

The Giggling Ghost of Ardlen Castle

I remember the incident pretty well; it was in February of my sophomore year. Dr. Thomas was my advisor, and he loved spooks. It wasn't what he officially studied, of course; as far as I can remember, he was an English professor and specialized in something that had nothing to do with paranormal stuff. It never seemed like he ever cared about it, though, and I liked him because he chased ghosts and told stories about them. I was hanging out in his den talking about the study of creatures that didn't exist- cryptozoology, he called it- when I made the mistake (fortunate or unfortunate, depending if you like ghost stories or not, I guess) of asking about a gnarled old branch that hung on the wall.

“Ah!” he said, setting down his brandy. “That is a relic, if you will, of one of the most frightening experiences of the paranormal that I have ever had the pleasure of investigating.”

He ambled over to his desk and took a picture out of the drawer, passing it to me. The picture was of a tree in pitch darkness. Hanging from the tree was a woman, thin and pale as hell, who looked like she was in her mid-thirties. From the picture, however, I could see that she was alive; her eyes were wide open, and she stared straight at the camera while clutching her right hand with her left. Even worse was her smile; Christ, that smile! Stretched across her face was the scariest grin I have ever seen before or since. The sight of that smile left me with goosebumps, and I knew instinctively that I was looking at some really freaking evil thing. I could swear that her eyes were glowing, but I don't think he saw it and I like to pretend it was my own imagination acting up. I handed him back the photo, and I have to say I was pretty glad that I was no longer holding it. He smiled a little bit when he saw my response.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Patience, Alexander, patience.” he replied, sitting back down and picking up his brandy

again. “I will begin from the beginning, and all will be explained in time. At least, explained inasmuch as I can offer an explanation; quite frequently these things defy such an approach.”

It was September of 1996, and I received a call from a friend, a former colleague of mine who now happens to reside in England. He had heard a most distressing story about ghosts, or so he said, and he called me because he was in the States and remembered that I had a passing curiosity regarding the supernatural. The owner was apparently frantic to rid his house of the spirits plaguing it, and I had been recommended as someone who had some experience in such matters.

I will readily admit that at first I considered this only a poorly-veiled attempt at convincing me to visit him. I decided upon further reflection, however, that I had not seen him in some time and it would be well-worth the trip if only to see him again. I was on leave that semester, and so I had time enough to squander; I was on a flight that night to England, and within the week we had arrived at Arden Castle, the location of his haunting. There we met with Mr. Edward Arden, its steward, and his daughter Elizabeth. He was a hale and rather handsome man, though I could see that something had certainly scared him half to death, and recently; he was haggard and had terrible rings beneath his eyes, as though for want of sleep. His daughter seemed to suffer no malady as of yet, though I could tell that she was deeply worried about her father's stress concerning the entire situation.

“And might you be Dr. John Thomas, as I've heard so much about?” said Mr. Arden, approaching me.

“Yes, that's me.” I replied. “I understand that you have some problems with which I may be of some help?”

“Lord knows, sir! Lord knows!” he said, grabbing my hand and shaking it so heartily I thought it might come off.

“Mr. Ardlen- perhaps we can get inside and have a drink?” I said.

“Aye, aye! And where've my manners gone? Come and we'll have a drink. But not in there!” he replied, looking at the castle. “For the love of God, not in there!”

He led us to a bar in the town that sat beneath Ardlen Hill, and once we had secured a table and some drink he began his story.

“Now to begin, I'd like it known that I consider myself a level-headed sort of man, and I think you won't find many as will disagree.” he said. “That being so, I was more than skeptical about the old legends of the castle and it being haunted.”

“And what haunts it, might I ask?” I inquired. He took a deep breath to steady himself, and my doubts as to his sincerity were quickly fading; even as I tell this story now I can feel sympathy for this poor soul.

“Well, I suppose the legend tells it best, as they go.” he said. “It began a long time ago- when exactly I don't know sure, to be honest- but it were back quite a-ways.” he said.

“There was a Lord and Lady Ardlen that lived in here, and word has it that he were a miserable old bloke. He would beat her, and yell most terrible things, and be a drunk, and altogether were a rotten sort of chap- he weren't right in the head, or so they say. The good lady of the house was quite terrorized, you might say, but as was customary for the time she never said a word and simply took it; Lord, but what a strong lady she must've been!”

