

THE MARBLE FINGER

(Edith Nesbit)

When Laura and I married we had little money. I used to paint in those days, and Laura used to write, but neither of us earned much. To save money, we moved to the country and rented a small cottage at Brenzett - a little village on a hill deep in the country.

Our house stood alone, about two miles from the village. It was a long, low building covered with ivy, with a lovely rose garden. We loved it.

A woman from the village, Mrs Dorman did our housework for us. She was an excellent cook and gardener. She also knew all the local stories. We loved to listen to her strange tales of 'things that walked' in the fields at night.

For three months we were very happy. Then one October evening, I went out to smoke my pipe with our only neighbour - a very nice young Irish doctor called Kelly. Laura stayed at home to finish drawing for magazine. When I came home she was lying on the window seat. Her face was wet with tears.

'Darling, what's the matter?' I cried, taking her in my arms.

'It's Mrs Dorman!'

'What has she done?'

'She says she must go before the end of the month. She says that her niece is ill but I don't believe that is the real reason. I think someone has been telling stories about us to her.'

'Never mind,' I said. 'We can find someone else.'

'No, I don't think we can,' she said. Tears were still coming down her face. 'These village people follow each other. If one won't do a thing, the others won't either.'

'I'll speak to Mrs Dorman when she comes back,' I said to calm her. 'Perhaps she wants more money. Don't worry. Everything will be all right. Let's walk up to the church.'

They were wicked men

The church was large and lonely but we loved to visit it, especially on bright nights. To get there we followed 'the cemetery walk'. This was a long path through a dark wood. It was once used to carry dead bodies to the church.

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Inside the church was dark and gloomy. On each side of the aisle there was a grey marble statue of a knight.

‘Mrs Dorman says that they should not be here,’ Laura told me. ‘She says that they were wicked men.’

‘Why are there statues of them?’

‘She says they bought their place in the church with stolen gold.’

Looking at their hard faces this story was easy to believe.

The church looked at its strangest that night. We sat without speaking, enjoying its beauty. Soon Laura felt better and we went back to the cottage. We were happy once again.

Mrs Dorman was there when we arrived. I immediately took her into my painting room. ‘Now, Mrs Dorman,’ I said. ‘Why do you want to leave us?’

‘I must get away before the end of the month, sir.’

‘Do you have a problem with us, Mrs Dorman?’

‘None at all, sir. You and your wife have been very kind.’

‘Then why not stay?’

‘I’d rather not,’ she said. ‘My niece is ill.’

‘But your niece has been ill since we came. Can’t you stay for another month?’

‘No, sir. I must go by Saturday.’

‘But my wife has poor health. She cannot do heavy housework. Can’t you stay until next week?’

‘I can come back next week. After the 31st of October.’

‘Why do you not want to be here on that date. Please, Mrs Dorman, you must explain.’

‘Many terrible things happened there.’

Mrs Dorman looked very unhappy. Finally she said,

‘Many years ago there was a big house here where this cottage is now. Many terrible things happened there.’

‘Tell me about them, Mrs Dorman,’ I said.

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‘Well, sir’ - she lowered her voice - ‘you may have seen in the church two statues.’

‘You mean the two marble knights? What about them?’

‘They say that on Halloween those statues stand up together. And as the church clock strikes eleven they walk out of the church door.’

‘Where do they go?’

‘They climb over the graves and then walk along the Cemetery Walk.’

‘But that would take them to this house.’

‘That’s right, sir. They come back here to their home.’

‘Home?’

‘They lived in the big house that was here. That’s why they come home every Halloween. And if anyone meets them -’

She stopped, not wanting to say more.

‘Well, what then?’ I asked.

But she would not say. ‘My niece is ill, sir. And I must go to her. But you must lock the door early on Halloween night.’

‘Has anyone actually seen these walking statues? Who was living here last year?’

‘No one, sir. The owner always goes away a month before Halloween.’

I did not tell Laura about the ‘walking marble men’ and not only because I knew it would upset her. I also felt a little troubled myself. For reasons I cannot explain, I did not want to discuss the story until after Halloween. -

Soon I put Mrs Dorman’s strange tale out of my mind. On Thursday she left us. ‘Don’t worry about the housework,’ she told Laura. ‘I can do it when I come back next week.’

Everything seemed fine on that day. And the Friday started well, too. I got up early and lit the kitchen fire. Then my wife came down and we made breakfast together. When we finished clearing up the house became silent.

Laura seemed very happy when we went for a walk that afternoon. We came back to the house hand in hand.

It was when we sat down together in the kitchen that I noticed that she was now very quiet. ‘You are sad, my darling,’ I said, half jokingly.

To my surprise she said, ‘Yes, I think I am a little troubled. I don’t think I am very well. I have shivered three or four times since we came in. It is not cold, is it?’

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'No,' I said. 'Perhaps you are unwell.'

'I don't think so,' she said. Then after a silence she spoke suddenly. 'What a baby I am! Let's light the candles and have a nice evening together.'

So we spent a happy hour or two at the piano.

At about half past ten I always smoke my last pipe of the evening. Laura still looked ill and I did not want to make her worse with pipe smoke. 'I'll take my pipe outside,' I said.

'Let me come, too.'

'No, darling. Not tonight. You're much too tired. Go to bed - I shan't be long.'

