

## Chapter 9

### **‘Cramful of Snakes and Ghosts’: B.M. Croker’s Anglo-Indian Ghost Stories.**

Christoph Singer

In Bithia Mary Croker’s Anglo-Indian Romance *In Old Madras* (1900) readers are quickly advised to avoid the dangers of the Indian hinterland. Mrs. Dixon, a memsahib who has spent many years in India, advises the novel’s protagonist Captain Tallboys Mallender against visiting a place called Panjevverram. Panjevverram, she asserts, is “just an overgrown, forgotten old place, and cram full of snakes and ghosts.” (Croker 1990, 170) This warning, which elicits only a laugh from the naïve newcomer, can also be read as a self-depreciating description of Croker’s Anglo-Indian ghost stories. Often set outside the British mainstays in bungalows and other temporary abodes, they are haunted by spectres, snakes and scorpions. Whereas Rudyard Kipling asserts in “My Own True Ghost Story” that “[n]o native ghost has yet been authentically reported to have frightened an Englishman; but many English ghosts have scared the life out of both white and black” (Kipling 1888, 61), Croker’s ghost stories are more inclusive. She presents frightful and sometimes deadly apparitions of Indians and British alike.

Her ghost stories do invite a number of readings, such as interrogations of otherness, discussions of gender issues, and as negotiations of the Indian Mutiny which “was still in collective memory of the people of northern India as the unfinished business of empire haunted both the British and Indians.” (Edmundson 2010, 111) Yet, in the following, I will claim that the fear and terror these stories evoke is not exclusively that of the colonized other. After all, as Benita Parry argues: “there are so few Indian characters in [Croker’s] books.” (Parry 1998, 82). These stories are rather obsessed with the British themselves, reducing the India outside of the station to an exotic setting.

A dominant anxiety expressed in Croker’s narratives is the fear of social embarrassment, of transgressing the social rules that govern the Anglo-Indian communities. To be a British expat in India meant to be part of a continued performance of power. “British women, along with their men”, as

argued by Margaret MacMillan, “were forced onto a stage in India. They had the leading roles in the imperial pageant. As long as they knew their lines and did not falter, the Indians would tolerate their rule.” (MacMillan 1988, 11) Not knowing your lines would lead to major embarrassment inside and outside the fort. And the resulting ridicule from Indians and Anglo-Indians alike would be regarded as a threat to the standing of oneself and the Empire.

In this article, I will discuss how the all-pervasive fear of transgressing Anglo-Indian conventions is embedded in Croker's rather conventional ghost stories. After a short introduction to Bithia Mary Croker, I will discuss the role of Anglo-Indian women – the memsahibs – inside their social networks. The focus will be on the related fears and anxieties as expressed in Croker's short stories “The Dâk Bungalow at Dakor”, “The Khitmatgar” and “To Let” from the 1893 short story collection *To Let* as well as “The Red Bungalow” from the 1919 anthology *Odds and Ends*. This perspective may help to elaborate on a neglected field in histories of the Empire. After all, as Nupur Chaudhuri argues: “historians of colonial India have paid little attention to the inner dynamics of the memsahibs' private sphere in the colonial environment” (Chaudhuri 1988, 518).

### 1. Bithia Mary Croker and Kipling's Ghost

In the anthology *Late Victorian Gothic Tales*, Roger Luckhurst states that Bithia Mary Croker was an “extremely popular novelist in her lifetime” (Luckhurst 2005, xxiv). While not completely forgotten, biographical information about Croker is as sparse as her publications are extensive. She was born in Ireland to Reverend William Sheppard. Later she married John Stokes Croker, who was an officer in the Royal Scots Fusiliers and the Royal Munster Fusiliers. At the age of 29 she moved with her husband to Madras and later to Bengal, to retire – after 14 years in British India – in Folkestone, England. The repeated biographical alignment of Croker to the men in her life (“daughter of”, “wife of”) is echoed in her short stories, as will be discussed below.

Many of Croker's works were written in the hill station of Wellington, resulting in an extensive oeuvre of 44 novels and six short story collections. An early review of her work in the *Saturday Review* was puzzled concerning Croker's gender: “We cannot confidently say whether B.M. Croker may be a lady or gentleman, and in intimating as much we pay him – we shall assume the male sex for convenience – a very high compliment.” (*Saturday Review* 1896) This treatment connects Croker to a number of female authors, as Mary Condé claims: “The first thing to be said is that the Englishwomen were not necessarily interested in presenting their female gaze as female: Charlotte Despard wrote anonymously; Bithia Mary Croker started

writing as 'B.M. Croker,' Alice Perrin as 'A. Perrin,' [...] J.E. Muddock, Sydney Carlyon Grier, Maxwell Gray, John Travers, I.A.R. Wylie, C.M.K. Phipps, J.M. Graham, M.J. Colquhoun, H.M. Cadell, E.W. Savi were all women." (Condé 2001, 14) Whether this was not partially due to the publisher's influence is hard to say in Croker's case. But, as will be shown, hers is a very female perspective, regarding the themes and topics of her stories, most notably her representation of a memsahib's role(s) inside a patriarchal society.

A review of the "Village Tales and Jungle Tragedies" in the *Athenaeum*, preceding the short story collection *In the Kingdom of Kerry*, is an early example of how Croker repeatedly has been perceived in relation to another Anglo-Indian writer: "Mrs. Croker has already achieved a secure foothold in that temple of Anglo-Indian fiction whereof Mr. Rudyard Kipling is the high-priest." (*Athenaeum* 1896) Douglas Sladen, 19 years later, is more generous of the contributions of Croker and her peers: "It is natural to mention Mrs. [Flora Annie] Steel, Mrs. [Alice] Perrin and Mrs. Croker together, for they long divided the Indian Empire with Rudyard Kipling as a realm of fiction. Each in her own department is supreme." (Sladen 1915, 121) As recently as 2005, Rudyard Kipling remains the main point of comparison to place Croker in the literary canon. Roger Luckhurst attests that "[i]n some ways, she can be seen as a female Kipling" (Luckhurst 2005, xxiv). However, he also hints at the fact that Croker has encouraged this comparison. Her 1897 novel *Beyond the Pale* evokes Kipling's short story from 1888. And in 1920, Croker published a novel called *Her Own People*, which recalls Kipling's *Mine own People* from 1891.

To show how Croker is "more than simply a 'female Kipling'" as Melissa Edmundson argues in response to Luckhurst (Edmundson 2013, 164), it is important to expand on this very notion of a "female Kipling". Her own gender as well as gender roles in her writing are of importance considering the hierarchical position many women held in the minutely stratified British communities in British India. Melissa Edmundson argues in regard to female Anglo-Indian authors, such as Croker:

These authors were dismissed as 'lady romancers' while ignoring what their works can reveal about how the British saw themselves and those they colonized. In effect, what these women authors often did was complicate the traditional notion of the colonial gaze, using their own status as marginalized and objectified subjects within the British social system to look sympathetically upon Indian natives, who were likewise marginalized by the British. (Edmundson 2010, 130)

While I agree with Edmundson concerning the complication of a traditional colonial gaze in a novel like *In Old Madras*, matters are a bit more complicated when it comes to Croker's ghost stories. As argued above, Indians hardly figure in her stories, which recalls Margaret MacMillan's argument that Anglo-Indian memsahibs "lived in a world in which there were few Indians" (MacMillan 1988, 42). Furthermore, the Indian characters we encounter in Croker's short stories are not exactly varied in their representation. At least in the ghost stories discussed here, the Indians often border on caricatures and are often reduced to types: *the ayah*, *the khitmatgar* or *the khansama*. In defense, one could argue that this reduction of individuals to their positions is similar to that of the memsahibs and their incorporation into their husbands' positions and, by extension, the Empire at large. Unsurprisingly, the ideology of incorporation found its way into a number of domestic novels. These novels, Alison Sainsbury argues, "married the ideology of patriarchy to the ideology of imperialism and merged the story of love and marriage and the story of European civilisation, subsuming all relations to an identity rooted in imperialism" (Sainsbury 1996, 170).