“Well, time comes when she walks in on him having a grand old time- if you take my meaning- with another lady high-born. Quite high-born, close even to the king, and if it were ever to come out that such a thing happened it'd be ruin for everybody around. So the Lord

Ardlen jumps up quick-like, and grabs her and says she was foolish to come in like that without knocking! Imagine, in her own home!

Well, she turns pale as a sheet, and she swears up and down that she weren't going to tell a soul 'til her dying day, but he didn't trust her with such a secret, so he tells her really evil-like that she weren't tell a soul because he was about to hang her 'til her feet stopped kicking. The poor woman is scared for her life, and as he drags her to the nearest tree she cries and cries for mercy. Well, he gets to the Ardlen garden in the castle, and there's a large tree in the middle, and he starts to noose her up, and all of a sudden she stops! And then the queerest thing happens; she just cracks. Goes bonkers, you see? Starts laughing, this high, trembly laugh of one who'd just lost their mind. Legend has it that she was still laughing when he kicked the stool out from beneath her. Terrible, you know, what fear can do to you.

Well, he tells everybody that she died of sickness, and nobody really questions it. About a year later he marries the girl as who he was fooling with, and they have a child. All's well as could be expected, but he feels uneasy. He doesn't know why, but pretty soon the servants start complaining about strange things happening, you see? Candles going out as if there's wind, doors closing, footsteps when there's nobody there, that sort of thing. He ignores it, as of course all fools in legends do, until one summer where his wife and child go away on holiday. Story goes that night, the servants hear this laughing sound, but like no laugh they ever heard before or since; this high, giggly laugh. You know, the laugh when you think of something funny, but there's none else that know what you're thinking? That sort of laugh, but crazy. Whoever done the laughing was bat out of their minds, and the servants were scared out of their wits. The Lord Ardlen, though, he knows who it is that's laughing; he'd heard it once before!

Well, next day comes, and the servants don't hear the morning tea-bell from Lord Ardlen.

So one of them is brave enough to risk his getting yelled at, so he tiptoes into the master suite and cracks open the door to the bedroom. He almost faints from what he sees next, and I tell you I can't blame him! There, on the bed, is Lord Ardlen dead as a doornail with his head twisted 'round at a real unnatural angle, almost backwards. Lying there on the bed next to him is a branch, but a real old and gnarled one, and it's got a piece of rope stuck inside it.

Well, the servants cleared out pretty quickly, you might imagine, and the wife and child came back. They moved out pretty quick too, though, as they heard the footsteps and the giggling too. Since then, the legend goes that no one can stay a night in the castle without hearing the signs of death approaching. First, you hear the scratch of the branches against her bones as she gets herself down from the tree. Second, you hear the footsteps, as she makes her way up to where you are. Third, you hear the laugh; it's then that she kills you, and leaves the branch and the rope as an unquestionable mark as to who done it.”

“That's a rather fanciful tale, Mr. Ardlen.” I said. “Especially for a man who claims to be a skeptic.”

“Ah!” he said nervously. “You scoff, Dr. Thomas, and I don't blame you for it. I did not believe the legend myself, when first I came to Ardlen. There's no evidence for it, either; there are no trees of hanging height anywhere near the castle grounds, and there's never been a garden in or around the castle far as anyone can remember. I found that when I researched the castle's history, thinking I could maybe turn it into a hotel, or some sort of profit-making thing, you see? But none in the town would have anything to do with it, and without a staff I couldn't very well make the castle into a profit-making bit of straw. So as to show the townsfolk what a superstitious lot they were, I decided to stay a night in the castle and come out none the worse for the wear. A poor mistake that was, I'll tell you!

I was warned against it by all the townsfolk, but I paid them no mind and retired to the castle around three o'clock the following day. I milled about, inspecting the grounds and cataloging what repairs might be necessary to get the place going again. Come dusk, I went to the master suite and lit the fire, intending to read a bit and then let myself drift to sleep. I remember nodding off thinking what a bunch of nitwits lived in the town. Ghosts, indeed!

