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The Shuttered Room

by
E.F.
Benson



"On the bed lay the figure of a man faintly twitching."

HUGH LISTER and his wife had come down from London to attend the funeral of his uncle, that strange old hermit of a man who had lived for the last year utterly recluse and indeed practically unseen in the charming Georgian house and high-walled garden, which, at his death, had now come into possession of his nephew. Two bachelor brothers, so Hugh remembered, had originally bought the place, and for some years had lived together there. But he knew almost nothing of their history, though he could recollect seeing them both, as a boy, when they spent the night at his mother's house

in town on their way abroad for some piece of holiday-travel in which they annually indulged: grim, odd-looking, men, much alike, who quarreled about the price of their tickets, and seemed considerably to dislike each other. They lived together, it appeared, because a joint establishment was cheaper than two separate houses, and they had a strong community of tastes in their love of money, and their dislike of other people. . . .

Hugh's fugitive recollection had now, after the funeral, been reinforced and amplified by a talk with Mr. Hodgkin, his uncle's solicitor, and he had learned more of these queer

brothers. They had lived entirely withdrawn from the local life of this little town of Trenthorpe: no guest ever crossed their threshold, nor did they set foot at all in the houses of their neighbors. Seldom were they ever seen outside their house and garden, and, indeed, not often within, for their domestic requirements were provided by a woman who went in for a few hours every morning to make their beds and lay their breakfasts, and cook some food for their dinner, but she would be busy in the kitchen when they came downstairs, and sometimes for days together she never set eyes on either of them. Except for her, the only human being who for the last four or five years had had access to any portion of the premises was the man who had charge of the furnace in the back yard behind the house which heated the radiators through its rooms and passages. Every day throughout the year he must come in the morning and consult the thermometer which hung in a shaded nook on a wall there, and should it register below 60° Fahrenheit, the furnace must be lit, and stoked twice during the day, before he paid his final visit at ten o'clock at night, and made up a fire that would keep the house warm till morning again.

No window ever appeared to be opened in that hermitage, and seldom cleaned; the meals were of the most frugal; an overheated house and complete solitude were all that the brothers asked of life. The man and the woman who looked after their needs went for their wages every week to Mr. Hodgkin, who also discharged for the brothers their bills and paid for them the rates and taxes of the freehold house. But this dismal frugality and joylessness was not the consequence of insufficient means, for they each had an income of five or six hundred a year, of which they spent not half. The rest merely accumulated at the bank, for they made no investments. One

or other of them was occasionally seen in the early morning walking by the bank of the tidal river that swept under the hill on which Trenthorpe stood, and debouched into the sea a mile or two away, but he would have returned to the house before nine in the morning, and thereafter appeared no more.

Most of this was news to Hugh and Violet: then Mr. Hodgkin went on to speak of an event which they knew had occurred, though the details had not reached them.

"That was the manner of life of your two uncles, Mr. Lister," he said, "until a year ago when the mysterious disappearance of the younger, Mr. Henry, took place. I had just come downstairs one morning, and was beginning my breakfast when Mr. Robert, whose funeral we have just attended, was announced. He had found the front door of his house, which, as you will presently see when we visit it, is secured by a multitude of bolts and locks and chains, standing wide open. It had not been forced from outside, for the bolts had been withdrawn from within. He called to his brother, but got no answer, and ascending to his room, found that it was empty. His bed had been slept in, his instruments of toilet had been used, but there was no trace of him anywhere either in the house or the garden. It seemed most likely, therefore, that it was he who had gone out, leaving the door wide, but this was so extraordinary a thing for him to have done that Mr. Robert instantly came round to tell me about it. It struck me also as so odd that I rang up the police office, search and enquiries were made, and within an hour a cloth cap, which Mr. Robert identified as belonging to his brother, was found on the bank of the river, where sometimes he walked, and next day his walking-stick was found at low tide on a sand-shoal a mile farther down. The tide—it was one of the big spring-tides—had been at the flood

about five o'clock in the morning on which he disappeared, and assuming that he left the house soon after that, it must have been running very strong to the sea, and the river was dragged without result. Then came further evidence, for a laborer in the town who had gone out to work at day-break, said that he had seen a man, answering to the description which was circulated, crossing the bridge above the bank where the cap was found."

