymaking, love and friendship, fun and laughter.

When it was over, I would have work to do.

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A London Particular

It was a Monday afternoon in November and already growing dark, not because of the lateness of the hour – it was barely three o'clock – but because of the fog, the thickest of London peasoupers, which had hemmed us in on all sides since dawn – if, indeed, there had been a dawn, for the fog had scarcely allowed any daylight to penetrate the foul gloom of the atmosphere.

Fog was outdoors, hanging over the river, creeping in and out of alleyways and passages, swirling thickly between the bare trees of all the parks and gardens of the city, and indoors, too, seething through cracks and crannies like sour breath, gaining a sly entrance at every opening of a door. It was a yellow fog, a filthy, evil-smelling fog, a fog that choked and blinded, smeared and stained. Groping their way blindly across

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roads, men and women took their lives in their hands, stumbling along the pavements, they clutched at railings and at one another, for guidance.

Sounds were deadened, shapes blurred. It was a fog that had come three days before, and did not seem inclined to go away and it had, I suppose, the quality of all such fogs – it was menacing and sinister, disguising the familiar world and confusing the people in it, as they were confused by having their eyes covered and being turned about, in a game of Blind Man's Buff.

It was, in all, miserable weather and lowering to the spirits in the dreariest month of the year.

It would be easy to look back and to believe that all that day I had had a sense of foreboding about my journey to come, that some sixth sense, some telepathic intuition that may lie dormant and submerged in most men, had stirred and become alert within me. But I was, in those days of my youth, a sturdy, commonsensical fellow, and I felt no uneasiness or apprehension whatsoever. Any depression of my usual blithe spirits was solely on account of the fog, and of November, and that same dreariness was shared by every citizen of London.

So far as I can faithfully recall, however, I felt nothing other than curiosity, a professional interest in what scant account of the business Mr Bentley had put before me, coupled with a mild sense of adventure, for I had never before visited that remote part of England

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to which I was now travelling – and a certain relief at the prospect of getting away from the unhealthy atmosphere of fog and dankness. Moreover, I was barely twenty-three years old, and retained a schoolboy's passion for everything to do with railway stations and journeys on steam locomotives.

But what is perhaps remarkable is how well I can remember the minutest detail of that day; for all that nothing untoward had yet happened, and my nerves were steady. If I close my eyes, I am sitting in the cab, crawling through the fog on my way to King's Cross Station, I can smell the cold, damp leather of the upholstery and the indescribable stench of the fog seeping in around the window, I can feel the sensation in my ears, as though they had been stuffed with cotton.

Pools of sulphurous yellow light, as from random corners of some circle of the Inferno, flared from shops and the upper windows of houses, and from the basements they rose like flares from the pit below, and there were red-hot pools of light from the chestnut-sellers on street corners; here, a great, boiling cauldron of tar for the road-menders spurted and smoked an evil red smoke, there, a lantern held high by the lamplighter bobbed and flickered.

In the streets, there was a din, of brakes grinding and horns blowing, and the shouts of a hundred drivers, slowed down and blinded by the fog, and, as I peered

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from out of the cab window into the gloom, what figures I could make out, fumbling their way through the murk, were like ghost figures, their mouths and lower faces muffled in scarves and veils and handkerchiefs, but on gaining the temporary safety of some pool of light they became red-eyed and demonic.

It took almost fifty minutes to travel the mile or so from Chambers to the station, and as there was nothing whatsoever I could do, and I had made allowance for such a slow start to the journey, I sat back, comforting myself that this would certainly be the worst part of it, and turned over in my mind the conversation I had had with Mr Bentley that morning.

I had been working steadily at some dull details of the conveyance of property leases, forgetful, for the moment, of the fog that pressed against the window, like a furred beast at my back, when the clerk, Tomes, came in, to summon me to Mr Bentley's room. Tomes was a small man, thin as a stick and with the complexion of a tallow candle, and a permanent cold, which caused him to sniff every twenty seconds, for which reason he was confined to a cubby-hole in an outer lobby, where he kept ledgers and received visitors, with an air of suffering and melancholy that put them in mind of Last Wills and Testaments – whatever the business they had actually come to the lawyer about.

And it was a Last Will and Testament that Mr

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Bentley had before him when I walked into his large, comfortable room with its wide bay window that, on better days, commanded a fine view of the Inn of Court and gardens, and the comings and goings of half the lawyers of London. 'Sit ye down, Arthur, sit ye down.' Mr Bentley then took off his spectacles, polished them vigorously, and replaced them on his nose, before settling back in his chair, like a man content. Mr Bentley had a story to tell and Mr Bentley enjoyed being listened to.

'I don't think I ever told you about the extraordinary Mrs Drablow?'

I shook my head. It would, at any rate, be more interesting than the conveyance of leases.

'Mrs Drablow,' he repeated, and picked up the Will, to wave it at me, across his partner's desk.

'Mrs Alice Drablow, of Eel Marsh House. Dead, don't you know.'

'Ah.'

'Yes. I inherited Alice Drablow, from my father. The family has had their business with this firm for . . . oh . . .' he waved a hand, back into the mists of the previous century and the foundation of Bentley, Haigh, Sweetman and Bentley.

'Oh yes?'