If Croker's short stories illustrate one thing, it is that: the memsahib was more than a stereotype herself. As Nupur Chaudhuri argues, memsahibs "[h]aving no legal voice and no particular political or economic power, they are seldom visible in official documents or records. Hence, until recently the image of memsahibs presented by Rudyard Kipling has been taken for granted." (Chaudhuri 1998, 517)

A memsahib's position was almost paradoxical in the sense that she had to negotiate two contradictory subject positions, which is illustrated in the oft-quoted statement from Flora Steel's and Grace Gardiner's manual *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*: "[A]n Indian household can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian Empire" (Steel and Gardiner 1909, 9). The memsahib, on the one hand, was the *angel in the house*, the home-maker and care-taker. On the other hand, she was expected to rule over a vast household including a minimum of three Indian servants.

This paradoxical subject-position is reflected by the term *memsahib* itself. Freely translated it means the 'master's woman'. In consequence, the memsahib can almost be considered a figure of the third, a go-between. The memsahib is a person with a complex social position vis-à-vis her Indian staff, the Anglo-British community, and the British homeland.

Such a life, especially for newcomers, was very difficult to navigate. A first impression of a memsahib that just arrived in India is quoted in Margaret MacMillan's study *Women of the Raj*: "[I]t was like walking over broken glass barefoot to steer one's way socially when I first went out to Poona." (MacMillan 1988, 156.) This experience of social insecurity is a

major source of fear and anxiety in Croker's ghost stories and the portrayal thereof allows readers to "glimpse into pockets of silence" (Kapila 2010, 53) if read in conjunction with official sources, as Shuchi Kapila claims.

The female protagonists' sense of being out-of-place in a world that resembles their own, yet is remarkably different, finds expression in a literary simile in "The Dâk Bungalow". Upon seeing the Indian murderer of a British Civil Servant staring through her bungalow's window, Julia is terrified: "He reminds me of the Cheshire Cat in 'Alice in Wonderland,'" said Julia with would-be facetiousness, but I noticed that she looked rather pale." ("The Dâk Bungalow," 131) In the logic of this simile, Julia is Alice, a young girl in a world where everything is different, strange and threatening. As such, this simile evokes genres like the *Bildungsroman* and *coming-of-age narratives*. The Anglo-Indian reader may recognize her- or himself in the inexperienced newcomers, all other readers may prove to be as naïve as the protagonists they observe.

## 2. Conventional Horror & The Horror of Convention

The allure of Croker's ghost stories lies in an idiosyncratic perspective into the conventions of a memsahib's life in combination with conventional haunted-house-plots. In 1903, the conventionality of Croker's writing was pointed out by *The Bookman*:

In taking up a new novel by Mrs. Croker the reader feels pretty certain of knowing the kind of story to expect. It will be what is called 'bright,' with a brisk and fairly exciting plot, with much easy and natural dialogue, and a shrewd, if not very profound handling of worldliness and worldly people. (The Bookman 1903, 150)

Croker seemed to have been aware of the stereotype of the *lady romancer* in conjunction with her own writing. And she was self-deprecating enough to laugh about it. Regardless of the fact, whether the following description from *In Old Madras* is self-referential or not, the stereotype of the Anglo-Indian lady-romancer, however, seems to the point:

Well, the little elderly lady with a face like a piece of wash-leather, lemon coloured hair, and diamonds, is Mrs. Fiske, widely known as 'The Acidulated Drop.' Her chief talent is fiction [...] she achieves distinction by the number and variety of her stories. Her late husband had a fine appointment, and she has a fine pension; her daughters are satisfactorily settled out here, she infests the hills, and knows everything that goes on – on Hills or plains. (Croker 1900, 58)

In line with this quotation, *In Old Madras* shows Croker's awareness of what makes a conventional plot. Early on in the novel, a side-character offers a comment on Captain Mallender's intentions: "if I must give an opinion, I say, that your idea would make a valuable plot for a sixpenny shocker, but that is all there is in it." (Croker 1900, 11) Considering that this is a comment on the eventual, unfolding plot of the novel, one may read this statement as a meta-commentary by Croker on her own writing.

How conventional are Croker's ghost stories? For one, they are all classic haunted-house-stories subdivided in two intertwined narratives: that of the haunting ghost and that of the haunted lodgers. The lodgers are mostly families that move, despite warnings to do otherwise, into haunted bungalows. As foreshadowed, the spectres appear, terrify and scare the protagonists away. In two cases the haunting ends deadly.

Less conventional is the fact, that the ghosts in Croker's stories are exclusively male. This gains significance in contrast to the protagonists who are pre-dominantly female: we follow the classic plot of women looking for and setting up a home somewhere in India. While their husbands are sporadically mentioned and appear occasionally, they remain mostly irrelevant.

Apart from the gender differences between ghosts and the haunted, a second distinction is related to the importance of India as a setting for the plot. Concerning the plot surrounding the ghosts, India as a setting is reduced to mere decoration. For the female protagonist's quests, however, Anglo-India is essential. Certainly, India's otherness does add an air of the exotic and the unknown. But, strictly speaking, when it comes to the ghosts and their past, India could easily be exchanged for another setting, without affecting the plot. Surely, certain discourses, such as interrogations of colonialism, would be silenced. The love-sick horse-rider in "To Let" could fall to his death in the Scottish Highlands or Croker's native Ireland. The murdered khitmatgar could be replaced by an English servant. The civil servant in "The Dâk Bungalow at Dakor" may as well find his demise at the hands of a greedy English robber, rather than an Indian dacoit. In all cases the plot would remain the same, and the ghosts could go about their vengeful business to a similar gothic effect.

However, what would happen, if one were to exchange the narrative present related to the female protagonists? How important is India for their stories? Such a substitution would alter the plot remarkably. I would like to claim that the depicted life in the stations, including the memsahib taking on special responsibilities and powers that were unlikely to be granted in the English motherland, provides the very essence of the plots at hand. The fear of social transgressions and missteps inside the Anglo-Indian community

proves constitutive for many of the protagonists' actions and reactions. And the fact that many memsahibs adapted to these rules is not surprising, considering that many

did not come to India for India's sake. They came, the great majority, to be wives; and they found in existence a tightly-knit community which gave them the simple choice of joining or staying outside. It was not much of a choice. Outside meant loneliness or India, and India frightened them. (MacMillan 1988, 8)

The tightly regulated fort and its own set of rules and reprimands may be preferable to being a social pariah. A related warning, found in Croker's *In Old Madras*, may be read in this light: "if one leaves the beaten road, - one has to pay!" (Croker 1900, 272)

### 3. The Ghosts of Social Embarrassment

The extent to which the Anglo-Indian society relied on a constant (over-)performance and affirmation of their imperial identity is hinted at in another middlebrow narrative about India. Louis Bromfield's novel *The Rains Came* offers an American outsider's view on the behaviour of Anglo-Indians in their stations. And it is not a sympathetic one:

