

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### NOTE UPON HOOD'S "HAUNTED HOUSE"

THE other day when we came to treat of Hood's work, I promised at some later time to read you parts of "The Haunted House"—as being the best poem of its kind in the English language. We have now leisure enough for some words about it; and I want to tell you first of all why it is such a good poem. It has the very great defect of being too long; but in spite of that it is a marvellous thing, and cannot be spoiled by that shortcoming.

There are two ways—at least two chief ways—of producing in poetry that peculiar creepy chill or thrill which we call ghostly fear. One direct and almost objective way is by describing a supernatural apparition, by painting or drawing a ghost or spectre in such a way as to produce fear. But in this modern and skeptical age, such a method can only succeed when a very extraordinary genius attempts it. I can best explain my meaning by referring to pictures. Most pictures of dreadful things imagined we can laugh at when we do not believe in ghosts. But the pictures of spectres drawn by such a genius as Gustave Doré make us afraid whether we believe in ghosts or not; and a curious fact is that he himself became afraid of his own pictures and dared not sleep in a room by himself, because the figures which he drew began to haunt him. Yet he would have laughed at the idea that ghosts really appear. The fear of his work is entirely due to the fact that the figures in it give us the memory and the sensation of a bad dream. In poetry, effects of this kind can be produced; but only the very greatest poets are capable of causing fear by the objective method. The other method which we may call a subjective

method is to produce the fear simply by creating in imagination the same condition in which fear and suspicion is likely to be felt,—and this without describing any ghost at all. Certain aspects of gloomy weather, fearful sunsets, strange shadowings, unaccustomed silences—these things have their effect even upon the most skeptical mind. So do very lonesome places—signs of desertion, signs of moulding and decay where life once rejoiced and laughed. Well, the method of Hood's poem is this. He takes us into an old deserted house, and there, merely by telling us to look at the conditions of the rooms and the gardens, he produces a feeling of cold fear.

First we have a glimpse of a house and the garden from outside—the poet does not tell us where or when he saw that; and the vagueness of the introduction helps the effect.

Some dreams we have are nothing else but dreams,  
 Unnatural, and full of contradictions;  
 Yet others of our most romantic schemes  
 Are something more than fictions.

It might be only on enchanted ground;  
 It might be merely by a thought's expansion;  
 But in the spirit, or the flesh, I found  
 An old deserted Mansion.

A residence for woman, child, and man,  
 A dwelling-place,—and yet no habitation;  
 A House,—but under some prodigious ban  
 Of excommunication.

. . . .  
 No dog was at the threshold, great or small;  
 No pigeon on the roof—no household creature—  
 No cat demurely dozing on the wall—  
 Not one domestic feature.

. . . .  
 With shutter'd panes the grassy court was starr'd;  
 The time-worn coping-stone had tumbled after!  
 And thro' the rugged roof the sky shone, barr'd  
 With naked beam and rafter.

O'er all there hung a shadow and a fear;  
 A sense of mystery the spirit daunted,  
 And said, as plain as whisper in the ear,  
 The place is Haunted!

By "a thought's expansion" the poet means probably the peculiar magnification or prolongation of a fancy in dreams; and the phrase "enchanted ground" only refers to imagination. We often speak of the enchanted land of Fancy. "Excommunication" usually signifies a religious curse—especially the anathema of the church, by which the offending person is cast out from the religious body, and condemned to solitude, the faithful being forbidden to speak to him or to help him in any way. But the word can be otherwise used, and is very well used here, implying the solitude of the place, which has no communication with the rest of the world. The description of the garden is very impressive; but it would not be so to you, unless you have seen old-fashioned English gardens, and were familiar with the different trees, plants, weeds, and flowers minutely described. So I will abbreviate this description, quoting only a very few stanzas.

The flow'r grew wild and rankly as the weed,  
 Roses with thistles struggled for espial,  
 And vagrant plants of parasitic breed  
 Had overgrown the Dial.

The beds were all untouch'd by hand or tool;  
 No footstep mark'd the damp and mossy gravel,  
 Each walk as green as is the mantled pool,  
 For want of human travel.

The vine unprun'd, and the neglected peach,  
 Droop'd from the wall with which they used to grapple;  
 And on the canker'd tree, in easy reach,  
 Rotted the golden apple.

The pear and quince lay squander'd on the grass;  
 The mould was purple with unheeded showers

Of bloomy plums—a Wilderness it was  
Of fruits, and weeds, and flowers!

The Fountain was a-dry—neglect and time  
Had marr'd the work of artisan and mason,  
And efts and croaking frogs, begot of slime,  
Sprawl'd in the ruin'd bason.