'A good age,' he flapped the paper again. 'Eighty-seven.'

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'And it's her will you have there, I take it?'

'Mrs Drablow,' he raised his voice a little, ignoring my question which had broken into the pattern of his story-telling. 'Mrs Drablow was, as they say, a rum'un.'

I nodded. As I had learned in my five years with the firm, a good many of Mr Bentley's older clients were 'rum 'uns'.

'Have you ever heard of the Nine Lives Causeway?'

'No, never.'

'Nor ever of Eel Marsh, in—shire?'

'No, sir.'

'Nor, I suppose, ever visited that county at all?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'Living there,' said Mr Bentley thoughtfully, 'anyone might become rum.'

'I've only a hazy idea of where it is.'

'Then, my boy, go home and pack your bags, and take the afternoon train from King's Cross, changing at Crewe and again at Homerby. From Homerby, you take the branch line to the little market town of Crythin Gifford. After that, it's a wait for the tide!'

'The *tide*?'

'You can only cross the Causeway at low tide. That takes you onto Eel Marsh and the house.'

'Mrs Drablow's?'

'When the tide comes in, you're cut off until it's low

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again. Remarkable place.' He got up and went to the window.

'Years since I went there, of course. My father took me. She didn't greatly care for visitors.'

'Was she a widow?'

'Since quite early in her marriage.'

'Children?'

'Children.' Mr Bentley fell silent for a few moments, and rubbed at the pane with his finger, as though to clear away the obscurity, but the fog loomed, yellow-grey, and thicker than ever, though, here and there across the Inn Yard, the lights from other chambers shone fuzzily. A church bell began to toll. Mr Bentley turned.

'According to everything we've been told about Mrs Drablow,' he said carefully, 'no, there were no children.'

'Did she have a great deal of money or land? Were her affairs at all complicated?'

'Not on the whole, Arthur, not on the whole. She owned her house, of course, and a few properties in Crythin Gifford – shops, with tenants, that sort of thing, and there's a poor sort of farm, half under water. She spent money on a few dykes here and there, but not to much purpose. And there are the usual small trusts and investments.'

'Then it all sounds perfectly straightforward.'

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'It does, does it not?'

'May I ask why I'm to go there?'

'To represent this firm at our client's funeral.'

'Oh yes, of course.'

'I wondered whether to go up myself, naturally. But, to tell you the truth, I've been troubled again by my foot this past week.' Mr Bentley suffered from gout, to which he would never refer by name, though his suffering need not have given him any cause for shame, for he was an abstemious man.

'And, then, there's the chance that Lord Boltrope will need to see me. I ought to be here, do you see?'

'Ah yes, of course.'

'And then again' – a pause – 'it's high time I put a little more onto your shoulders. It's no more than you're capable of, is it?'

'I certainly hope not. I'll be very glad to go up to Mrs Drablow's funeral, naturally.'

'There's a bit more to it than that.'

'The will?'

'There's a bit of business to attend to, in connection with the estate, yes. I'll let you have the details to read on your journey. But, principally, you're going to go through Mrs Drablow's documents – her private papers . . . whatever they may be. *Wherever* they may be . . .' Mr Bentley grunted. 'And to bring them back to this office.'

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'I see.'

'Mrs Drablow was – somewhat . . . disorganized, shall I say? It may well take you a while.'

'A day or two?'

'At least a day or two, Arthur. Of course, things may have changed, I may be quite mistaken . . . things may be in apple-pie order and you'll clear it all up in an afternoon. As I told you, it's very many years since I went there.'

The business was beginning to sound like something from a Victorian novel, with a reclusive old woman having hidden a lot of ancient documents somewhere in the depths of her cluttered house. I was scarcely taking Mr Bentley seriously.

'Will there be anyone to help me?'

'The bulk of the estate goes to a great-niece and -nephew – they are both in India, where they have lived for upwards of forty years. There used to be a housekeeper . . . but you'll find out more when you get there.'

'But presumably she had friends . . . or even neighbours?'

'Eel Marsh House is far from any neighbour.'

'And, being a rum 'un, she never made friends, I suppose?'

Mr Bentley chuckled. 'Come, Arthur, look on the bright side. Treat the whole thing as a jaunt.'

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I got up.

'At least it'll take you out of all this for a day or two,' and he waved his hand towards the window. I nodded. In fact, I was not by any means unattracted to the idea of the expedition, though I saw that Mr Bentley had not been able to resist making a good story better, and dramatizing the mystery of Mrs Drablow in her queer-sounding house a good way beyond the facts. I supposed that the place would merely prove cold, uncomfortable and difficult to reach, the funeral melancholy, and the papers I had to search for would be tucked under an attic bed in a dust-covered shoebox, and contain nothing more than old receipted bills and some drafts of cantankerous letters to all and sundry – all of which was usual for such a female client. As I reached the door of his room, Mr Bentley added, 'You'll reach Crythin Gifford by late this evening, and there's a small hotel you can put up at for tonight. The funeral is tomorrow morning at eleven.'

'And, afterwards, you want me to go to the house?'

'I've made arrangements . . . there's a local man dealing with it all . . . he'll be in touch with you.'

'Yes, but . . .'

Just then, Tomes materialized with a sniff at my shoulder.