There was no temptation to leave, for he had no desire to go to Simla or Darjeeling or Ootacamund to be with the small people with their small ambitions, the army officers and the civil servants with their wives and brats, their precedence and their snobbery, their clubs and their suburban British manners. He had tried that twice and found that it was intolerable – far more intolerable than the monsoon. (Bromfield 1937, 8)

One concept is of central importance here: "precedence". Bromfield's protagonist refers to the fact that the social behaviour of the British was largely governed by one's social rank. MacMillan argues: "In between were minute gradations of rank almost invisible to outsiders but of the utmost importance to the British themselves. Social status depended almost entirely on what one did, or in the case of married women, on what one's husband did." (MacMillan 1988, 47)

In Croker's short stories the memsahibs may appear like the matriarchs in power, but this power derives from the social status of their husbands. This tight relationship of the memsahibs to their husbands, is a repeated theme in Croker's short stories. Despite the husbands' physical absence, they are very much present as markers of their wives' identities. In

“The Dāk Bungalow at Dakor”, for example, the female protagonists are first introduced in relation to their husbands: “Mrs. Duff, the wife of our deputy commissioner” (114), “Mrs. Goodchild, the wife of the police officer” (ibid.) and “myself, wife of the forest officer” (ibid.). Interestingly, the husbands’ names are omitted, they are also reduced to their role and function inside and for the Empire. For the wives the repeated attribute “wife of” almost serves the function of an Homeric epithet. It indicates the protagonists’ social rank inside the community. Nupur Chauduri argues: “The memsahib in India, like her counterpart in Britain, commonly derived her status from her husband’s occupation; her social position was clearly defined by her husband’s rank in the colonial administrative system.” (Chauduri 1988, 519) The Warrant of Precedence published in *Thacker’s Indian Directory* or *The India List and India Office List*, both released annually listed in detail where every member of the Civil Service and the armed forces was to be found in said hierarchy.

Croker’s short stories repeatedly stress the respective rank of their characters. Mrs. Starkey, for example, is the wife of the “cantonment magistrate” (“To Let,” 15) as opposed to Aggie, whose husband works in the “irritation office” [probably irrigation office] (“To Let,” 3). Naturally, their setting up shop in a former colonel’s bungalow is eyed suspiciously. As a consequence of this strict observance of rank, the relationship amongst the memsahibs could be intimate, troubling, or intimately troubling: “It is whispered that in small and isolated stations the fair sex are either mortal enemies or bosom-friends.” (“The Dāk Bungalow at Dakor,” 115)

In Croker’s stories leaving one’s place in the precedence has consequence. As said, the stories’ basic plots are structured as follows: a family is looking for a new (temporary) home. Their choice of abode is eyed critically by the older memsahibs. In the short story “To Let” the warning is frank and direct: “It’s haunted. There you have the reason in two words” (“To Let,” 18). The warnings are neglected; yet they turn out to be justified. In consequence, the respective families quickly vacate the premises, dead or alive.

So, wherein lies the transgression? All of these stories are built around the notion that the choice of lodging is not merely problematic because of their being haunted. Rather these spaces are socially inappropriate. The rented bungalows are too big or too luxurious relative to the social status of the lodgers. In the short story “The Red Bungalow”, for example, Netta, is worried why nobody had rented the bungalow at offer: ““Why has it stood empty? Is it unhealthy?” asked Netta.” The vendor’s answer is straightforward: ““Oh not, no. I think it is too majestic, to gigantic for insignificant people.”” (“The Red Bungalow,” 146)

That these implicit transgressions become discernable for the reader is due to Croker’s definitions of proper behaviour. These Croker presents

either 'ex negativo' or by highlighting (mostly) commendable characters. The former relates to the protagonist in "The Khitmatgar" who is "a girl without education, without energy, and without a penny." ("The Khitmatgar," 93) The later refers to Aggie, the protagonist in "To Let", who is described as such: "Her children, her wardrobe, her husband, are all models in their way [...] she is the ruling member of her family." ("To Let," 2) What is more, Aggie fulfils yet another ideal memsahibs were burdened with. As Mary Procida argues: "Anglo-Indian women were incorporated wives who supported their husbands' careers by subsuming their own ambitions, ideas and identities to the demands of their spouses' work." (Procida 2002, 43) This commitment to an husband's position, which defines the wife's own position is illustrated by Aggie who "knows all about his [Tom's] department, his prospects of promotion, his prospects of furlough, of getting acting appointments, and so on, even better than himself." ("To Let," 3) His career, after all, is her career.

Most of Croker's characters share a general understanding of these rules, while overlooking some minute details. And the fear of mis-stepping is palpable and haunts the stories. Nobody wants to "[...] become the laughing stock of a station with a keen sense of the ridiculous." ("The Red Bungalow," 148) Mistakes cause strong reactions from the other memsahibs, 'jealousy' being an oft-repeated keyword in Croker's ghost stories. In "To Let", a memsahib's warnings are misread and disregarded as signs of envy: "Horrid old frump! [...] She is jealous and angry that she did not get Briarwood *herself*." ("To Let," 20, italics in original) In "The Khitmatgar" two of the female characters get into a vicious fight over who leads the most impressive household, resulting in the following verdict: "She's jealous of the grand big house, and fine compound, fit for gentry" ("The Khitmatgar," 107). At the same time, nobody wants to appear envious: "[...] I, the Colonel's wife, might be a little jealous that the new arrival had secured a far more impressive looking abode" ("The Red Bungalow," 151).

Envy and constant judgement haunt these stories, and the rules require a careful eye on part of the characters as well as the readers. In the story "To Let", the protagonist Aggie misjudges the unbearable, scolding heat of the pre-monsoon season in Lucknow and is late at booking an abode in the cooler hill stations, "called (for this occasion only) 'Kantia,'" ("To Let," 7). One of the earliest information the reader receives about Aggie's husband Tom is that his lower position, at the "Irritation Office" comes with a reduced holiday: "Tom could only get two months' leave (July and August)" ("To Let," 4) This fact becomes important later when Mrs. Starkey, a matron at Kantia, advises Aggie to rent one of the remaining flats in the undesirable Cooper's Hotel before "the rush up here in July, by the two month's people" ("To Let," 19). Not only is Mrs. Starkey's dismissive tone indicative of her view of these two-month's-people. Additionally, she expects

that the “two month’s people” belong into the small Cooper’s Hotel rather than the expansive Briarwood bungalow. In the hotel, she advises Aggie, “I believe you can have that small set of rooms at the back. The sitting-room smokes – but beggars can’t be choosers.” (“To Let,” 30)

In a way, Croker’s stories resemble Greek tragedies if only in the sense that the newcomers always express a clear sense of hubris concerning their own status. This leads them to live above their own status and, in the end, social ridicule. A slight exception is the case of “The Khitmatgar”, which ends with the husband’s death. Yet, as opposed to the other short stories, the narrator doesn’t express an ounce of sympathy for the main protagonist called Mrs. Fernanda Jackson. Fernanda Jackson was born as Fernanda Braganza, “a girl without education, without energy, and without a penny.” (“The Khitmatgar,” 93). Upon renting the long abandoned Bhootia Bungalow in Panipore she “was convinced that she was positively about to be ‘a lady at last.’” (“The Khitmatgar,” 100) The self-appointed status quickly goes to her head, and upon visiting a neighbour she feels the sting of envy. The “unexpected grandeur” of the neighbour’s house “was a blow to Mrs. Jackson” and “it seemed to her that Mrs. Clark also set up for being quite the lady, although her husband was not a gentleman.” (“The Khitmatgar,” 103) At this point in the story, Fernanda may have adopted the name of her husband, but her maiden’s name Braganza still rings true. Both, Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Clark “played a fine game of brag” (“The Khitmatgar,” 103), a game she loses despite her extended household, which consists of “a couple of grimy servants” (“The Khitmatgar,” 93).