Well, it comes around ten o'clock that evening, near as I can tell. I wake up and I hear it-like something scraping on a window. I hope you don't think me a coward, Dr. Thomas, but my blood froze in my veins once I heard it. Still I convinced myself that it was a prank, you see? I walked around the castle with a lantern, trying to figure out where was the sound coming from. But it didn't come from no window! I checked them all, and always seemed it coming from the other side right where I had last checked. By God, Dr. Thomas, my hair stood up on my neck and no mistake!

Well, the scratching stopped suddenly, and my nerves slowly started to come back to me. I was convincing myself that it was a joke, and that made sense because the ruffians couldn't stand out and scratch all night. I was a step ahead of them, though, and I went to every door in the castle and locked it tight- damned if I were letting them in and stepping around on my property trying to scare me!

Well, as soon as I locked them all I went back upstairs to the suite and re-lit the fire. I sat for a bit, reading, and I remember thinking how I'd thwarted those devils and their foolish plans. I said to myself, privately, that they'd sure as hell scored a point on me with the last trick, but none fool Mr. Edward Ardlen twice a night, so I say, and I presently nodded off in front of the fire.

I woke up again in the middle of the night, but for what I couldn't tell you. The fire had

since gone out, so I'd wager it was about one o'clock in the morning, and I got up to go to bed properly.

Around me was pretty quiet, and as I settled into bed and tucked myself in I thought myself pretty clever at having stopped those hoodlums from trying to play me any further. If only it was hoodlums though, sir, for just then I heard them- the footsteps, I mean!

They were very faint at first, and slow, and I thought I was just imagining them. I placed my head back on the pillow and closed my eyes very tight, but it weren't any use- the footsteps got louder. They had a strange sort of cadence to them, like as if whoever was doing it did it so they could be heard; there weren't any stealth in this job, as it were. Now I knew that I had locked all the doors, but I hadn't checked the windows and I was still hoping it were a joke. I was about to go catch the fool that was doing it, but then they stopped. I listened for well over a minute, but I heard not a thing! Not a thing!

I'd ask you kindly not to think me a coward or a fool for what happens next, Dr. Thomas, but it's the gospel truth- I broke, sir, I broke and ran out of the castle as if the Devil himself had tried to catch my heel. And sir, I will swear to my dying day as I fumbled with the lock on that front door that I heard her laughing; oh God, but it will haunt my dreams forever!"

He stopped talking at this point, and I saw his hands shake and his eyes well up. I was convinced now, more than ever, of the veracity of this man's tale; he was scared for his life, and I cannot say that I blamed him given what he had experienced. It remained, however, very possible that he had been the unfortunate victim of a very well-planned hoax- indeed, that was the most probable explanation- and so began my investigation of Ardlan Castle.

We stayed the night in town, and come daybreak I had Mr. Ardlan take me up to the castle. I credit the man for his bravery; though he had received a dreadful fright, he was loyal

enough to stay beside me while I inspected the grounds all morning.

“You're trying to help, sir, and by no means will I leave you to- to her.” he said. “Let it never be said that Mr. Edward Ardlen's a deserter!”

I examined all of the doors for signs of entrance; save the main door, which Mr. Ardlen had left unlocked in his panicked flight from the castle, all of the doors were bolted tightly from the inside. I examined next the perimeter of the grounds in case our would-be spirits might have left branches on the floor or scratches on the windows as evidence of their escapades. I found none, though these were hardly conclusive of a true haunting; the pranksters may have hidden in the house before Mr. Ardlen locked up the doors, and it's possible that they were careful enough to leave no marks.

I resolved, then, to lay a trap- to bait the pranksters, as it were. I called David and Elizabeth back in town and told them to make known about the whole place that I was going to stay the night and disprove this haunting once and for all. They accomplished this quite splendidly, or so I understand; by three o'clock that afternoon everyone from the plumber to the banker knew the name of Dr. John Thomas and what he intended to do that evening.

While my companions embarked on their little campaign of misinformation, I began to set my traps in the house. I tied a string of hair across every window and every door in the castle in such a way that it would be quite impossible to open them without breaking my tiny little seals. I then tied more strands of it at the corners of critical corridors in the castle; if there were a secret entrance that I was unaware of, which was entirely plausible, then our assailants would break the strands as they traversed the hallways of the castle. It was hard enough to see the strands in the daylight, and I was certain that they would be almost impossible to see by candle-light or flashlight.