'Your ten-thirty client, Mr Bentley.'

'Good, good, show him in.'

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'Just a moment, Mr Bentley . . .'

'What is the matter, Arthur? Don't dither in the doorway, man, I've work to do.'

'Isn't there any more you ought to tell me, I . . .'

He waved me away impatiently, and at that point Tomes returned, closely followed by Mr Bentley's ten-thirty client. I retreated.

I had to clear my desk, go back to my rooms and pack a bag, inform my landlady that I would be away for a couple of nights, and to scribble a note to my fiancée, Stella. I rather hoped that her disappointment at my sudden absence from her would be tempered by pride that Mr Bentley was entrusting me with the firm's business in such a manner – a good omen for my future prospects upon which our marriage, planned for the following year, depended.

After that, I was to catch the afternoon train to a remote corner of England, of which until a few minutes ago I had barely heard. On my way out of the building, the lugubrious Tomes knocked on the glass of his cubby-hole, and handed me a thick brown envelope marked DRABLOW. Clutching it under my arm, I plunged out, into the choking London fog.

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The Journey North

As Mr Bentley had said, however far the distance and gloomy the reason for my journey, it did represent an escape from the London particular and nothing was more calculated to raise my spirits in anticipation of a treat to come than the sight of that great cavern of a railway station, glowing like the interior of a blacksmith's forge. Here, all was clangour and the cheerfulness of preparations for departure, and I purchased papers and journals at the bookstall and walked down the platform beside the smoking, puffing train, with a light step. The engine, I remember, was the Sir Bedivere.

I found a corner seat in an empty compartment, put my coat, hat and baggage on the rack and settled down in great contentment. When we pulled out of London, the fog, although still lingering about the suburbs,

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began to be patchier and paler, and I all but cheered. By then, a couple of other passengers had joined me in my compartment, but, after nodding briefly, were as intent on applying themselves to newspapers and other documents as myself, and so we travelled a good many uneventful miles towards the heart of England. Beyond the windows, it was quickly dark and, when the carriage blinds were pulled down, all was as cosy and enclosed as some lamplit study.

At Crewe I changed with ease and continued on my way, noting that the track began to veer towards the east, as well as heading north, and I ate a pleasant dinner. It was only when I came to change again, onto the branch line at the small station of Homerby, that I began to be less comfortable, for here the air was a great deal colder and blowing in gusts from the east with an unpleasant rain upon its breath, and the train in which I was to travel for the last hour of my journey was one of those with ancient, comfortless carriages upholstered in the stiffest of leathercloth over unyielding horsehair, and with slatted wooden racks above. It smelled of cold, stale smuts and the windows were grimed, the floor unswept.

Until the very last second, it seemed that I was to be alone not merely in my compartment but in the entire train, but, just at the blowing of the guard's whistle, a man came through the barrier, glanced quickly along

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the cheerless row of empty carriages and, catching sight of me at last, and clearly preferring to have a companion, climbed in, swinging the door shut as the train began to move away. The cloud of cold, damp air that he let in with him added to the chill of the compartment, and I remarked that it was a poor night, as the stranger began to unbutton his greatcoat. He looked me up and down inquisitively, though not in any unfriendly way, and then up at my things upon the rack, before nodding agreement.

'It seems I have exchanged one kind of poor weather for another. I left London in the grip of an appalling fog, and up here it seems to be cold enough for snow.'

'It's not snow,' he said. 'The wind'll blow itself out and take the rain off with it by morning.'

'I'm very glad to hear it.'

'But, if you think you've escaped the fogs by coming up here, you're mistaken. We get bad frets in this part of the world.'

'Frets?'

'Aye, frets. Sea-frets, sea-mists. They roll up in a minute from the sea to land across the marshes. It's the nature of the place. One minute it's as clear as a June day, the next . . .' he gestured to indicate the dramatic suddenness of his frets. 'Terrible. But if you're staying in Crythin you won't see the worst of it.'

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'I stay there tonight, at the Gifford Arms. And tomorrow morning. I expect to go out to see something of the marshes later.'

And then, not particularly wishing to discuss the nature of my business with him, I picked up my newspaper again and unfolded it with a certain ostentation, and so, for some little while, we rumbled on in the nasty train, in silence – save for the huffing of the engine, and the clanking of iron wheels upon iron rails, and the occasional whistle, and the bursts of rain, like sprays of light artillery fire, upon the windows.

I began to be weary, of journeying and of the cold and of sitting still while being jarred and jolted about, and to look forward to my supper, a fire and a warm bed. But in truth, and although I was hiding behind its pages, I had read my newspaper fully, and I began to speculate about my companion. He was a big man, with a beefy face and huge, raw-looking hands, well enough spoken but with an odd accent that I took to be the local one. I put him down as a farmer, or else the proprietor of some small business. He was nearer to sixty than fifty, and his clothes were of good quality, but somewhat brashly cut, and he wore a heavy, prominent seal-ring on his left hand, and that, too, had a newness and a touch of vulgarity about it. I decided that he was a man who had made, or come into, money late and unexpectedly, and was happy for the world to know it.