Maybe it is in light of this “game of brag” and Mrs. Jackson’s desperate search for a subject position above her own that one has to read the story’s epithet taken from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “Whence and what art thou, execrable shape?” (“The Khitmatgar,” 91) This quote from Book II, line 681, of *Paradise Lost* may apply to the undead Indian servant haunting Bhootia Bungalow. After all, the addressee in Milton’s quote is Death, guarding hell’s gate. On the other hand, the addresser, Satan, is the first social upstart in all of Biblical history, dissatisfied with his place in the social hierarchy of heaven and looking for a new home. Hence the question – “Whence and what art thou, execrable shape?” – applies also to Mrs. Jackson, who is constantly on the move, displaced, outcast and rather wretched as a result. More precisely, Mrs. Jackson belongs nowhere. She is a “half-caste wife [with] a couple of dusky children” (“The Khitmatgar,” 93). In line with *Paradise Lost*’s main themes – degradation and the fall from grace – due to her husband’s drinking problem the family “for twenty years [...] fell from one grade to another” (“The Khitmatgar,” 92). Looking out of her newly rented bungalow, she only finds reminders of a paradise, dead and gone, the former splendour relegated into brackets by the author: “Behind these ruins stretched an immense overgrown garden (with ancient, dried-up

fruit trees, faint traces of walks and water-channels, and a broken fountain and sundial)." ("The Khitmatgar," 98)

This presentation of a lost paradise is reminiscent of Croker's novel *In Old Madras*. Panjevverram, the place in question, is "just an overgrown, forgotten old place, and cram full of snakes, and ghosts." (Croker 1900, 170) Here lives an equally destitute family on the far-off-fringes of Anglo-Indian life. There is one major difference. Major Rochfort, who lives a double-life in this place "was extraordinarily happy" (Croker 1900, 143).

The short story's narrator, however, offers no sympathy for Mrs Jackson and her lot. Her deep desire to be a 'lady' is mocked, regardless of the alcoholic husband being the source of all trouble. What is noteworthy though, is how this family is initially represented. The introduction resembles a speaker beginning to share some gossip:

"Perhaps you have seen them more than once on railway platforms in the North-West Provinces. A shabby, squalid, weary-looking group, sitting on their battered baggage [...] I mean Jackson, the photographer, and his belongings. Jackson is not his real name, but it answers the purpose. There are people that will tell you that Jackson is a man of good family, that he once held a commission at a crack cavalry regiment, and that his brother is Lord-Lieutenant of his county, and his nieces are seen at Court balls." ("The Khitmatgar," 90)

Here Croker's narrative voice adopts the snarky tone of a *burra memsahib*. As MacMillan explains, the "*burra* ('great') *memsahib*, the social leader of the station, was the lady whose husband occupied the most senior post." (MacMillan 1988, 47) Firstly, the reader is directly addressed as "you". Secondly, the reference to "people that will tell you" goes hand in hand with the gossipy tone of this introduction. Thirdly, the fact that "Jackson is not his real name" furthermore evokes the notion of gossip being exchanged in a way that pretends to maintain the face of everyone involved. With this tonality, address, and hedging the story starts like the beginning of a conversation in an intimate setting.

If we accept that Croker emulates a judgmental *burra memsahib*, it has to be stressed that these aren't idealized either. Croker's other narrators repeatedly add the occasional quip against these dominant ladies by changing the focalization through which these are being perceived. In "To Let" one character ironically addresses the absent, know-it-all *memsahibs*: "Tell me this, ye Anglo-Indian matrons?" ("To Let," 4) In the same story a parrot mimics a *memsahib* and her husband's unflattering voices: "He [the parrot] called 'Qui hye' so naturally, in a lady's shrill soprano, or a gruff male bellow, that I have no doubt our servants would have liked to have wrung his

neck." ("To Let," 22) Especially the association of the memsahib with a "shrill" voice is indicative, considering this description is repeated in "The Khitmatgar": "but he [a servant] soon learned his mistake from the voluble, shrill-tongued mem-sahib." ("The Khitmatgar," 97).

These changes of focalization add a different perspective to this performance of British rule, and illustrates the servants' perceiving their superiors as shrill, which is echoed by MacMillan, who also attributes the stereotype of the memsahibs with "ringing voices [...]" (MacMillan 1988, 1). Despite these mockeries, one should not overlook the power these burra memsahibs had, power they often used to interfere with the lives of the memsahibs they deemed inferior. Mary Procida argues

"Such interference could become especially troublesome in smaller stations, where there was no escape from the narrow society of the Anglo-Indian community. As late as the Second World War, some spouses of junior officers felt intimidated by these 'burra mems' and were inhibited in their actions for fear of damaging their husbands' careers." (Procida 2002, 44)

What complicates matters, however, is the fact that in the short stories, the burra memsahibs, despite their rather negative portrayal, are without fail correct in their predictions. And in hindsight, every piece of advice turns out to be helpful, putting the newcomers into their place: "Aggie bore Mrs. Starkey's insufferable 'I told you so.'" ("To Let," 38)

#### 4. Critique or Affirmation

This leaves us with the question whether these short stories are an affirmation or critique of the existing status quo. On the one hand, Croker's stories do support Kapila's argument that "[p]opular forms of writing and representation often express unacknowledged fears, anxieties, and preoccupations" (Kapila 2010, 53). On the other hand, Croker's shorts stories share a general aversion of exaggerated self-importance, rather than a direct critique of the status-quo that leads to such a behaviour.

Yet, in line with Kapila's statement, there seems to be a deeper fear permeating these haunted-house-stories. According to Anne Williams, "the word 'house' has two meanings relevant to Gothic fictions – it refers both to the building itself and the family line." (Anne Williams 1995, 45) And the houses in Croker's stories are haunted in both senses of the word: on the one hand, the respective ghosts haunt the bungalows and abodes of the protagonist. On the other hand, the family line, as represented by the children, is always at risk in these stories, which gives a distressing insight

into the realities of Anglo-Indian mothers: “Children could die with appalling suddenness. Steel and Gardiner offer a chilling list of what they describe as common ailments – abscesses, bites of wasps, of scorpions, of mad dogs and of snakes, colds, cholera, colic, dysentery, fever, indigestion, itch, piles, sunstroke. They might have added malaria, typhoid and smallpox for good measure.” (MacMillan 1988, 127) Another, anonymously published handbook for women in India – *The Englishwoman in India* of 1864 – is more optimistic, despite stressing that the probability of child-mortality is related to one’s class: “In many respects, India is a more healthy country for very young children than England. How rarely is there an instance of bronchitis, croup, or any lung disease [...]. Of course these remarks do not apply to the children of European soldiers, among whom, from many causes, the mortality is fearful.” (*The Englishwoman in India* 1864, 95)

The decay of the family-line is most explicitly represented in “The Khitmatgar” where the narrator does not even bother to specify the number of Mrs. Jackson’s children. They are “a couple of dusky children” (“The Khitmatgar,” 93) and it is their very complexion that renders them unimportant for the Empire’s cause as only white children “were a sign that the British were established in India, that the community was ‘sound’. And the presence of white children showed that the British men had firmly abjured the bad old practice of keeping Indian mistresses.” (MacMillan 1998, 125)

The family line of Aggie and Tom in “To Let” seems at first sight sufficiently healthy. The focus here is rather on the bungalow’s former Anglo-Indian owners who lose their suicidal daughter Lucy, and thus see their family line end. Yet, if one looks closer at Tom and Aggie’s family it becomes quickly clear that the children’s health is a major factor. As MacMillan asserts, India’s “heat drained away their children’s strength, leaving pale and listless shadows.” (MacMillan 1998, 12) This quote very much mirrors the description of the children falling ill in Croker’s “To Let”: “and presently Bobby and Tom began to fade: their little white faces and listless eyes appealed to Aggie [...]. Then Bobbie had a bad go of fever – intermittent fever; the beginning of the end to his alarmed mother; the end being represented by a large gravestone.” (“To Let,” 6-7) The narrator’s tone may sound slightly ironic, but the danger was very real. As such the fear of ending the family line can be read quite literal as well as an indication of the Empire’s impending demise.