"Was it supposed to have been an accident?" asked Hugh.

"There was not sufficient evidence to make that clear. It is possible that Mr. Henry might have slipped while walking along the bank, for the ground was very miry: on the other hand, Mr. Robert, in the statement he made to the police, said that for several days his brother had been very queer in his behavior, and possibly it was suicide, but there could, of course, be no inquest, since the body was never found. Death was presumed after the due legal period, and by the will which both your uncles had made, which was in my keeping, and by which the survivor of the two was named as the heir of the deceased, Mr. Henry's property passed to his brother. That was completed only a few days ago. Previously to that, Mr. Robert, as you know, had made a further will under which you inherit."

Mr. Hodgkin paused a moment, but Hugh had no question to put to him, and he continued in the same even voice.

"After Mr. Henry's disappearance," he said, "your surviving uncle became more recluse than ever, and once only, as far as I am aware, he left his house and garden, and that was when he came to see me to make his will. The charwoman continued to go in every morning, but now she hardly ever saw him. He moved from the bedroom upstairs next to Mr. Henry's, both of which looked out on to the garden, and occupied a small

room on the ground floor looking out on to the street, and the two bedrooms upstairs were locked and the keys were in his keeping. He similarly locked the two corresponding rooms on the ground floor which look on to the garden, though he used them himself, and the charwoman left his food on a small table in the hall outside, and he took it in after she had gone, putting the plates and utensils he had used in the same place for her to wash up next day. Her range, in fact, was entirely confined to the kitchen and your uncle's bedroom, from which he had always gone into one of the locked rooms on the ground floor before she arrived. If he wanted anything ordered for him, there would be a note for her on the table by his bed stating his requirements. So it went on till last Thursday, the day of his death."

Again the lawyer paused.

"It is a painful and terrible account I have to give you, Mr. Lister," he said. "She went to his bedroom as usual, and found him crouching in a corner of the room, and he screamed out with fright, she said, when he saw her, and kept crying out: 'No, no! have mercy on me, Henry!' Like a sensible woman she ran straight for the doctor, and as she went past his window, she heard him still screaming. Dr. Soleham was in, and came at once: your uncle was still in some wild access of terror, and he slipped by them, and ran out into the street. Then quite suddenly he spun round and collapsed. They brought him back into the house, and in a few minutes it was all over."

SUCH was the grim manner in which Hugh Lister entered into his inheritance: it was all horrible and mysterious enough, but no question of personal grief or loss came into it, since he was practically a stranger to these queer relations of his. Mr. Hodgkin went into other business matters with him; there was a con-

siderable sum of money which was his, also this house and garden, of which the house, so the lawyer told him, was in a state of the most hideous dilapidation and disrepair. Of the garden he knew nothing, for though it stood in the middle of the little town, its high brick walls screened it from all scrutiny of the houses round, and the rooms which looked on to it from the house had long been kept locked. Hugh and his wife slept that night at an inn, and next morning Mr. Hodgkin called to take them over the property.

Pitiable indeed was the neglect into which this charming and dignified little mansion had fallen. The roof leaked in a dozen places, the mildewed paper was peeling off the walls, the carpets were rotted by damp and drip: here they were faded by the sun, here they were mere rags and ribands. The casement bars of the windows were perished, the panes so crusted with dust and spiders' webs that scarce a glimpse of the street outside could be seen; doors sagged on their hinges; a litter of sticks and straws from the nests of starlings that had built in the chimneys littered the hearths; pictures had fallen from the walls and lay in fragments of splintered glass and broken frames on the floor. Then there were the four locked rooms which looked on to the garden, two upstairs and two below, to be explored. A bunch of keys was found in the bedroom below, which Robert Lister had used, and they began their investigations upstairs, starting with the first door on the landing: this was the room, the charwoman told them, which Mr. Henry had occupied, and which had been locked ever since his disappearance.