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Having, in my youthful and priggish way, summed up and all but dismissed him, I let my mind wander back to London and to Stella, and for the rest, was only conscious of the extreme chill and the ache in my joints, when my companion startled me, by saying, 'Mrs Drablow.' I lowered my paper, and became aware that his voice echoed so loudly through the compartment because of the fact that the train had stopped, and the only sound to be heard was the moan of the wind, and a faint hiss of steam, far ahead of us.

'Drablow,' he pointed to my brown envelope, containing the Drablow papers, which I had left lying on the seat beside me.

I nodded stiffly.

'You don't tell me you're a relative?'

'I am her solicitor.' I was rather pleased with the way it sounded.

'Ah! Bound for the funeral?'

'I am.'

'You'll be about the only one that is.' In spite of myself, I wanted to find out more about the business, and clearly my companion knew it.

'I gather she had no friends – or immediate family – that she was something of a recluse? Well, that is sometimes the way with old ladies. They turn inwards – grow eccentric. I suppose it comes from living alone.'

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'I daresay that it does, Mr . . . ?'

'Kipps. Arthur Kipps.'

'Samuel Daily.'

We nodded.

'And, when you live alone in such as place as that, it comes a good deal easier.'

'Come,' I said smiling, 'you're not going to start telling me strange tales of lonely houses?'

He gave me a straight look. 'No,' he said, at last, 'I am not.'

For some reason then, I shuddered, all the more because of the openness of his gaze and the directness of his manner.

'Well,' I replied in the end, 'all I can say is that it's a sad thing when someone lives for eighty-seven years and can't count upon a few friendly faces to gather together at their funeral!'

And I rubbed my hand on the window, trying to see out into the darkness. We appeared to have stopped in the middle of open country, and to be taking the full force of the wind that came howling across it. 'How far have we to go?' I tried not to sound concerned, but was feeling an unpleasant sensation of being isolated far from any human dwelling, and trapped in this cold tomb of a railway carriage, with its pitted mirror and stained, dark-wood panelling. Mr Daily took out his watch.

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'Twelve miles, we're held up for the down train at Gapemouth tunnel. The hill it runs through is the last bit of high ground for miles. You've come to the flat-lands, Mr Kipps.'

'I've come to the land of curious place-names, certainly. This morning, I heard of the Nine Lives Causeway, and Eel Marsh, tonight of Gapemouth tunnel.'

'It's a far-flung part of the world. We don't get many visitors.'

'I suppose because there is nothing much to see.'

'It all depends what you mean by "nothing". There's the drowned churches and the swallowed-up village,' he chuckled. 'Those are particularly fine examples of "nothing to see". And we've a good wild ruin of an abbey with a handsome graveyard – you can get to it at low tide. It's all according to what takes your fancy!'

'You are almost making me anxious to get back to that London particular!'

There was a shriek from the train whistle.

'Here she comes.' And the train coming away from Crythin Gifford to Homerby emerged from Gapemouth tunnel and trundled past us, a line of empty yellow-lit carriages that disappeared into the darkness, and then immediately we were under way again.

'But you'll find everything hospitable enough at Crythin, for all it's a plain little place. We tuck

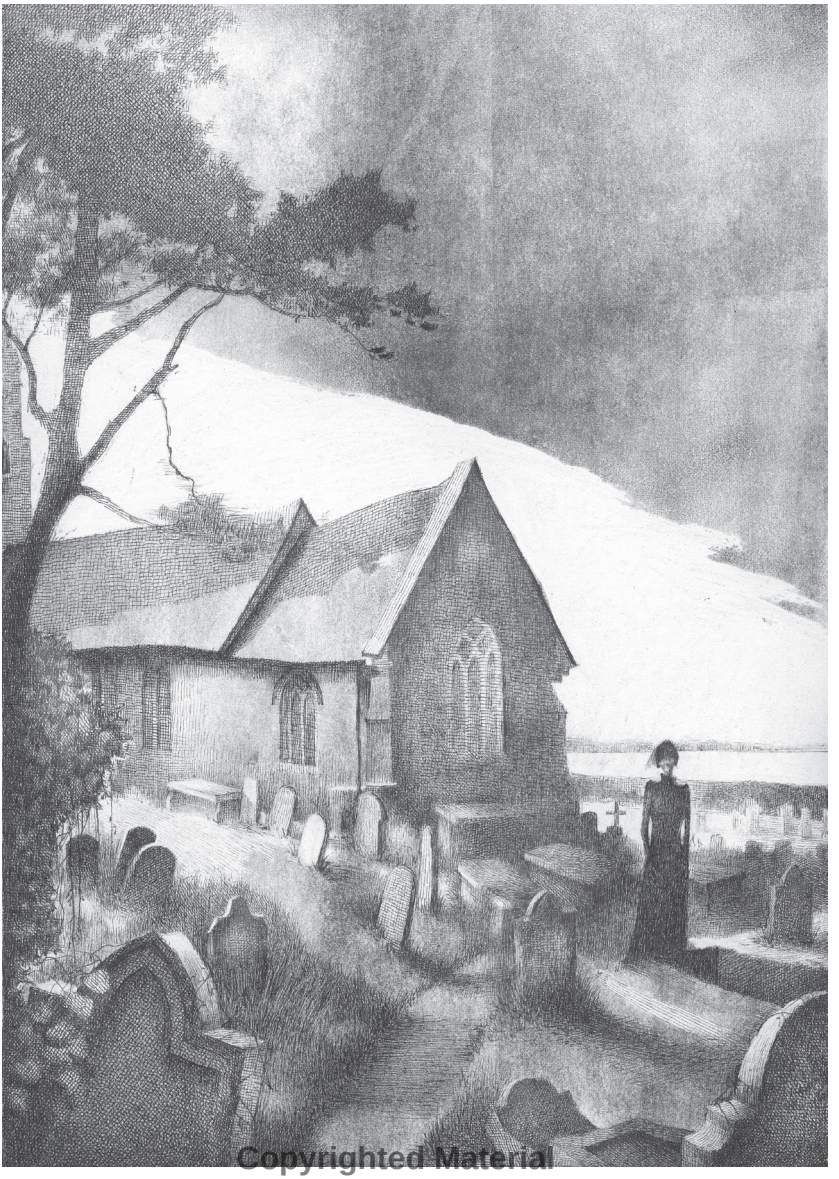
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ourselves in with our backs to the wind, and carry on with our business. If you care to come with me, I can drop you off at the Gifford Arms – my car will be waiting for me, and it's on my way.'