I kissed her goodnight. As I was turning to go, she threw her arms around my neck. She held me tightly while I stroked her hair.

'Come on, darling. You're over-tired. The housework has been too much for you.'

Slowly she let me go. 'We've been very happy today, Jack, haven't we? Don't stay out too long.'

'I won't, my love.'

'What a night it was!'

I walked out of the front door, leaving it unlocked. What a night it was! Above me dark heavy clouds moved across the sky. Behind them the full moon shone brightly.

The night was silent. There was no sound of rabbits or half-asleep birds. Across the woods I could see the church in the distance. I thought about our months of happiness.

The church clock struck. Eleven already! I turned to go in but the night was too lovely. I could not go to our warm rooms yet.

I looked in through the low window as I went. Laura was half lying on her chair by the fire. I could not see her face but she seemed to be asleep.

I was walking slowly along the edge of the wood when I heard a noise. It sounded like footsteps echoing mine. I stopped and listened. The noise stopped too.

I went on and again heard the sound of steps. Someone else was in the woods - a wood thief, perhaps.

I turned into the wood. Oddly, the footsteps now seemed to come from the path I had just left. An echo, perhaps?

The wood looked beautiful in the moonlight. The big trees reminded me of the columns in the church. I turned into the Cemetery Walk. Soon I passed through the gate into the churchyard.

Reaching the stone seat where Laura and I had been earlier that afternoon, I sat down for a moment. Then I noticed that the door of the church was open. Had we left it unlocked the other night? Only Laura and I ever visited the church outside of Sunday.

'I could not believe my eyes'

I went in and I walked up the aisle. Strangely, it was only then that I remembered – with a sudden shiver - about the walking statues. A moment later I was calm again. 'What nonsense!' I told myself. 'Don't be frightened by a silly story.'

With my hands in my pockets, I carried on walking up the aisle. This was my chance to prove to Mrs Dorman that the statues slept peacefully on Halloween.

In the poor grey light, the eastern end of the church looked larger than usual. The columns above the statues looked larger too. Then the moon came out and my heart jumped.

The marble statues were gone.

At first I could not believe my eyes. Were they really gone? Or was I mad? I bent down and felt with my hands. Nothing. Had someone taken them away as a joke?

I made a torch out of a newspaper I was carrying in my pocket. Lighting this torch, I held it high above my head. The yellow light lit up the dark columns. I could now see clearly that the statues were gone. And I was alone in the church.

Or was not I?

'A trick of the light?'

Terrified, I threw down my torch and ran down the aisle. I raced through the cemetery and back through the wood.

Suddenly a figure moved out of the shadows to stand in my path. 'Get out of the way!' I shouted, but the figure caught my hands.

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It was Dr Kelly.

‘Let me go, you fool,’ I shouted. ‘The marble statues have gone from the church.’

The young Irish doctor laughed. ‘You’ve been smoking that pipe too much!’ he said. ‘And listening to silly stories.’

‘I tell you I’ve seen it with my own eyes!’

‘Well, come back with me. I’m going up to old Palmer’s - his daughter’s ill. We can go into the church on the way.’

‘Come on then,’ I said, calming down. ‘Perhaps you are right.’

We walked back to the church. All was silent. The place smelt very damp.

When we walked up the aisle I shut my eyes. I knew the statues would not be there. I heard Dr Kelly light a match.

‘Here they are,’ he said. ‘You’ve been drinking or dreaming.’

I opened my eyes and saw the two statues. They were in their old place. I breathed deeply.

‘It must have been some trick of the light,’ I said. ‘Or perhaps I have been working too hard. I was sure they were gone.’

‘The doctor was looking more closely at the statue on the right. ‘There is something strange,’ he said. ‘This hand is broken.’

And so it was. I was certain that it had been perfect the last time Laura and I had been there.

‘Perhaps someone has tried to remove them,’ said the young doctor.

‘Come and have a drink at our house,’ I said. ‘I’m sure there’s a simple explanation for this.’

Dr Kelly nodded. ‘I suppose it’s too late to go up to Palmer’s now,’ he said. ‘I can go in the morning.’

We walked back to the cottage. On the way, we discussed how my eyes had fooled me. We also talked about other ‘ghosts’ that simple people believed in.

As we walked up our garden path, I saw something that surprised me. Bright light was coming out through our open front door. The kitchen door was open, too. Had she gone out?

‘Come in,’ I said, and Dr. Kelly followed me into the kitchen. It was full of lit candles, with at least a dozen in unusual places. I knew that Laura lit candles at night when she was nervous. Poor child! Why had I left her?

We glanced around the room. The window was open and the wind was blowing light from the candles in one direction. Laura's chair was empty. Her handkerchief and book lay on the floor.

I turned to face the window. It was only then I saw Laura. 'Oh my God!'

A grey marble finger

She had fallen back across the window seat. Her head hung down but was clearly facing back into the room. Her long brown hair fallen back on the carpet. Her eyes were wide open.

Had she gone to that window to watch for me? And what had come into the room behind her? What had made her turn with that look of horror on her face?

Her eyes were wide open. They saw nothing now. What had they seen last?

The doctor moved towards her, but I pushed him aside. Taking her in my arms I cried. 'It's all right, Laura! I've got you safe, my love.'

I held her in my arms and kissed her, but I think I knew she was dead. Her hands were tightly held. In one of them she was holding something.

It was a grey marble finger.