The key grated rustily in the boards, but soon the door stood open, and they saw that the room was quite dark, for the windows were shuttered. A little fumbling revealed the fastenings, and Hugh, throwing them open, gave an exclamation of surprize. For

the room, though long closed and neglected, with sagging ceiling and damp-stained walls, bore all signs of use: the bed-clothes, coverlet and blankets and moldy sheets were still on the bed, half-turned back, as if its occupant had only just left it. On the washstand were sponge and tooth-brush, and beside it on the floor stood a brass hot-water can, green with verdigris: in the window was a dressing-table with a looking-glass, blurred and foggy, and by it a pair of hair-brushes and a shaving-brush, and a rusty razor with the dried stain of soap on the blade. There were a couple of pairs of boots, efflorescent with gray mildew below it; the chest of drawers was full of clothes. Nothing had been touched since the morning when Henry Lister left it, not to return.

Violet felt a sudden qualm of misgiving, coming from she knew not what secret cell in her brain. The room, with its dead air and vanished occupant, was still horribly alive. She moved across to the window, with the notion of throwing it open, so that the wholesome morning breeze could enter. The windows from having been shuttered were less opaquely coated with dust than those below, and she saw what lay outside.

"Hugh, look at the garden," she called. "It's a perfect jungle: paths, lawn, flower-beds all covered with the wild."

He peered out.

"There's a job in front of us then," he said. "But we'll take that after we've been through the house. It's a queer room, this, Vi."

The chamber next door was as queer: this was the bedroom, said the charwoman, which Mr. Robert had occupied when the two brothers were living together in the house. At Mr. Henry's disappearance he had moved on to the ground floor into the room which he used until the day of his death. This upper room had been locked up since then: she had not seen it since the day when Mr. Robert had

slept downstairs. His bed had been moved down, his wardrobe and his washing-stand: a couple of crazy chairs alone now stood there, and as in the room next door, the shutters were closed when they entered. Mr. Robert, she told them, had forbidden her to go upstairs any more when Mr. Henry left them. Three more bedrooms, all absolutely empty of furniture, and a bathroom with brown stains down the side of the bath below the taps, completed this floor: the bedrooms had never been furnished at all, as far as she knew, and yet, for all the emptiness of this story of the house, it seemed to Violet as if something followed them as they went downstairs again.

There remained for exploration the two rooms on the ground-floor which looked out on to the garden, and which for the last year had always been kept locked: these were scarcely more fit for human habitation than the rest. The dust lay thick everywhere, the carpet was in rags, the windows bleared with dirt. One must have been Robert Lister's dining-room, for there were pieces of crockery and cutlery on the table, a glass, and a half-empty bottle of whisky, a jug of water and a salt-cellar, and a few tattered books were scattered on the floor beside it. One window looked out on to the street, and on the wall at right angles to that a glass-paned door led out into the garden. This was bolted at top and bottom; evidently it had long been in disuse for entrance and egress, and it was with difficulty that Hugh managed to push the bolts back into their rusty grooves. When that was done, he wrenched the door open, and it was good to let a breath of the sweet untainted air of outside penetrate into that sick and deadened atmosphere.

"My uncle never went out into the town, you tell me," he said to Mr. Hodgkin, "and we can see that he never went into the garden. He must

have lived indoors altogether, and indoors he never set foot upstairs. Good God! it's ghastly: just these three rooms with no presence there except his own. Enough to drive a man mad. And yet he chose to do it . . . What's that?"

He turned round as he spoke, wheeling quickly, and went out into the hall outside. But there was nothing there; a stair perhaps had creaked, or perhaps it was the yellow-underwing moth that flapped against the pane that made him think that there was something astir.