The next step was to place photographic and audio surveillance about the place, but I had only one camera and one tape recorder. I asked Mr. Ardlen where he imagined the footsteps to originate. He did not remember, but told me that his best guess would be where the serving staircase was, in the back rooms. I placed the camera at the foot of the stairs, facing up, and setting it so that it would take a picture if there was any motion in front of it. I placed the audio recorder in an inconspicuous spot outside the master suite, believing that whoever cared to make the sounds would do so in such a way that the sleeper in the master suite would hear them clearly.

Having set both bait and trap, I asked Mr. Ardlen to reconnoiter the surrounding area and make sure that there was no one near. He did so and reported back that we were quite alone; we exited by the main doorway, tied our last seal, and proceeded to fall back towards my hiding-spot in the overgrowth near the castle where I had placed two pairs of binoculars. Mr. Ardlen and I were to hide there and stake out the castle in an attempt to catch anyone sneaking about outside.

It had fallen dark at that point, and the two of us settled down to wait and watch out for any miscreants. We watched faithfully until about one o'clock in the morning, at which point we both became quite tired from such stoic focus. Mr. Ardlen suggested that we take shifts, and I agreed quite readily; I took the first shift from one to four and he from four to seven. I remember how eerie the castle looked in the darkness. It was as if the building itself took great pleasure in the primal power of fear, reveling in the utter horror it inspired in those who looked upon it.

The sun came up around seven o'clock that morning, and Mr. Ardlen and I proceeded up to the castle to check our traps. We found the hairs to be all intact, and we retrieved the audio recorder and the camera. We brought them back to the hotel and examined them, and what we found surprised me but not him; namely, the fact that on the audio recording you could hear a

most distinct trodding of footsteps. The camera had taken only one photograph, and you may be quick to imagine we saw what you have just seen. You would be mistaken, for once developed the film contained just one photograph that was of complete and utter darkness; I could discern nothing but a vague haze or mist, something easily attributed to a dirty lens. Curious, considering the flash on the camera and its usually meticulous upkeep, but nothing to merit any closer inspection- or so I thought at the time.

It was clear then that one of two things had happened: either the pranksters had succeeded in eluding my defenses (an outcome which I thought unlikely) or there was in fact a ghost haunting Ardlen Castle (an outcome that I found equally unlikely, though I sincerely hoped it to be true). I resolved that night to stay inside the castle, and again I was inspired by my compatriots' bravery. Both David and Mr. Ardlen volunteered to stay the night with me, and I can say that I was very glad to have their companionship. I told them to be at the castle at three o'clock that afternoon with some strong rope while I prepared some wards and protections for our night's stay there.

That morning I set out to acquire some items with which to mount an effective defense against the spirit in Ardlen Castle. I received a bottle of holy water from the priest, as well as some rowan and garlic from the general store. I acquired from the local auto mechanic a rod of iron, and finally from my own hotel room some bedsheets. Regrettably, I could find no lodestones; they are, however, considered a minor magical defense in many circles and some not at all, so I was not in too much anxiety about their scarcity.

With these I went to Ardlen Castle, and my faithful comrades were there waiting for me. We proceeded up to the master suite, the area where we would make our stand against either malevolent creature or vicious miscreant. On our arrival I instructed David and Mr. Ardlen to

cover the mirrors with the bedsheets; it is said that some spirits manifest through them and I had no wish to test that theory.

Once all the mirrors were covered, I hung the rowan and the garlic above the doorway, being careful to set them sturdily, so they would not fall if the door were violently opened for any reason. I put the iron rod straight across the frame itself; laugh if you'd like, but many spirits have been shown to have a distinct aversion to iron, if not an outright weakness to it. I then took out the bottle of holy water and blessed every part of the entranceway, from the door to the frame to the very floor itself. I did not want to take any chances regarding my safety or that of Mr. Ardlen and David.

