

# The Ghost of Lille: The Pennyman Version

by Elizabeth Pennyman

*Transcribed by Sabine Baring Gould in his article "The Man in the Iron Cage," published in [Cornhill Magazine, November 1907](#).*

As you expressed a wish to know what degree of credit may be given to a garbled tale, which has most astonishingly been sent forth after a lapse of between thirty and forty years, as "an accredited ghost story," I will state the facts as recalled to my mind about a year ago, by an old friend, a daughter of Sir W. á Court; she sent me the album in which it first appeared, requesting me to read it and tell her if there was any degree of truth in it, for, as she had been intimate with my mother and whole family, and she had never heard it mentioned, she did not believe a word of it. I did read it with the greatest surprise, for it was clear it came from one who had not been in the family at the time, or, indeed, intimate with us, as it was full of mistakes in names, etc., yet in some parts came so near the truth, it quite puzzled me.

So many years had elapsed, and so many things arisen to drive it from my mind, I had some trouble in recalling exactly what did pass—which, however, I succeeded in doing. So that I can now do it with ease for your satisfaction.

Sir James and my mother, with myself and one brother (Charles, who was too young for college, and near the head of Westminster), went abroad towards the end of the year 1786. After being in two or three towns, we found the masters to be particularly good at Lille, and having letters to the Commandant, as also some of the best French families in the neighbourhood, we determined to settle there.

We got at first into a bad, uncomfortable lodging, where Sir James left us, looking about for a house. We shortly found a very large good family hotel which we liked much, and very cheap, even for that part of the world.

We went into it immediately, and about three weeks after, I walked with my mother to the banker's, with Sir Robert Herries's letter of credit, to get some money, which being all paid in the great six francs, we could not take. He said he would send his clerk, and asked our address. We told him our hotel was in the Place du Lion d'Or. He looked surprised, and said there was no house there that would suit

our family, except indeed the one that had been long unlet, on account of the revenant that walked about it. (He said this with quite a serious countenance, and in his natural tone of voice.)

We both laughed, and were quite entertained with it, but requested the clerk not to name it to the servants, and we agreed as we walked home not to say a word on the subject before them.

My mother added, laughing, "I suppose, Bessy, 'tis the ghost that has waked us, walking over our heads."

I slept with her, and we had been waked by a heavy slow step overhead three or four times, and imagined it to be one of the menservants. We had three Englishmen, a footman (who had lived years with us), a coachman, and a groom; three Englishwomen, my mother's maid and housekeeper (Creswell), my maid, and Alice (the nursery maid). All these English servants returned to England with us, and never had the least idea of leaving us. The rest of the women in the house were French, and we had four Frenchmen, a butler, cook, footman, and Louis (a boy who came home with us).

A few days after we came from the banker's, having been again waked by the step, my mother asked Creswell who slept in the room over us.

She answered, "No one, my lady, 'tis a large empty garret."

About a week or ten days after this Creswell came one morning after breakfast and told my mother most of the French servants talked of going away, because there was a revenant in the house, "and indeed, my lady, there is a very strange story about a young man who was heir to this and another house, with an estate in the country, and who, they say, was confined by an uncle in an iron cage in this house, and as he disappeared, and was never seen after, they suppose he was killed here. The uncle left the house in a hurry, and sold it to the man's father of whom we took it, for very little. No one ever remained in it so long as we have done (about a month), and it has been a long time without a tenant."

"And you believe this, Creswell, do you?" was my mother's answer.

"Well, the iron cage is in the garret over your head, my lady, at all events, and I wish you would all come up and see it."

Just as this passed, an old officer with the cross of St. Louis, a great friend of ours, came in. We told him the story laughing, and asked him to go upstairs with us to see this cage, which he did.

It was a long, large garret, with bare brick walls, and nothing in it, but in the further corner there was an iron cage, attached to the wall—such as you see wild beasts in, only higher. It was about four feet square and eight feet high. There was an iron ring in the wall at the back, to which was an old rusty chain, with a collar. It certainly made one's flesh creep to look at such a horrid place of confinement, with the idea that any human being could ever have been in it. Our old friend expressed as much horror as ourselves, as he said, it had assuredly been constructed to confine some poor wretch. We all agreed that the noises and walking about was some plan to keep the house untenanted; that it was not at all pleasant to be in a house that could be entered by some private unknown way. Therefore we should certainly look about for another, and remain quiet till we succeeded.

About ten days after this determination, Creswell, when she came to dress my mother in the morning, looked very pale and ill, and when asked what was the matter, said, "Indeed, my lady, we have been frightened to death, and neither Mrs. Marsh (my maid) nor myself can sleep again in the room we are now in."

"Well," my mother said, "you may come and sleep in the little spare room next to ours; but what has alarmed you?"

"Someone, my lady, went through our room in the night. We both saw the figure, but covered ourselves with the bedclothes and lay in a dreadful fright till this morning."

I could not help laughing, which made Creswell cry. When I saw her so nervous, I tried to comfort her, told her I had heard of a very good house, and we should soon be out of that; and in the meantime they were to come to the room next to us. This room, in which they had been so frightened, had a door recessed from the first landing-place of a very wide staircase, which led to a large, wide passage, that all the best rooms came into.

My mother's room door faced the staircase. In the room Creswell had left there was another door which led to the back stairs, so that it was a passage room.