*In Old Madras* is equally concerned with both of these houses falling apart. The main protagonist’s family is anything but thriving: “unfortunately, like other old families, the race was almost extinct.” (Croker 1900, 16) Statements like these go hand in hand with a repeatedly expressed doubt concerning the Empire’s legacy: “No, and I dare say there won’t be

much sign of us after a couple of thousand years. We shall leave no great monuments, temples and fortresses, such as still recall ancient Hindostan.” (Croker 1900, 202) This negative outlook supported by the natives' declining respect for their imperial rulers. The following description links Croker's novel to her gothic short stories: “there is the grave of an English officer about twenty miles out, with the date 1809; I've seen it. He is worshipped as a demon, and natives bring him brandy and cheroots. [...] but I think they only offer arrack, and bazaar tobacco now.” (Croker 1900, 192) If the natives aren't even afraid of a dead demon anymore, this doesn't bode well for the future of the living Brits.

In light of these and similar depictions Kapila reads Croker's writing as a “critique of upper-class British life associated with England and its praise of homeliness even in a mixed home, Croker's romance breaches the boundaries of the unspeakable” (Kapila 2010, 77). Especially when it comes to the fear of this homeliness disintegrating and the Empire falling apart, it is this fear of the unseen that permeates Croker's short stories and the novel *In Old Madras* alike. In the novel, a young 'half-caste' girl is being sent to the English homeland to be educated. Because of her blonde hair and fair complexion – her twin brothers are “two copies in black” (Croker 1900, 144) – her father does not expect any problems. Captain Mallender, however, is worried about the girl's mother's influence, invisibly hidden behind the girl's looks, to become visible in the future: “[...] no one would ever suspect the child of anything but pure English blood.’ That was true, thought Mallender, but her children? – what of them? They might resemble her brothers, or her grandmother!” (Croker 1900, 164-165)

When it comes to the end of the family line, of homes being destroyed, the most unsettling of Croker's ghost stories is “The Red Bungalow” published in 1919, that is, 26 years after the short story collection “To Let”. “The Red Bungalow” superficially adheres to the same plot structure and set-up as Croker's earlier stories. Yet, this story is also remarkably different in its almost modernist fashion. Where Croker's older short stories were always upfront about the reality of their ghosts, and very specific about their looks, histories and behaviour, “The Red Bungalow” remains remarkably ambiguous. “The maddening part was that they would give no definite name or shape to their fears – they spoke of ‘It’ and a ‘Thing’ – a fearsome object that dwelt within and around the Bungalow.” (“The Red Bungalow,” 153) Additionally, the short story recalls Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* in its ambiguity regarding the ghost's reality. Whether this is a ghost or a phantasm remains unanswered. But it has a tragic effect on the family-line, especially on the two children. Whereas I find Croker's other ghost stories rather amusing, “The Red Bungalow's” climactic moment stands out in its illustration of the children's terror in the face of something invisible to the parents:

There, huddled together, we discovered the two children on the table which stood in the middle of the apartment. Guy had evidently climbed up by a chair, and dragged his sister along with him. It was a beautiful afternoon, the sun streamed in upon them, and the room as far as we could see, was empty. Yes, but not empty to the trembling little creatures on the table, for with wide, mad eyes they seemed to follow the motion of a something that was creeping round the room close to the wall, and I noticed that their gaze went up and down [...]. ("The Red Bungalow," 155)

The tragic part lies not only in the parents' helplessness, and their inability to see what their two children are seeing. This event marks the very end of the family-line: the son, Guy, dies of "brain fever" (ibid.) and the daughter, Baba, "remains dumb for the present day" ("The Red Bungalow", 156).

Croker didn't publish enough ghost stories towards the end of her career, to allow for a larger argument concerning the looming end of Empire and the related representation of gothic terror and threat. It is noteworthy, however, that while in "The Red Bungalow" the family-line does end in traumatic silence the haunted bungalow is ready to be let by "anyone desirous of becoming a tenant." ("The Red Bungalow," 157) In line with the horrifying convention, the horror continues, and continues, and continues.

## 5. Works Cited

- Anon., *Athenaeum*, Review of *Village Tales and Jungle Tragedies*, quoted in B.M. Croker, *In the Kingdom of Kerry and Other Stories*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1896.
- Anon., Review of "Her Own People," *The Bookman*, 1903, 150.
- Anon., Review of "Pretty Mrs. Neville," *Saturday Review*, quoted in B.M. Croker, *In the Kingdom of Kerry and Other Stories*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1896.
- Bromfield, Louis. *The Rains Came*. New York: Grant & Dunlap, 1937.
- Chaudhuri, Nupur. "Memsahibs and Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century Colonial India." *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 31. No. 4 (Summer, 1988), 517-535.
- Condé, Mary. "Grounded in Fiction: Women Inscribing the Indian Landscape." Eds. Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Pier Paolo Piciuccio. *Studies in Indian Writing in English*. Vol. II. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001. 14-42.
- Croker, Bithia Mary. *In Old Madras*. London: Hutchinson & Co., 1900.
- . *To Let*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1906 [1893].
- . *Odds and Ends*. London: Hutchinson & Co., 1919.
- Edmundson Makala, Melissa. *Women's Ghost Literature in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013.

- Edmundson Makala, Melissa. "Bithia Mary Croker and the Ghosts of India." *The CEA Critic* 72.2 (Winter 2010). 94-112.
- The Englishwoman in India*, by a Lady Resident. London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1864
- Kipling, Rudyard. "My Own True Ghost Story." Ed. S.T. Joshi, *The Mark of the Beast and Other Horror Tales*. New York: Dover Publications, 2000 [1888]. 61-66.
- Kapila, Shuchi. "The Domestic Novel Goes Native: Bithia Mary Croker's Anglo-India." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 26:3 (2004), 215-35.
- Luckhurst, Roger. *Late Victorian Gothic Tales*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- MacMillan, Margaret. *Women of the Raj*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988.
- Parry, Benita. *Delusions and Discoveries: India in the British Imagination, 1880-1930*. London: Verso, 1998.
- Procida, Mary A. *Married to the Empire: Gender and Imperialism in India, 1883-1947*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.
- Sainsbury, Alison. "Married to the Empire: the Anglo-Indian Domestic Novel." Ed. Bart Moore-Gilbert. *Writing India, 1757-1990-1998: The Literature of British India*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996. 163-187.
- Sladen, Douglas. *Twenty Years of my Life*. London: Constable, 1915.
- Steel, Florence Anne, Grace Gardiner. *The Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook*. London: William Heinemann, 1909.
- Williams, Anne. *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

**Mary Croker,**

## **IX. THE RED BUNGALOW**

It is a considerable time since my husband's regiment ("The Snapshots") was stationed in Kulu, yet it seems as if it were but yesterday, when I look back on the days we spent in India. As I sit by the fire, or in the sunny corner of the garden, sometimes when my eyes are dim with reading I close them upon the outer world, and see, with vivid distinctness, events which happened years ago. Among various mental[140] pictures, there is not one which stands forth with the same weird and lurid effect as the episode of "The Red Bungalow."