He seemed keen to reassure me and to make up for his teasing exaggeration of the bleakness and strangeness of the area, and I thanked him and accepted his offer, whereupon we both settled back to our reading, for the last few miles of that tedious journey.

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The Funeral of Mrs Drablow

My first impressions of the little market town – indeed, it seemed scarcely larger than an overgrown village – of Crythin Gifford were distinctly favourable. When we arrived that night, Mr Samuel Daily's car, as shining, capacious and plush a vehicle as I had travelled in in my life, took us swiftly the bare mile from the tiny station into the market square, where we drew up outside the Gifford Arms.

As I prepared to alight, he handed me his card.

'Should you need anyone . . .'

I thanked him, though stressing that it was most unlikely, as I would have whatever practical help I might require to organize the late Mrs Drablow's business from the local agent, and did not intend to be in the place more than a day or two. Mr Daily gave me a straight, steady stare, and said nothing and, so as not

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to appear discourteous, I tucked the card carefully into my waistcoat pocket. Only then did he give the word to his driver, and move away.

'You'll find everything hospitable enough at Crythin,' he had said earlier, and so it proved. As I caught sight of the piled-up fire and the capacious armchair beside it, in the parlour of the inn, and found another fire waiting to warm me in the prettily furnished bedroom at the top of the house, my spirits rose, and I began to feel rather more like a man on holiday than one come to attend a funeral, and go through the dreary business attendant upon the death of a client. The wind had either died down or else could not be heard in the shelter of the buildings, around the market square, and the discomfort, and queer trend of the conversation of my journey, faded like a bad dream.

The landlord recommended a glass of mulled wine, which I drank sitting before the fire, listening to the murmur of voices on the other side of a heavy door leading to the public bar, and his wife made my mouth water in anticipation of the supper she proposed – home-made broth, sirloin of beef, apple and raisin tart with cream, and some Stilton cheese. While I waited, I wrote a brief fond note to Stella, which I would post the next morning, and while I ate heartily, I mused about the type of small house we might afford to live in after our marriage, if Mr Bentley were to continue

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to give me so much responsibility in the firm, so that I might feel justified in asking for an increase in salary.

All in all, and with the half-bottle of claret that had accompanied my supper, I prepared to go up to bed in a warm glow of well-being and contentment.

'You'll be here for the auction, I take it then, sir,' the landlord waited by the door, to bid me goodnight.

'Auction?'

He looked surprised. 'Ah – I thought you would have come up for that – there's a big auction of several farms that lie just south of here, and it's market day tomorrow as well.'

'Where is the auction?'

'Why here, Mr Kipps, in the public bar at eleven o'clock. We generally have such auctions as there are at the Gifford Arms, but there hasn't been one so big as this for a good many years. Then there's the lunch afterwards. We expect to serve upwards of forty lunches on market day, but it'll be a few more than that tomorrow.'

'Then I'm sorry I shall have to miss it – although I hope I shall be able to have a stroll round the market.'

'No intention to pry, sir – only I made sure you'd come for the auction.'

'That's all right – quite natural that you should. But at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning, I'm afraid that I have a sombre engagement. I'm here to attend a

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funeral – Mrs Drablow, of Eel Marsh House. Perhaps you knew of her?'

His face flickered with . . . what? Alarm, was it? Suspicion? I could not tell, but the name had stirred some strong emotion in him, all signs of which he endeavoured to suppress at once.

'I knew of her,' he said evenly.

'I am representing her firm of solicitors. I never met her. I take it she kept rather out of the way, for the most part?'