THE garden into which they now stepped was, as Violet had said, a mere jungle of wild and riotous growth, but it was easy to see how delectable a plot it must have been, and to feel what overgrown charms still lingered there. It was spacious for an enclosed space like this, with streets and houses all round it, a liberal acre in extent, and defended by its high brick walls from any intrusive eye. From no quarter could it be overlooked, so tall was its mellowed fencing, and only the peaks of house-roofs and their chimneys and the vane on the church-tower peered above the copings. A broad strip of flower-bed had once sunned itself along the house-front, bordered by box-hedging; a paved walk led by it, and beyond had been a stretch of lawn up to the farther wall. To the left the plot had once been divided by a trellis that now leaned tipsily askew this way and that, with great gaps in it, through which could be seen fruit-trees, now in flower, on this spring afternoon: there no doubt had been the kitchen-garden. But now rank weeds and grasses had triumphed over everything on lawn and border; the paved walk was plumed with them and thickly overlaid with mosses; creepers that must once have been trained up the walls sprawled fallen across the ground-growths, and tendrils of degenerated rose-trees thread-

ed their thorns through the shrubby clumps of the box-edgings.

The two men pushed across the lawn through briars and thick grasses and entanglements, but Violet said she had had enough and sat down to wait for them on a stone bench, crumpled and mossy, which stood on the edge of the paved walk. The charm of the place struggled with the melancholy disorder of it, and she could imagine it cultivated and cared for, with its beds glowing again with ordered jewels, its lawn smooth-napped, its paved walks free of the tangle of growth, but there was something more than this tangle of weeds that had to be cleared away before peace could return to it. Something beyond mere neglect was amiss with it; something dead but horribly alive was watching her even as in the shuttered room at the head of the stairs. . . .

The stone seat faced the sun, and a little dazzled by its brightness, though delighting in the genial warmth of it after the airless seclusion of the house, Violet closed her eyes, wondering what it could be that wrought this strange perturbation within her. Hugh and Mr. Hodgkin had vanished now behind the crazy trellis; their voices no longer came to her, and she felt extraordinarily sun-dered from the touch of human intercourse. And yet she was not alone: there was some presence, not theirs, moving up closer to her and watching her. Once she opened her eyes to reassure herself that it was only her imagination thus playing tricks with her, but of course there was nothing there, and again she closed them. An odd drowsiness invaded her, and she saw a shadow come across the red field of her closed eyelids. She thought to herself that the two men were approaching her, and that it was they who had come between her and the sun, and she waited for the sound of their voices or their steps. Perhaps Hugh thought she was asleep, and meant to give her forty winks or so:

if that was in his mind, she wished he would stand aside, for with him cutting off the sunlight from her, the air had become very cold. She gave a little shiver, and opened her eyes. There was no one there.

It was startling: she had felt quite sure there had been someone standing close in front of her, but it certainly was not Hugh, nor indeed was there any sign of a living presence. But there he was, stepping over the fallen trellis, and coming quickly toward her.

"Violet, dear," he said, "isn't the place utterly enchanting? I'm going to have all the rags and rubbish turned out of the house at once, and get it washed and cleaned and renewed. I shall furnish it, too, and put a caretaker in, and then we'll bring the garden into order again. Then when it's all habitable we can settle what we shall do with it, let it, or sell it, or keep it. What extraordinary odd fellows they must have been, living in squalor and discomfort and letting everything go to ruin! But I shall restore it all with the money they saved over it. And frankly, I've fallen in love with the place: I want to keep it terribly."