Robert was commanding his regiment, and we were established in a pretty spacious house at Kulu, and liked the station. It was a little off the beaten track, healthy and sociable. Memories of John Company and traces of ancient Empires still clung to the neighbourhood. Pig-sticking and rose-growing, Badminton and polo, helped the resident of the place to dispose of the long, long Indian day—never too long for me!

One morning I experienced an agreeable surprise, when, in reading the Gazette, I saw that my cousin, Tom Fellowes, had been appointed Quartermaster-General of the district, and was to take up the billet at once.

Tom had a wife and two dear little children (our nursery was empty), and as soon as I had put down the paper I wired to Netta to congratulate and beg them to come to us immediately. Indian moves are rapid. Within a week our small party had increased to six, Tom, Netta, little Guy, aged four, and Baba, a dark-eyed coquette of nearly two. They also brought with them an invaluable ayah—a Madrassi. She spoke English with a pretty foreign accent, and was entirely devoted to the children.

Netta was a slight young woman with brilliant eyes, jet-black hair, and a firm mouth. She was lively, clever, and a capital helpmate for an army man, with marvellous energy, and enviable taste.

Tom, an easy-going individual in private life, was a red-hot soldier. All financial and domestic affairs were left in the hands of his wife, and she managed him and them with conspicuous success.

Before Netta had been with us three days she[141] began, in spite of my protestations, to clamour about "getting a house."

"Why, you have only just arrived," I remonstrated. "You are not even half unpacked. Wait here a few weeks, and make acquaintance with the place and people. It is such a pleasure to me to have you and the children."

"You spoil them—especially Guy!" she answered with a laugh. "The sooner they are removed the better, and, seriously, I want to settle in. I am longing to do up my new house, and make it pretty, and have a garden—a humble imitation of yours—a Badminton court, and a couple of ponies. I'm like a child looking forward to a new toy, for, cooped up in Fort William in Calcutta, I never felt that I had a real home."

“Even so,” I answered, “there is plenty of time, and I think you might remain here till after Christmas.”

“Christmas!” she screamed. “I shall be having Christmas parties myself, and a tree for the kids; and you, dear Liz, shall come and help me. I want to get into a house next week.”

“Then pray don’t look to me for any assistance. If you make such a hasty exit the station will think we have quarrelled.”

“The station could not be so detestable, and no one could quarrel with *you*, you dear old thing,” and as she stooped down and patted my cheek, I realised that she was fully resolved to have her own way.

“I have yards and yards of the most lovely cretonne for cushions, and chairs, and curtains,” she continued, “brought out from home, and never yet made up. Your Dirzee is bringing me two men to-morrow. When I was out riding this morning, I went to an auction-room—John Mahomed, they call the man—and inspected some sofas and chairs. Do[142] let us drive there this afternoon on our way to the club, and I also wish to have a look round. I hear that nearly all the good bungalows are occupied.”

“Yes, they are,” I answered triumphantly. “At present there is not *one* in the place to suit you! I have been running over them with my mind’s eye, and either they are near the river, or too small, or—not healthy. After Christmas the Watsons are going home; there will be their bungalow—it is nice and large, and has a capital office, which would suit Tom.”

We drove down to John Mahomed’s that afternoon, and selected some furniture—Netta exhibiting her usual taste and business capacity. On our way to the club I pointed out several vacant houses, and, among them, the Watsons’ charming abode—with its celebrated gardens, beds of brilliant green lucerne, and verandah curtained in yellow roses.

“Oh yes,” she admitted, “it is a fine, roomy sort of abode, but I hate a thatched roof—I want one with tiles—red tiles. They make such a nice bit of colour among trees.”

“I’m afraid you won’t find many tiled roofs in Kulu,” I answered; “this will limit you a good deal.”

For several mornings, together, we explored bungalows—and I was by no means sorry to find that, in the eyes of Netta, they were all more or less found wanting—too small, too damp, too near the river, too stuffy—and I had made up my mind that the Watsons’ residence (despite its thatch) was to be Netta’s fate, when one afternoon she hurried in, a little breathless and dusty, and announced, with a wild wave of her sunshade, “I’ve found it!”

“Where? Do you mean a house?” I exclaimed.

“Yes. What moles we’ve been! At the back of this, down the next turn, at the cross roads! Most[143] central and suitable. They call it the Red Bungalow.”

“The Red Bungalow,” I repeated reflectively. I had never cast a thought to it—what is always before one is frequently unnoticed. Also it had been unoccupied ever since we had come to the station, and as entirely overlooked as if it had no existence! I had a sort of recollection that there was some drawback—it was either too large, or too expensive, or too out of repair.

“It is strange that I never mentioned it,” I said. “But it has had no tenant for years.”

“Unless I am greatly mistaken, it will have one before long,” rejoined Netta, with her most definite air. “It looks as if it were just waiting for us—and had been marked ‘reserved.’”

“Then you have been over it?”

“No, I could not get in, the doors are all bolted, and there seems to be no chokedar. I wandered round the verandahs, and took stock of the size and proportions—it stands in an imposing compound. There are the ruins at the back, mixed up with the remains of a garden—old guava trees, lemon trees, a vine, and a well. There is a capital place at one side for two Badminton courts, and I have mentally laid out a rose-garden in front of the portico.”

“How quickly your mind travels!”

“Everything *must* travel quickly in these days,” she retorted. “We all have to put on the pace. Just as I was leaving, I met a venerable coolie person, who informed me that John Mahomed had the keys, so I despatched him to bring them at once, and promised a rupee for his trouble. Now do, like a good soul, let us have tea, and start off immediately after to inspect my treasure-trove!”

“I can promise you a cup of tea in five minutes,” I[144] replied, “but I am not so certain of your treasure-trove.”

“I am. I generally can tell what suits me at first sight. The only thing I am afraid of is the rent. Still, in Tommy’s position one must not consider that. He is obliged to live in a suitable style.”

“The Watsons’ house has often had a staff-tenant. I believe it would answer all your requirements.”

“Too near the road, and too near the *General*,” she objected, with a gesture of impatience. “Ah, here comes tea at last!”

It came, but before I had time to swallow my second cup, I found myself hustled out of the house by my energetic cousin and *en route* to her wonderful discovery—the Red Bungalow.

We had but a short distance to walk, and, often as I had passed the house, I now gazed at it for the first time with an air of critical interest. In Kulu, for some unexplained reason, this particular bungalow had never counted; it was boycotted—no, that is not the word—*ignored*, as if, like some undesirable character, it had no place in the station’s thoughts. Nevertheless, its position was sufficiently prominent—it stood at a point where four ways met. Two gateless entrances opened into different roads, as if determined to obtrude upon public attention. Standing aloof between the approaches was the house—large, red-tiled, and built back in the shape of the letter “T” from an enormous pillared porch, which, with some tall adjacent trees, gave it an air of reserve and dignity.

“The coolie with the keys has not arrived,” said Netta, “so I will just take you round and show you its capabilities myself. Here”—as we stumbled over some rough grass—“is where I should make a couple of Badminton courts, and this”—as we came to the back of the bungalow—“is the garden.”

[145]Yes, here were old choked-up stone water-channels, the traces of walks, hoary guava and apricot trees, a stone pergola and a dead vine, also a well, with elaborate tracery, and odd, shapeless mounds of ancient masonry. As we stood we faced the back verandah of the house. To our right hand lay tall cork trees, a wide expanse of compound, and the road; to our left, at a distance, more trees, a high wall, and clustered beneath it the servants' quarters, the cook-house, and a long range of stables.