Finally, I took the rope and together with my companions tied it strongly to the iron frame of the fireplace. In the event that there was a spirit who was able to pass all our defenses, or if the decidedly human component of this case were to intend murder, we had a means of egress to the lawn and subsequently Mr. Ardlen's car which was parked right beneath the window. The spirit had shown an attachment to the castle proper based on Mr. Ardlen's own account and the account of the stories, and I was fairly certain that no human aggressor could outrun a car.

Thus our defenses were prepared, and armed with just our nerve and plenty of firewood we sat and watched the night fall. We had already decided that we would take shifts beginning at ten o'clock at night, and have at least one man awake at all times until daylight broke. I took the first watch, though it was as if we all did; poor Mr. Ardlen was too frightened to sleep given his previous experience, and David was a bundle of nervous energy. I tell you that a pin could not have fallen without us hearing, so keenly were we listening to the still night air.

Finally we heard it, at around eleven o'clock at night- the scratching noise. But what a terrible noise it was! I silently admired Mr. Ardlen for investigating the sound the previous time

he stayed here. That is a bravery I am not so sure I would have had, had we switched places.

“D-Do you hear it?” Mr. Ardlen whispered, shaking. “Do you believe me now?”

“Yes, Mr. Ardlen.” I said. “I hear it. What a damnably horrid sound!”

“I hear it too.” David said. “Gives me the creeps.”

“Perhaps it's best to let the sleeping dragons lie, aye?” Mr. Ardlen said, his voice trembling. “I've no mind to have my head snapped 'round like a carousel!”

“Calm down, Ardlen!” I said. I hoped I sounded brave and authoritative, though I am sure I was not able to muster any such sort of feel to my voice. “The wards which I have placed at the doorway will keep us perfectly safe. The ghost can do us no harm in here.”

“Well, if that's true,” David said, “Then maybe a few guys can relax with a game of cards?”

He drew a deck from his pocket, and I was irrationally glad that he had brought some sort of diversion. We sat down and played cards, and after the first few hands the scratch was tuned out; it became a sort of background noise. After about half an hour or so we had more or less forgotten about the scratch- until it stopped.

The three of us realized it had left at almost the same time, and I saw the look of fear twitch across their eyes, as I'm sure they saw in mine. The footsteps started almost as soon as the scratching stopped- a faint *thump, thump* that I half-imagined to come from some foul dungeon deep in the castle's depths.

“Sh-she started early tonight, I suppose.” Mr. Ardlen joked nervously, and we laughed in spite of ourselves. The man was brave, I'll give him that, and we continued playing cards. There was no vigor to be found in the game, however; we had long since lost a desire to play. The footsteps grew louder, and I realized with a sinking feeling in my stomach that Mr. Ardlen had

been right about them. Whoever- or whatever- was roaming the castle wanted us to know it was here. It gleefully announced its presence, like a child playing hide-and-seek. I could almost imagine it peeking under beds and inside closets, smiling and playing its twisted game even though it knew where we were hiding- I was sure it was just toying with us now. *Thump, thump, thump*, the steps went, and each one made my heart beat harder in my chest.

And then all of a sudden they stopped, and I saw the blood drain from Mr. Ardlen's face. He sat as still as a statue, frozen by an almost palpable fear that surrounded him. I must admit that I too was gripped by a sense of fearful anticipation. David and I looked at each other, and we all braced ourselves for what we knew would come next.

Now I have heard many ghostly voices in my time, and I should like to think that I have developed a tolerance for them. This, however, was like nothing I have ever heard before or since. Oh God, but it chilled me to my very bones! It was insane, malicious, and delighted all at the same time! A cackle, a giggle, a broken laugh that echoed throughout the hallways! I cannot describe to you the sudden stab of horror that wormed its way through my spine, nor can I describe how it deepened as the laugh started to come nearer and nearer, until we realized with an incomparable dread that the thing was right outside our door.

There was a moment of unbroken silence that seemed, in our state, to last forever. Then there was a terrible crack, as if something had hurled itself against the doorway and had been repulsed. We all jumped at the sound, and I daresay I almost broke and ran. I collected myself, somehow, and listened, stock-still, to the thing thrust itself over and over against the door. I realized suddenly it was not the wood but the iron that was keeping the thing at bay, though the comfort this thought provided was dwarfed by the unearthly terror that I knew lay just outside the threshold of the suite. As it realized its failure, the laugh mixed in with a roar- a uniquely

disturbing sound which has never left my memory, and in fact still haunts my dreams.