A few nights after the women had changed their room, my mother said she wished Charles and I would go to her room and fetch down her long frame, that she might make her work ready for the morning. (It was some time after supper.) We immediately went, without a candle, as there was a lamp at the bottom of the staircase, which would enable us to find the frame by leaving the door of my mother's room open. As we got to the stairs we saw a tall, thin figure, in a powdering gown, and hair down the back, going upstairs before us. We both at once thought it was Hannah [the sister of Elizabeth, the writer of this account], and called out "It won't do, Hannah, you can't frighten us."

As we said this the figure turned into the recess, and as we saw nothing there as we passed it, we concluded she had gone through and down the back staircase. We ran down with the frame, and, laughing, told my mother of Hannah's fun, who said, "It is very odd, for Hannah went to bed with the toothache before you came in from your walk."

We directly went together to Hannah's room, found Alice at work there, who told us Miss Hannah had never moved, and been sound asleep above an hour. I named what had passed, and our surprise to find it was not my sister, as we were going to bed, to Creswell, who turned quite white, and said, "That was exactly the figure they saw."

About this time Harry [Elizabeth's brother William Henry, who succeeded to the Baronetcy. Charles, the youngest, died without issue.] came to spend ten days with us. He slept up another pair of stairs, at the other end of the house. A morning or two after, when he came to breakfast, he asked my mother in an angry way if she was afraid he was drunk and could not put his candle out, as she sent some of those French rascals to watch him.

He added: "I jumped up last night and opened my door, and by the moon through the skylight I saw the fellow in his loose gown, at the bottom of the stairs. If I had had anything on, I would have been after him with my hanger, and given him enough of coming to watch me."

My mother assured him she had not sent anyone to watch him. That very day we settled to take a delightful house with a charming garden, which belonged to a young nobleman who was going to Italy for a few years. He was to leave it the next morning, and we agreed to go in the week following.

An evening or two after this a Mr. and Mrs. Atkyns with their son came on horseback to call upon us. (They lived three or four English miles from Lille.) We talked over the fright of our servants, and the very disagreeable thing it was to be in a house where a person might get in, by means we could not discover, on purpose to frighten people, and named the alarm of Creswell and my maid, since which no one would sleep in that room.

Mrs. Atkyns laughed, and said she should much like to sleep there, if my mother would allow her, and that with her terrier she could not fear any revenant.

My mother replied she would have no objection, upon which she (i.e. Mrs. Atkyns) requested Mr. Atkyns to ride home with the boy immediately, that she might get her things before the gates shut.

He answered with a smile, "You are mighty bold, I think, but I will go and send them directly."

In the morning Mrs. Atkyns looked ill, and as if she had not slept much. We asked if she had been frightened. She declared she had been awakened from a sound sleep by something moving in her room, that, by the lamp in the chimney, she saw most distinctly a figure, and that the dog never moved, and he generally flew at anything, and said much about her attempting to make him. We certainly gave her credit for being too frightened to think about the dog, and we were entertained, when Mr. Atkyns came to ride home with her, at his droll way of saying, "You perhaps dreamt it all?" At which she was very angry.

We said nothing, though we really thought she might have seen something, and after they were gone, my mother said, as she had often done, "I cannot for one instant fancy it a ghost, but I most sincerely hope I shall get out of the house without seeing what seems to frighten people so much—indeed, to see any person in my room at night, which I know would alarm me dreadfully."

Three days before we were to go into the count's house I had been on a long ride, and went to bed tired; it was hot weather, and the curtains of our bed were undrawn on my side and at the foot. I was waked from a sound sleep, though I could not say what waked me—we had got so used to the step overhead that it now never waked my mother or myself. There was a light in the room always, and in turning round I saw a tall, thin figure, in the long gown, with an arm rested upon

the chest of drawers, that stood between a window and the door, with the face towards me, a long, thin, pale young face (with a melancholy look I could never forget).

I felt certainly very much frightened, but my great horror was my mother waking. I turned gently towards her, and heard her breathing high in a sound sleep. The clock on the stairs struck four, and I lay perhaps nearly an hour before I dared look again towards the drawers. When I did take courage to do so, there was nothing, though I never heard the door opened or shut or any noise.

I never shut my eyes after, and lay quiet till Creswell came as usual to the door, when I called out, "I need not get up to let you in, for you must have forgot to put the key upon the drawers last night" (the usual way in France of securing your door).

She said she had not, and to my surprise, when I got up, I found it in the usual place.

I told my mother, who was most grateful that she had not waked, and praised me for my resolution in not waking her; but as she was always my first object there was nothing surprising in that. She determined not to run the risk another night, and we set about moving everything the moment we had breakfasted, and went to sleep in our new hotel that night.

Before we went, Creswell and I examined every part of our room, but could not discover any place that opened.

The horrors of the French Revolution, and various difficulties of our own, &c., coming on so soon, we lost sight of our *revenant* and never thought about it. Except once that my mother made me tell it to Mrs. Hoare one winter evening at Duryard (near Exeter), I do not think it has been mentioned, so that the author of the story must have heard it from some French person. There are so many blunders in the tale sent forth, though so near the fact.

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*Transcriber's Note: This transcription has been slightly re-paragraphed for legibility, and to better confirm with modern text conventions. In addition, I've taken two explanatory footnotes from the original article and interleaved them into the body of the text, in brackets.*