'She could hardly do otherwise, living there,' and he turned away abruptly in the direction of the public bar. 'I'll wish you goodnight, sir. We can serve breakfast at any time in the morning, to your convenience.' And he left me alone. I half moved to call him back, for I was both curious and a little irritated by his manner, and I thought of trying to get out of him exactly what he had meant by it. But I was tired and dismissed the notion, putting his remarks down to some local tales and silliness which had grown out of all proportion, as such things will do in small, out of the way communities, which have only themselves to look to for whatever melodrama and mystery they can extract out of life. For I must confess I had the Londoner's sense of superiority in those days, the half-formed belief that countrymen, and particularly those who inhabited the remoter corners of our

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island, were more superstitious, more gullible, more slow-witted, unsophisticated and primitive, than we cosmopolitans. Doubtless, in such a place as this, with its eerie marshes, sudden fogs, moaning winds and lonely houses, any poor old woman might be looked at askance; once upon a time, after all, she would have been branded as a witch and local legends and tales were still abroad and some extravagant folklore still half-believed in.

It was true that neither Mr Daily nor the landlord of the inn seemed anything but sturdy men of good commonsense, just as I had to admit that neither of them had done more than fall silent and look at me hard and a little oddly, when the subject of Mrs Drablow had arisen. Nonetheless, I had been left in no doubt that there was some significance in what had been left *un*said.

On the whole, that night, with my stomach full of home-cooked food, a pleasing drowsiness induced by good wine, and the sight of the low fire and inviting, turned-back covers of the deep, soft bed, I was inclined to let myself enjoy the whole business, and to be amused by it, as adding a touch of spice and local colour to my expedition, and I fell asleep most peacefully. I can recall it still, that sensation of slipping down, down into the welcoming arms of sleep, surrounded by warmth and softness, happy and secure as a small child

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in the nursery, and I recall waking the next morning, too, opening my eyes to see shafts of wintry sunlight playing upon the sloping white ceiling, and the delightful feeling of ease and refreshment in mind and limbs. Perhaps I recall those sensations the more vividly because of the contrast that presented with what was to come after. Had I known that my untroubled night of good sleep was to be the last such that I was to enjoy for so many terrifying, racked and weary nights to come, perhaps I should not have jumped out of bed with such alacrity, eager to be down and have breakfast, and then to go out and begin the day.

Indeed, even now in later life, though I have been as happy and at peace in my home at Monk's Piece, and with my dear wife Esmé, as any man may hope to be, and even though I thank God every night that it is all over, all long past and will not, *cannot* come again, yet I do not believe I have ever again slept so well as I did that night in the inn at Crythin Gifford. For I see that then I was still all in a state of innocence, but that innocence, once lost, is lost forever.

The bright sunshine that filled my room when I drew back the flowered curtains was no fleeting, early-morning visitor. By contrast with the fog of London, and the wind and rain of the previous evening's journey up here, the weather was quite altered as Mr Daily had confidently predicted that it would be.

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Although it was early November and this a cold corner of England, when I stepped out of the Gifford Arms after enjoying a remarkably good breakfast, the air was fresh, crisp and clear and the sky as blue as a blackbird's egg. The little town was built, for the most part, of stone and rather austere grey slate, and set low, the houses huddled together and looking in on themselves. I wandered about, discovering the pattern of the place – a number of straight narrow streets or lanes led off at every angle from the compact market square, in which the hotel was situated and which was now filling up with pens and stalls, carts, wagons and trailers, in preparation for the market. From all sides came the cries of men to one another as they worked hammering temporary fencing, hauling up canvas awnings over stalls, wheeling barrows over the cobbles. It was as cheerful and purposeful a sight as I could have found to enjoy anywhere, and I walked about with a great appetite for it all. But, when I turned my back on the square and went up one of the lanes, at once all the sounds were deadened, so that all I heard were my own footsteps in front of the quiet houses. There was not the slightest rise or slope on the ground anywhere. Crythin Gifford was utterly flat but, coming suddenly to the end of one of the narrow streets, I found myself at once in open country, and saw field after field stretching away into the pale horizon. I saw then what

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Mr Daily had meant about the town tucking itself in with its back to the wind, for, indeed, all that could be seen of it from here were the backs of houses and shops, and of the main public buildings in the square.

There was a touch of warmth in the autumn sunshine, and what few trees I saw, all bent a little away from the prevailing wind, still had a few last russet and golden leaves clinging to the ends of their branches. But I imagined how drear and grey and bleak the place would be in the dank rain and mist, how beaten and battered at for days on end by those gales that came sweeping across the flat, open country, how completely cut off by blizzards. That morning, I had looked again at Crythin Gifford on the map. To north, south and west there was rural emptiness for many miles – it was twelve to Homerby, the next place of any size, thirty to a large town, to the south, and about seven to any other village at all. To the east, there were only marshes, the estuary, and then the sea. For anything other than a day or two, it would certainly not do for me, but as I strolled back towards the market, I felt very much at home, and content, in the place, refreshed by the brightness of the day and fascinated by everything I saw.

When I reached the hotel again, I found that a note had been left for me in my absence by Mr Jerome, the agent who had dealt with such property and land

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business as Mrs Drablow had conducted, and who was to be my companion at the funeral. In a polite, formal hand, he suggested that he return at ten-forty, to conduct me to the church, and so, for the rest of the time until then, I sat in the front window of the parlour at the Gifford Arms, reading the daily newspapers and watching the preparations in the market place. Within the hotel, too, there was a good deal of activity which I took to be in connection with the auction sale. From the kitchen area, as doors occasionally swung open, wafted the rich smells of cooking, of roasting meat and baking bread, of pies and pastry and cakes, and from the dining room came the clatter of crockery. By ten-fifteen, the pavement outside began to be crowded with solid, prosperous-looking farmers in tweed suits, calling out greetings, shaking hands, nodding vigorously in discussion.