HUGH set to work with his usual volcanic energy to put the place in order again: he and Violet took rooms at the inn near, and spent hot and laborious days in turning out the dirty raffle that filled the house, reserving for later examination any papers that might possibly be of interest. All the upholstery was perished; carpets, curtains and rugs were only fit for the fire: there were cupboards, and presses full of threadbare stuffs, moth-eaten blankets and moldy linen, and a clean sweep had to be made of all these before the cleaning and redecoration of the house could begin. Day after day a bonfire in the kitchen-garden smoldered and burst into flames and smoldered again, for little even of the solid furniture was

serviceable: rickety tables and broken-seated chairs seemed to have been sufficient for the uncles. After that the walls must be stripped of their torn and flapping papers, and scraped of their discolored paint, the roof must be repaired, ceilings and fittings of doors and windows renovated. To Violet all this holocaust of moldy raffles signified something more than the mere material cleaning-up, even as the opening of windows long-closed and the admission into the house of the air and the sun and the wholesome winds did more than refresh the staleness of its actual atmosphere: both were symbolical outward signs of some interior purging. And yet, even when all was clean and empty, ready for its new furnishing, the very essence of what they had been turning out still lingered. All was not well with the house: in some strange manner the shadow that had come between her closed eyes and the sun as she sat on the garden-bench had entered, and was establishing itself more firmly day by day.

She knew how fantastic such a notion was, and so, though it persisted, she could not bring herself to speak to Hugh about it. It haunted the rooms and the passages, and though she got no direct vision of its presence it was there, like some shy creature wary in hiding itself, but yet wishing to make itself manifest: sometimes it seemed malignant, sometimes sad and pitiful. Most of all it was perceptible in that pleasant square room at the top of the stairs which they had found shuttered, where the bedclothes were turned back as if he who had slept there had just quitted it, and where the apparatus of a man's toilet still lay on the dressing-table: the room, so the charwoman had told them, occupied by Henry Lister. Had this presence something to do with him, she wondered? She felt it also in the room downstairs occupied after his disappearance by Robert: there she felt it as something fierce or re-

vengeful. Finally she began to wonder whether Hugh was conscious that there was something queer in that room at the head of the stairs, for at first he had intended to make his private den there, but he had abandoned that, and though the furnishing of the house was proceeding apace he had left it empty.

IT WAS early in May that the house was ready to be occupied in a tentative picnicking fashion: vans had been unloading all day, a couple of servants had come down, and tonight Hugh and Violet were to sleep here, for to be on the premises, said Hugh, was the surest way of speeding such tasks as picture-hanging and carpet-laying. The dusk of the evening was warm, and he and Violet were sitting on the stone bench in the garden with a box of papers between them which must be looked through before they could be consigned to the bonfire. The garden was rapidly being tamed, the lawn had been scythed in preparation for the mowing-machine, the paved walk had been cleared of moss, and weeding was going on in the beds.

"But the soil is wretched and sour," said Hugh, as he untied a bundle of papers. "That bed by the house must be dug over deep and a cartload of rich stuff put in before it's fit for planting. Hullo, a photograph . . . Why, it's of the two uncles, and was taken here in the garden. They're sitting on the stone bench where we are now. Before they became hermits, I suppose."

Violet looked over his shoulder.

"Which is Uncle Robert?" she said.

"That one on the left, the older of the two, the bald one."

"And the other the one who disappeared?" asked Violet.

"Yes."

He looked up quickly as he spoke, and Violet, following his eye, thought she saw for a moment in the dusk some figure standing on the paved

walk twenty yards away. But it resolved itself into a pale stain on the wall and a bush immediately below, and she took another glance at the faded photograph. There was a strong family resemblance between them; she would have guessed that the two faces, rather long-nosed, with eyes very wide apart, were those of brothers, but they were quite distinguishable.

Presently Hugh came to the end of the packet, and he took the bulk of it to toss on to the smoldering bonfire. The evening was now beginning to get chilly, and when he had gone she rose and took a turn down the paved walk. The light from the west glowed dusky-red on the brick front of the house, and glancing idly up at the window of the room at the head of the stairs, she saw a man standing there within, looking down on her. The glimpse she got of his face was but brief, for almost immediately he turned away, but she had seen enough to know that it was the face of the younger of the two brothers at whose photograph she had just been looking.