It was a fine, important-looking residence, although the stables were almost roofless and the garden and compound a wilderness, given over to stray goats and tame lizards.

"Yes, there is only one thing I am afraid of," exclaimed Netta.

"Snakes?" I suggested. "It looks rather snaky."

"No, the rent; and here comes the key at last," and as she spoke a fat young clerk, on a small yellow pony, trotted quickly under the porch—a voluble person, who wore spotless white garments, and spoke English with much fluency.

"I am abject. Please excuse being so tardy. I could not excavate the key; but at last I got it, and now I will hasten to exhibit premises. First of all, I go and open doors and windows, and call in the atmosphere—ladies kindly excuse." Leaving his tame steed on its honour, the baboo hurried to the back, and presently we heard the grinding of locks, banging of shutters, and grating of bolts. Then the door was flung open and we entered, walked (as is usual) straight into the drawing-room, a fine, lofty, half-circular room, twice as large and well-proportioned as mine. The drawing-room led into an equally excellent dining-room. I saw Netta measuring it with her eye, and she said, "One could easily[146] seat thirty people here, and what a place for a Christmas-tree!"

The dining-room opened into an immense bedroom which gave directly on the back verandah, with a flight of shallow steps leading into the garden.

"The nursery," she whispered; "capital!"

At either side were two other rooms, with bath and dressing-rooms complete. Undoubtedly it was an exceedingly commodious and well-planned house.

As we stood once more in the nursery—all the wide doors being open—we could see directly through the bungalow out into the porch, as the three large apartments were *en suite*.

"A draught right through, you see!" she said. "So cool in the hot weather."

Then we returned to the drawing-room, where I noticed that Netta was already arranging the furniture with her mental eye. At last she turned to the baboo and said, "And what is the rent?"

After a moment's palpable hesitation he replied, "Ninety rupees a month. If you take it for some time it will be all put in repair and done up."

"Ninety!" I mentally echoed—and we paid one hundred and forty!

"Does it belong to John Mahomed?" I asked.

“No—to a client.”

“Does he live here?”

“No—he lives far away, in another region; we have never seen him.”

“How long is it since this was occupied?”

“Oh, a good while——”

“Some years?”

“Perhaps,” with a wag of his head.

“Why has it stood empty? Is it unhealthy?” asked Netta.

“Oh no, no. I think it is too majestic, too gigantic for insignificant people. They like something[147] more altogether and *cosy*; it is not *cosy*—it is suitable to persons like a lady on the General’s staff,” and he bowed himself to Netta.

I believe she was secretly of his opinion, for already she had assumed the air of the mistress of the house, and said briskly, “Now I wish to see the kitchen, and servants’ quarters,” and, picking up her dainty skirts, she led the way thither through loose stones and hard yellow grass. As I have a rooted antipathy to dark and uninhabited places, possibly the haunt of snakes and scorpions, I failed to attend her, but, leaving the baboo to continue his duty, turned back into the house alone.

I paced the drawing-room, dining-room, the nursery, and as I stood surveying the long vista of apartments, with the sun pouring into the porch on one hand, and on the green foliage and baked yellow earth of the garden on the other, I confessed to myself that Netta was a miracle!

She, a new arrival, had hit upon this excellent and suitable residence; and a bargain. But, then, she always found bargains; their discovery was her *métier*!

As I stood reflecting thus, gazing absently into the outer glare, a dark and mysterious cloud seemed to fall upon the place, the sun was suddenly obscured, and from the portico came a sharp little gust of wind that gradually increased into a long-drawn wailing cry—surely the cry of some lost soul! What could have put such a hideous idea in my head? But the cry rang in my ears with such piercing distinctness that I felt myself trembling from head to foot; in a second the voice had, as it were, passed forth into the garden and was stifled among the tamarind trees in an agonised wail. I roused myself from a condition of frightful obsession, and endeavoured to summon my common sense and self-command. Here was I, a[148] middle-aged Scotchwoman, standing in this empty bungalow, clutching my garden umbrella, and imagining horrors!

Such thoughts I must keep exclusively to myself, lest I become the laughing-stock of a station with a keen sense of the ridiculous.

Yes, I was an imaginative old goose, but I walked rather quickly back into the porch, and stepped into the open air, with a secret but invincible prejudice against the Red Bungalow.

This antipathy was not shared by Netta, who had returned from her quest all animation and satisfaction.

“The stables require repair, and some of the go-downs,” she said, “and the whole house must be recoloured inside, and matted. I will bring my husband round to-morrow morning,” she announced, dismissing the baboo. “We will be here at eight o’clock sharp.”

By this I knew—and so did the baboo—that the Red Bungalow was let at last!

“Well, what do you think of it?” asked Netta triumphantly, as we were walking home together.

“It is a roomy house,” I admitted, “but there is no office for Tom.”

“Oh, he has the Brigade Office.—Any more objections?”

“A bungalow so long vacant, so entirely overlooked, must have *something* against it—and it is not the rent——”

“Nor is it unhealthy,” she argued. “It is quite high, higher than your bungalow—no water near it, and the trees not too close. I can see that you don’t like it. Can you give me a good reason?”

“I really wish I could. No, I do not like it—there is something about it that repels me. You know I’m a Highlander, and am sensitive to impressions.”

“My dear Liz,” and here she came to a dead halt,[149] “you don’t mean me to suppose that you think it is haunted? Why, this is the twentieth century!”

“I did not say it was haunted”—(I dared not voice my fears)—“but I declare that I do not like it, and I wish you’d wait; wait only a couple of days, and I’ll take you to see the Watsons’ bungalow—so sunny, so lived in—always so cheerful, with a lovely garden, and an office for Tom.”

“I’m not sure that *that* is an advantage!” she exclaimed with a smile. “It is not always agreeable to have a man on the premises for twenty-four hours out of the twenty-four hours!”

“But the Watsons——”

“My dear Liz, if you say another word about the Watsons’ bungalow I shall have a bad attack of the sulks, and go straight to bed!”

It is needless to mention that Tom was delighted with the bungalow selected by his ever-clever little wife, and for the next week our own abode was the resort of tailors, hawkers, butchers, milkmen, furniture-makers, ponies and cows on sale, and troops of servants in quest of places.

Every day Netta went over to the house to inspect, and to give directions, to see how the mallees were laying out the garden and Badminton courts, and the matting people and whitewashers were progressing indoors.

Many hands make light work, and within a week the transformation of the Red Bungalow was astonishing. Within a fortnight it was complete; the stables were again occupied—also the new spick-and-span servants' quarters; Badminton courts were ready to be played upon; the verandah and porch were gay with palms and plants and parrots, and the drawing-room was the admiration of all Kulu. Netta introduced plants in pots—pots actually dressed up in pongee silk!—to the station ladies; her sofa cushions[150] were frilled, she had quantities of pretty pictures and photos, silver knick-knacks, and gay rugs.

But before Netta had had the usual name-board—"Major Fellowes, A.Q.M.G."—attached to the gate piers of the Red Bungalow, there had been some demur and remonstrance. My ayah, an old Madrasi, long in my service, had ventured one day, as she held my hair in her hand, "That new missus never taking the old Red Bungalow?"

"Yes."

"My missus then telling her, *please*, that plenty bad place—oh, so bad! No one living there this many years."

"Why—what is it?"