I was sad to be obliged to leave it all, dressed in my dark, formal suit and overcoat, with black armband and tie, and black hat in my hand, when Mr Jerome arrived – there was no mistaking him because of the similar drabness of his outfit – and we shook hands and went out onto the street. For a moment standing there looking over the colourful, busy scene before us, I felt like a spectre at some cheerful feast, and that our appearance among the men in workaday or country clothes was that of a pair of gloomy ravens. And,

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indeed, that was the effect we seemed to have at once upon everyone who saw us. As we passed through the square we were the focus of uneasy glances, men drew back from us slightly and fell silent and stiff, in the middle of their conversations, so that I began to be unhappy, feeling like some pariah, and glad to get away and into one of the quiet streets that led, Mr Jerome indicated, directly to the parish church.

He was a particularly small man, only five feet two or three inches tall at most, and with an extraordinary, domed head, fringed around at the very back with gingerish hair, like some sort of rough braiding around the base of a lampshade. He might have been anywhere between thirty-five and fifty-seven years of age, with a blandness and formality of manner and a somewhat shuttered expression that revealed nothing whatsoever of his own personality, his mood or his thoughts. He was courteous, businesslike, and conversational but not intimate. He inquired about my journey, about the comfort of the Gifford Arms, about Mr Bentley, and about the London weather, he told me the name of the clergyman who would be officiating at the funeral, the number of properties – some half-dozen – that Mrs Drablow had owned in the town and the immediate vicinity. And yet he told me nothing at all, nothing personal, nothing revelatory, nothing very interesting.

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'I take it she is to be buried in the churchyard?' I asked.

Mr Jerome glanced at me sideways, and I noted that he had very large, and slightly protuberant and pale eyes of a colour somewhere between blue and grey, that reminded me of gulls' eggs.

'That is so, yes.'

'Is there a family grave?'

He was silent for a moment, glancing at me closely again, as if trying to discover whether there were any meaning behind the apparent straightforwardness of the question. Then he said, 'No. At least . . . not here, not in this churchyard.'

'Somewhere else?'

'It is . . . no longer in use,' he said, after some deliberation. 'The area is unsuitable.'

'I'm afraid I don't quite understand . . .'

But, at that moment, I saw that we had reached the church, which was approached through a wrought-iron gate, between two overhanging yew trees, and situated at the end of a particularly long, very straight path. On either side, and away to the right, stood the gravestones, but to the left, there were some buildings which I took to be the church hall and – the one nearer to the church – the school, with a bell set high up in the wall, and, from within it, the sound of children's voices.

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I was obliged to suspend my inquisitiveness about the Drablow family and their burial ground, and to assume, like Mr Jerome, a professionally mournful expression as we walked with measured steps towards the church porch. There, for some five minutes that seemed very much longer, we waited, quite alone, until the funeral car drew up at the gate, and from the interior of the church the parson materialized beside us; and, together, the three of us watched the drab procession of undertaker's men, bearing the coffin of Mrs Drablow, make its slow way towards us.

It was indeed a melancholy little service, with so few of us in the cold church, and I shivered as I thought once again how inexpressibly sad it was that the ending of a whole human life, from birth and childhood, through adult maturity to extreme old age, should here be marked by no blood relative or heart's friend, but only by two men connected by nothing more than business, one of whom had never so much as set eyes upon the woman during her life, besides those present in an even more bleakly professional capacity.

However, towards the end of it, and on hearing some slight rustle behind me, I half-turned, discreetly, and caught a glimpse of another mourner, a woman, who must have slipped into the church after we of the funeral party had taken our places and who stood several rows behind and quite alone, very erect and still,

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and not holding a prayer book. She was dressed in deepest black, in the style of full mourning that had rather gone out of fashion except, I imagined, in court circles on the most formal of occasions. Indeed, it had clearly been dug out of some old trunk or wardrobe, for its blackness was a little rusty looking. A bonnet-type hat covered her head and shaded her face, but, although I did not stare, even the swift glance I took of the woman showed me enough to recognize that she was suffering from some terrible wasting disease, for not only was she extremely pale, even more than a contrast with the blackness of her garments could account for, but the skin and, it seemed, only the thinnest layer of flesh was tautly stretched and strained across her bones, so that it gleamed with a curious, blue-white sheen, and her eyes seemed sunken back into her head. Her hands that rested on the pew before her were in a similar state, as though she had been a victim of starvation. Though not any medical expert, I had heard of certain conditions which caused such terrible wasting, such ravages of the flesh, and knew that they were generally regarded as incurable, and it seemed poignant that a woman, who was perhaps only a short time away from her own death, should drag herself to the funeral of another. Nor did she look old. The effect of the illness made her age hard to guess, but she was quite possibly no more than thirty. Before

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I turned back, I vowed to speak to her and see if I could be of any assistance after the funeral was over, but just as we were making ready to move away, following the parson and the coffin out of the church, I heard the slight rustle of clothing once more and realized that the unknown woman had already slipped quickly away, and gone out to the waiting, open grave, though to stand some yards back, beside another headstone, that was overgrown with moss and upon which she leaned slightly. Her appearance, even in the limpid sunshine and comparative warmth and brightness outdoors, was so pathetically wasted, so pale and gaunt with disease, that it would not have been a kindness to gaze upon her; for there was still some faint trace on her features, some lingering hint, of a not inconsiderable former beauty, which must make her feel her present condition all the more keenly, as would the victim of a smallpox, or of some dreadful disfigurement of burning.