For one moment sheer terror clutched at her: the next, as if by some subtle recognition her mind told her that here was the visible manifestation of the presence of which she had for days been conscious. It was he who had shadowed her closed eyelids, it was he who, as yet unseen, had haunted the house, and in especial the room at the window of which she now beheld him. Though the flesh of her still quaked at the thought that she had looked on one who had passed beyond the dread dim gate, it was terribly interesting, and she continued looking up, half dreading, half hoping that she would see him again. Then she heard Hugh's step returning from his errand.

"What's the matter, Violet?" he said. "You're white: your hands are trembling."

She pulled herself together.

"It's nothing," she said. "Something startled me just now."

Looking at him, she guessed with a sense of certainty what was in his mind when he asked her what was the matter.

"Hughie, have you seen something too that—that comes from beyond?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"No, but I know it's there," he said, "and it's chiefly in that room at the top of the stairs. That's why I've done nothing with it. Have you seen it? Was it that which startled you just now? What was it?"

She pointed to the window.

"There," she said. "A man looked out on me from the window. It was Henry Lister. His room, you know."

They were both looking up now, and even as she spoke the figure appeared there again. Once more it turned away, and vanished.

For a long moment they met each other's eyes.

"Violet, are you frightened?" he said.

"I'm not going to be," she said. "Whatever it is, whatever it's here for, it can't hurt us. I think it wants us to do something for it . . . But, Hughie, why did Robert scream out 'Have mercy?' Why did he run from the house?"

Hugh had no answer for this.

"I shall go in," he said at length, "and open the door of that room, and see what is there. I left it locked, I know. Don't come with me, Violet."

"But I wish to," she said; "I want to know all that there is to be known. What we have seen means something."

They went upstairs together, and paused for a second outside the door. The key was in the lock, and Hugh turned it and threw the door wide.

The room was lit by the fading evening light, but clearly visible. It was completely furnished as on the day when they had first looked into it. On

the bed there lay the figure of a man faintly twitching. His face was turned away, but with a final movement his head fell back on the pillows, and they saw who it was. The mouth drooped open, the cheeks and forehead were of a mottled purple in color, and round the neck was tied a cord . . . And then they saw that they were looking into a perfectly empty room, unfurnished, but newly papered and painted.

THE deep digging-over of the flower-bed along the house front began next morning, and an hour later the gardener came in to tell Hugh what he had found. The digging was resumed under the supervision of the police-inspector, and the body when disinterred was removed to the mortuary. The identity was established at the inquest; it was established also that death had been due to strangulation, for a piece of rope was still tied round the neck. Though there could be no absolute certainty as to the history of the murder, only one reconstruction of it would fit the facts which were known; namely, that Henry Lister had been strangled by his brother during the night preceding his disappearance, and buried in the garden. Very early next morning Robert Lister, who in height and general appearance strong-

ly resembled his brother, must have gone down to the river-bank (having been seen on his way there by the laborer from the town) and left his cap on the path, and thrown the stick into the river. He must also with a diabolical cunning have arranged his brother's room to look as if he had got up and dressed himself as usual. He then returned, and an hour or two later went to Mr. Hodgkin's house, saying that he had found the front door open, and that his brother was missing. No search was made in the house or garden, for the evidence all pointed to his having dressed and gone out and met his death in the river. Why Robert Lister in that seizure of panic which gripped him just before he died called on his brother to have mercy on him was no affair for police investigation, but it seems likely that he saw, or thought he saw, some very terrible thing, some strange specter such as was certainly seen by Hugh and Violet in the room at the top of the stairs. But that is conjecture only.

The two brothers now lie side by side in the cemetery on the hill outside Trenthorpe: it may be added that in all England there is no more wholesome or tranquil house than that which was once the scene of so tragic a history and of so grim and ghostly a manifestation.