In the first line of the above quotation the word “rankly” refers to rough, wild growth. In a garden which has been neglected for a long time cultivated plants will assume wild characteristics. For instance I remember visiting in America the garden of a very rich planter who had been a great lover of roses; and he had imported many beautiful roses from all parts of the world to plant them in his garden. All of these had become wild again; the double flowers had become single, and the artificially produced colours had disappeared. In most of the old-fashioned English gardens there used to be a dial, or sun-dial—it was an indispensable part of the garden scenery. The spaces of soft clay in such gardens, where the choice flowers are cultivated, are called “beds;” and the paths are called “walks.” These paths are usually strewn with grass, but have to be carefully weeded. The expression “mantled pool” here means a space of stagnant water, an old pond, so covered with green water plants that the water itself is concealed. You know that the green which mantles or covers such old ponds is usually a very bright green. The next stanza, the reference to the peach and vine “grappling with the wall” alludes to the English custom of training these trees to grow against a wall exposed to the south; and the branches of the trees are fastened to the wall with cords and nails. The word “canker'd,” referring to a kind of dry-rot, is much more commonly used of weeds and flowers than of trees; but it is so much the more expressive in this case. “Bloomy plums” is probably an expression with which you are not familiar. On the surface of purple grapes or purple plants there is a fine white powder that looks like mould; and when this be-

comes somewhat thick, it is a sign that the fruit is ripe. "Bloomy" here signifies "covered with *bloom*"—that is the name given to the white growth on the surface of the ripe fruit. Again, efts are small lizards—the name is often given to the water newt, called in Japanese *imori*; and the word "sprawl'd" signifying to fall or lie flat with arms and legs widely spread out, is very expressive of the attitude of amphibious reptiles on a smooth surface.

So much for the outside appearance. On entering the house the appearances are much worse; and the first effect of pushing the door open is to frighten away a host of insects. The door itself, even outside, had been for years in possession of spiders and centipedes.

The centipede along the threshold crept,  
The cobweb hung across in mazy tangle,  
And in its winding-sheet the maggot slept,  
At every nook and angle.

The keyhole lodged earwig and her brood,  
The emmets of the steps had old possession,  
And march'd in search of their diurnal food  
In undisturb'd procession.

Howbeit, the door I push'd—or so I dreamed—  
Which slowly, slowly gaped,—the hinges creaking  
With such a rusty eloquence, it seem'd  
That Time himself was speaking.

The startled bats flew out—bird after bird—  
The screech-owl overhead began to flutter,  
And seem'd to mock the cry that she had heard  
Some dying victim utter!

The wood-louse dropp'd, and roll'd into a ball,  
Touch'd by some impulse occult or mechanic;  
And nameless beetles ran along the wall  
In universal panic.

The subtle spider, that from overhead  
Hung like a spy on human guilt and error,

Suddenly turn'd, and up its slender thread  
 Ran with a nimble terror.

. . . .

If but a rat had linger'd in the house,  
 To lure the thought into a social channel!  
 But not a rat remain'd or tiny mouse,  
 To squeak behind the panel.

. . . .

The floor was redolent of mould and must,  
 The fungus in the rotten seams had quicken'd;  
 While on the oaken table coats of dust  
 Perennially had thicken'd.

. . . .

There was so foul a rumour in the air,  
 The shadow of a Presence so atrocious;  
 No human creature could have feasted there,  
 Even the most ferocious.

“Maggot” does not mean maggot in the strict sense of the word; but in England the little grubs of the moth which eat carpets, silk hangings, clothing, etc., are called maggots. They make little chrysalides in the corners of the rooms and doorways—little chrysalides of thread, here called by the poet their “winding sheets” or shrouds. The word “em-mets” is still used in England for ants, but is seldom heard in America. The “earwig” is a little creature shaped somewhat like a long beetle, and, having a pincers in its tail, owes its name to the belief that it is fond of getting into peoples’ ears. Children are very much afraid of it. The stanza about the wood-louse is famous. In the second line the word “occult” has the sense of ghostly as well as view-less; indeed the word always combines both meanings in poetry. “Must” is a popular name for a particular kind of mould; and the word “seams” in the second line of the same stanza signifies the space between the planks of the floor. “Coats of dust” is a very English expression, the word “coat” here only means layer.

In the above quotation I have been obliged to leave out a number of striking verses—describing the fireplace as in-

habited by lizards and toads—also describing the appearance of the walls, and the noise of the wind in the broken windows. But the stanzas given are very effective and sufficiently suggest the remainder. However, we are only on the ground floor. The next thing to do is to go upstairs:—

'Tis hard for human actions to account,  
 Whether from reason or from impulse only—  
 But some internal prompting bade me mount  
 The gloomy stairs and lonely.

. . . . .  
 Those dreary stairs, where with the sounding stress  
 Of ev'ry step so many echoes blended,  
 The mind, with dark misgivings, fear'd to guess  
 How many feet ascended.

Have you never had this weird sensation? I think we have all experienced it. Often in climbing up an old staircase, alone at night, the cracking of the stairs behind you sounds exactly as if somebody was following. Of course we only notice this as a curious thing if we are not superstitious. But children and people easily frightened by ghost stories, always find a particular terror in creaking stairways. The merit of the stanza—the second of those quoted—lies in its remarkable compactness. A great many things are suggested by four lines. Paraphrased, the thought would require a good many words: "On those lonesome stairs, the noisy pressure of every footstep awakened so many strange echoes that one felt startled, and suspected that he heard feet climbing behind him, but was afraid either to look back or to think about it." That is the real meaning conveyed.

Here we may leave the subject. You cannot at a glance perceive the real impressiveness of the quotation to-day given, but if you will read them over some other time,—especially after dark in a lonely place,—I think you will find them very powerful and that the effect may tempt you to study a little more of Hood's particular method in treating weird subjects.