Then the cracking abruptly ceased, as did the roaring. I hoped beyond all hope that the thing had given up, but I knew that it was simply looking for another way in. I was suddenly intensely glad that we had covered up the mirrors, and little by little I began to feel safer in our bastion of a bedroom.

“Well, that wasn't so scary.” David said, though the lack of color in his face suggested otherwise. “Guess it wasn't such a big deal after all.”

Then all of a sudden the giggle came again, but it was reserved; as if the thing did not want to be heard but could not suppress its joy. It was the singularly odd giggle of someone who was privy to an inside joke- the slight chuckle, for example, of a man who is leading you to a surprise party. Do you understand what I mean? I sat bolt-still, afraid the laugh was coming from inside the room, but it was not. Then I heard a door swing slowly open; it was the front door, I was sure of it. It had a peculiar sound as it scraped against the stone of the hallway. I thought it was the ghost, but then I heard something that renewed in me every utter feeling of dread and terror that I had experienced up to that point.

“Dad?” Elizabeth called, her voice ringing from inside the castle. “I saw someone run away from here, and I wanted to make sure everything was alright. Are you all okay?”

The giggling outside our room continued, but it was stealing away towards the hallway now. The thing was overjoyed at having found some prey, and it knew that we understood what it was about to do; I believe that gave it the most satisfaction of all. I cursed myself inwardly for not telling Elizabeth not to enter the castle for any reason whatsoever.

“Oh my God!” Mr. Ardlen cried, jumping up. “It's my dear Liza! We must save her!”

“I think this devil's forced our hand, John.” David said, getting up. “Let's go!”

Elizabeth shrieked, and we barreled out of the master suite, running towards the great hallway. Being in better shape than my peers, I reached it a good few seconds before they did and stared down the darkness. I saw nothing and realized that Elizabeth and her assailant had gone from the main hall. I waited a paralyzing second or two, and the laughing continued to reverberate along the corridors as David and Mr. Ardlen caught up to me.

“I don’t know where she’s gone!” I said. “The laughing’s coming from everywhere!”

“Split up!” David cried. “Find her!”

With that we bolted along the hallways, searching desperately for any sign of Miss Ardlen. A thought crept uninvited into my head about what I might find standing above her crumpled, distorted corpse, and I am ashamed to confess that this thought almost stopped me from continuing my search lest I prove it true.

I ran for about a minute, and it was a terrifying one; my fears for myself and Elizabeth were compounded into a single, oppressive cloud of despair. I felt that I was nearing the source of the laughter- it appeared to be originating from the vicinity of the servants' stairway. I bounded down the stairs and came upon what I perceived to be the source of the laughter; I leapt into the servants' chambers and prepared myself for the worst.

I feel that any description of what I felt at the moment would be, at this point in time, entirely academic. It is impossible to convey what I felt at that time due to the unique set of circumstances that surrounded me; the surreal haze of extreme terror and adrenaline that makes reality seem dreamlike and ephemeral. I heard nothing save the drip of a water-pipe somewhere and my own footsteps, though I had been sure that only seconds ago someone- some thing- had been laughing near my exact location. I walked slowly and carefully, looking for any sign of Elizabeth. As I walked, however, I started to hear something. At first I thought it was the *hiss-*

hiss, hiss-hiss of a steam-pipe broken somewhere along the corridor. I then heard it move, however, and I realized in a frightened panic that castles do not have steam-pipes.

“Run back! It's a trick! It's trying to trick us!” I yelled, sprinting back along the corridors to the master suite. The laugh returned, finding the fact that its ploy had worked to be great fun; as I rounded the corner I saw Mr. Ardlen and David duck into the master suite, with me following close behind. I jumped in and shut the door as fast as I could, and as I did I heard the terrible crash against the door as well as the furious, frightening roar of the thing as it lost its prey.

“Oh God, Oh God!” Mr. Ardlen said over and over, sinking down onto the floor of the master suite. “Oh God, Dr. Thomas!”