Well, I thought, there is one who cares, after all, and who knows how keenly, and surely, such warmth and kindness, such courage and unselfish purpose, can never go unrewarded and unremarked, if there is any truth at all in the words that we have just heard spoken to us in the church?

And then I looked away from the woman and back, to where the coffin was being lowered into the ground,

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and I bent my head and prayed with a sudden upsurge of concern, for the soul of that lonely old woman, and for a blessing upon our drab circle.

When I looked up again, I saw a blackbird on the hollybush a few feet away and heard him open his mouth to pour out a sparkling fountain of song in the November sunlight, and then it was all over, we were moving away from the graveside, I a step behind Mr Jerome, as I intended to wait for the sick-looking woman and offer my arm to escort her. But she was nowhere to be seen.

While I had been saying my prayers and the clergyman had been speaking the final words of the committal, and perhaps not wanting to disturb us, or draw any attention to herself, she must have gone away, just as unobtrusively as she had arrived.

At the church gate, we stood for a few moments, talking politely, shaking hands, and I had a chance to look around me, and to notice that, on such a clear, bright day, it was possible to see far beyond the church and the graveyard, to where the open marshes and the water of the estuary gleamed silver, and shone even brighter, at the line of the horizon, where the sky above was almost white and faintly shimmering.

Then, glancing back on the other side of the church, something else caught my eye. Lined up along the iron railings that surrounded the small asphalt yard of

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the school were twenty or so children, one to a gap. They presented a row of pale, solemn faces with great, round eyes, that had watched who knew how much of the mournful proceedings, and their little hands held the railings tight, and they were all of them quite silent, quite motionless. It was an oddly grave and touching sight, they looked so unlike children generally do, animated and carefree. I caught the eye of one and smiled at him gently. He did not smile back.

I saw that Mr Jerome waited for me politely in the lane, and I went quickly out after him.

'Tell me, that other woman . . .' I said as I reached his side, 'I hope she can find her own way home . . . she looked so dreadfully unwell. Who was she?'

He frowned.

'The young woman with the wasted face,' I urged, 'at the back of the church and then in the graveyard a few yards away from us.'

Mr Jerome stopped dead. He was staring at me.

'A young woman?'

'Yes, yes, with the skin stretched over her bones, I could scarcely bear to look at her . . . she was tall, she wore a bonnet type of hat . . . I suppose to try and conceal as much as she could of her face, poor thing.'

For a few seconds, in that quiet, empty lane, in the sunshine, there was such a silence as must have fallen again now inside the church, a silence so deep that I

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heard the pulsation of the blood in the channels of my own ears. Mr Jerome looked frozen, pale, his throat moving as if he were unable to utter.

'Is there anything the matter?' I asked him quickly. 'You look unwell.'

At last he managed to shake his head – I almost would say, that he shook himself, as though making an extreme effort to pull himself together after suffering a momentous shock, though the colour did not return to his face and the corners of his lips seemed tinged with blue.

At last he said in a low voice, 'I did not see a young woman.'

'But, surely . . .' And I looked over my shoulder, back to the churchyard, and there she was again, I caught a glimpse of her black dress and the outline of her bonnet. So she had not left after all, only concealed herself behind one of the bushes or headstones, or else in the shadows of the church, waiting until we should have left, so that she could do what she was doing now, stand at the very edge of the grave in which the body of Mrs Drablow had just been laid to rest, looking down. I wondered again what connection she would have had with her, what odd story might lie behind her surreptitious visit, and what extremes of sad feeling she was now suffering, alone there. 'Look,' I said, and pointed, 'there she is again . . . ought we not

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to . . .' I stopped as Mr Jerome grabbed my wrist and held it in an agonizingly tight grip, and, looking at his face, was certain that he was about to faint, or collapse with some kind of seizure. I began looking wildly about me, in the deserted lane, wondering whatever I might do, where I could go, or call out, for help. The undertakers had left. Behind me were only a school of little children, and a mortally sick young woman under great emotional and physical strain, beside me was a man in a state of near-collapse. The only person I could conceivably reach was the clergyman, somewhere in the recesses of his church, and, if I were to go for him, I would have to leave Mr Jerome alone.

'Mr Jerome, can you take my arm . . . I would be obliged if you would loosen your grip a little . . . if you can just walk a few steps, back to the church . . . path . . . I saw a bench there, a little way inside the gate, you can rest and recover while I go for help . . . a car . . .'

'No!' He almost shrieked.

'But, my dear man!'

'No. I apologize . . .' He began to take deep breaths and a little colour returned by degrees to his face. 'I am so sorry. It was nothing . . . a passing faintness . . . It will be best if you would just walk back with me towards my offices in Penn Street, off the square.'

He seemed agitated now, anxious to get away from the church and its environs.

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