“That was a real close call there, John. Jesus.” David said, resting his head in his hands. “Jesus.”

“At least we're safe, and so is Elizabeth. The thing's plan to lure us out was foiled, at any rate.” I said, trying to lighten the mood. But I was unable to, and not a word was said after that; we sat there in the light of the fire until morning, listening to the occasional crash and the unending shrieks of fury just outside our door.

Finally day broke, and with it left the shrieks and the crashes. Not a one of us felt inclined to open the doorway, having seen the thing's penchant for tricks. We instead climbed out of the window, and slept until noon, by which time we felt safe enough to re-enter the house. I took point, and gingerly pushed open the door to the main hallway. I stepped in, and heard nothing; I motioned for the others to follow, and we checked all the hair strands. All remained intact except the ones we had snapped in our mad rush to the entranceway. I took the audio recorder and the camera and we ventured back to town where we could examine both in full.

The audio tape had a full aural record of our night's exploits, complete with the laughs, crashes, and the fake Elizabeth. The camera had apparently gone off in a frenzy of taking pictures, and upon developing them each one contained an image just like the one I have shown you. We made our way up to the master suite to collect our things, and it was there that Mr. Ardlen grabbed my arm.

“Sir, I don't know if you can get rid of these spirits or not,” he began, “but I don't want you to try even if you can. I'm going to board this place up so good that a fruit fly would've a hard time breaking in.”

“If that is your choice, Mr. Ardlen, I deem it a prudent one.” I said, relieved. “I believe you said it best; let sleeping dogs lie.”

We made our way down to the main entrance again, and what I saw next made my blood run cold all over again. Sitting perfectly in the middle of the grand hallway was a branch, old and gnarled. It had a bit of rope sticking out from it. I was completely positive that it had not been there before, as we had searched very carefully for the strands and would have noticed any branch on the floor. All three of us froze for a moment, and none of us dared to make a sound.

“I think it's time to go, fellows.” David said finally, breaking the silence, and with that we left. As we closed the main gate, I could have sworn I heard a laugh from inside the castle; I do not believe the others heard it, though, and I am quite ready to put it to my imagination.

I wrote the case in as open, as I had not resolved the haunting or even indeed discovered what caused it. And that, as they say, is that.'

“That's it? I'm confused, then.” I said. “How'd the branch get to be in here in your study?”

“Mr. Arden sent it to me, he thought I might find it interesting.” Dr. Thomas said, smiling. “Some local boys had apparently broken in and taken it, leaving it on his doorstep as a prank.”

“Speaking of, how did it get there? Who put it there?” I said.

“Ah- that is a question I choose not to linger upon.” he replied. “I have ruled out all possibilities but it being the ghost, an outcome which scares me very much.”

“It couldn't be the ghost, though; it only came out at night, and was scared away during the day.” I said.

“Or was it?” Dr. Thomas said. “Let me put it this way- if in fact the thing was able to come out during the day, that means that it was only pretending to be driven away by the light.”

“Why would it do that?” I asked. “After all, everyone went in during the day. That's like prime feeding time.”

“Perhaps, but I think it thrived on that element of fear and found the chase not as thrilling in the sunlight. But I ask you- what if it was merely pretending- waiting, as the case may be- when the sun first started to peek that night we stayed in the house? What if, God forbid, we had opened that door? Even worse- what if it was only pretending to be warded off by the protection? What if it is not shackled by the castle at all? What if, indeed.” he said, taking a sip of his brandy.

The way he posed the question sent a little shiver up my spine, and I remembered the picture. I tried not to think about it.

“Well, it is late, and I must be heading to bed.” he said, standing up. “I trust you are not too frightened to walk home after that little anecdote?”

I replied that I wasn't, and I got up to leave the study. He handed me a cassette tape.

“A certain recording, Alexander.” he said. “In case your curiosity should ever get the best of you.”

With that he sent me on my way, and I returned to my room that night after what felt like the longest walk home of my life. I have never listened to that tape, and I never intend to; I am afraid that it is the one which I hear in my darkest of nightmares; those ones that wake you up, you know? The ones that leave you certain that there is something there, some indescribably terrifying thing in the darkness by the foot of your bed; something waiting for you to fall back to sleep.