"I not never knowing, only the one word—*bad*. Oh, my missus! you speak, never letting these pretty little children go there——"

"But other people have lived there, Mary——"

"Never long—so people telling—the house man paint bungalow all so nice—same like now—they make great bargain—so pleased. One day they go away, away, away, never coming back. Please, please," and she stooped and kissed my hand, "speak that master, tell him—*bad* bungalow."

Of course I pooh-poohed the subject to Mary, who actually wept, good kind creature, and as she did my hair had constantly to dry her eyes on her saree.

And, knowing how futile a word to Tom would prove, I once more attacked Netta. I said, "Netta, I'm sure you think I'm an ignorant, superstitious imbecile, but I believe in presentiments. I have a presentiment, dear, about that Bungalow—*do* give it up to please and, yes, comfort me——"

"What! my beautiful find—the best house in Kulu—my *bargain*?"

"You may find it a dear bargain!"

"Not even to oblige you, dear Liz, can I break off[151] my agreement, and I have really set my heart on your *bête noire*. I am so, so sorry," and she came over and caressed me.

I wonder if Netta in her secret heart suspected that I, the Colonel's wife, might be a little jealous that the new arrival had secured a far more impressive looking abode than her own, and for this mean reason I endeavoured to persuade her to "move on."

However, her mind must have been entirely disabused of this by a lady on whom we were calling, who said:

“Oh, Mrs. Fellowes, have you got a house yet, or will you wait for the Watsons’? Such a——”

“I am already suited,” interrupted Netta. “We have found just the thing—not far from my cousin’s, too—a fine, roomy, cheerful place, with a huge compound; we are already making the garden.”

“Roomy—large compound; near Mrs. Drummond,” she repeated with knitted brow. “No—oh, surely you do not mean the Red Bungalow?”

“Yes, that is its name; I am charmed with it, and so lucky to find it.”

“No difficulty in finding it, dear Mrs. Fellowes, but I believe the difficulty is in remaining there.”

“Do you mean that it’s haunted?” enquired Netta with a rather superior air.

“Something of that sort—the natives call it ‘the devil’s house.’ A terrible tragedy happened there long ago—so long ago that it is forgotten; but you will find it almost impossible to keep servants!”

“You are certainly most discouraging, but I hope some day you will come and dine with us, and see how comfortable we are!”

There was a note of challenge in this invitation, and I could see with the traditional “half-eye” that Mrs. Dodd and Mrs. Fellowes would scarcely be bosom friends.

[152]Nor was this the sole warning.

At the club a very old resident, wife of a Government employé, who had spent twenty years in Kulu, came and seated herself by me one morning with the air of a person who desired to fulfil a disagreeable duty.

“I am afraid you will think me presuming, Mrs. Drummond, but I feel that I *ought* to speak. Do you know that the house your cousin has taken is said to be unlucky? The last people only remained a month, though they got it for next to nothing—a mere song.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of these places, and read of them, too,” I replied, “but it generally turns out that someone has an interest in keeping it empty; possibly natives live there.”

“*Anywhere* but there!” she exclaimed. “Not a soul will go near it after night-fall—there is not even the usual chokedar——”

“What is it? What is the tale?”

“Something connected with those old mounds of brickwork, and the well. I think a palace or a temple stood on the spot thousands of years ago, when Kulu was a great native city.

“Do try and dissuade your cousin from going there; she will find her mistake sooner or later. I hope you won’t think me very officious, but she is young and happy, and has two such dear children, especially the little boy.”

Yes, especially the little boy! I was devoted to Guy—my husband, too. We had bought him a pony and a tiny monkey, and were only too glad to keep him and Baba for a few days when their parents took the great step and moved into the Red Bungalow.

In a short time all was in readiness; the big end room made a delightful nursery; the children had also the run of the back verandah and the garden, and were soon completely and happily at home.

[153]An inhabited house seems so different to the same when it stands silent, with closed doors—afar from the sound of voices and footsteps. I could scarcely recognise Netta's new home. It was the centre of half the station gaieties—Badminton parties twice a week, dinners, "Chotah Hazra" gatherings on the great verandah, and rehearsals for a forthcoming play; the pattering of little feet, servants, horses, cows, goats, dogs, parrots, all contributed their share to the general life and stir. I went over to the Bungalow almost daily: I dined, I breakfasted, I had tea, and I never saw anything but the expected and the commonplace, yet I failed to eradicate my first instinct, my secret apprehension and aversion. Christmas was over, the parties, dinners and teas were among memories of the past; we were well advanced in the month of February, when Netta, the triumphant, breathed her first complaint. The servants—excellent servants, with long and *bonâ fide* characters—arrived, stayed one week, or perhaps two, and then came and said, "Please I go!"

None of them remained in the compound at night, except the horsekeepers and an orderly; they retired to more congenial quarters in an adjoining bazaar, and the maddening part was that they would give no definite name or shape to their fears—they spoke of "It" and a "Thing"—a fearsome object, that dwelt within and around the Bungalow.

The children's ayah, a Madras woman, remained loyal and staunch; she laughed at the Bazaar tales and their reciters; and, as her husband was the cook, Netta was fairly independent of the cowardly crew who nightly fled to the Bazaar.

Suddenly the ayah, the treasure, fell ill of fever—the really virulent fever that occasionally seizes on natives of the country, and seems to lick up their very life. As my servants' quarters were more comfortable—and[154] I am something of a nurse—I took the invalid home, and Netta promoted her understudy (a local woman) temporarily into her place. She was a chattering, gay, gaudy creature, that I had never approved, but Netta would not listen to any advice, whether with respect to medicines, servants, or bungalows. Her choice in the latter had undoubtedly turned out well, and she was not a little exultant, and bragged to me that *she* never left it in anyone's power to say, "There—I told you so!"

It was Baba's birthday—she was two—a pretty, healthy child, but for her age backward: beyond "Dadda," "Mamma," and "Ayah," she could not say one word. However, as Tom cynically remarked, "she was bound to make up for it by and by!"

It was twelve o'clock on this very warm morning when I took my umbrella and topee and started off to help Netta with her preparations for the afternoon. The chief feature of the entertainment was to be a bran pie.

I found my cousin hard at work when I arrived. In the verandah a great bath-tub full of bran had been placed on a table, and she was draping the said tub with elegant festoons of pink glazed calico—her implement a hammer and tacks—whilst I burrowed into the bran, and there interred the bodies of dolls and cats and horses, and all manner of pleasant surprises. We

were making a dreadful litter, and a considerable noise, when suddenly above the hammering I heard a single sharp cry.

“Listen!” I said.

“Oh, Baba is awake—naughty child—and she will disturb her brother,” replied the mother, selecting a fresh tack. “The ayah is there. Don’t go.”

“But it had such an odd, uncanny sound,” I protested.

“Dear old Liz! how nervous you are! Baba’s[155] scream is something between a whistle of an express and a fog-horn. She has abnormal lung power—and to-day she is restless and upset by her birthday—and her teeth. Your fears——”

Then she stopped abruptly, for a loud, frantic shriek, the shriek of extreme mortal terror, now rose high above her voice, and, throwing the hammer from her, Netta fled into the drawing-room, overturning chairs in her route, dashed across the drawing-room, and burst into the nursery, from whence came these most appalling cries. There, huddled together, we discovered the two children on the table which stood in the middle of the apartment. Guy had evidently climbed up by a chair, and dragged his sister along with him. It was a beautiful afternoon, the sun streamed in upon them, and the room, as far as we could see, was empty. Yes, but not empty to the trembling little creatures on the table, for with wide, mad eyes they seemed to follow the motion of a something that was creeping round the room close to the wall, and I noticed that their gaze went up and down, as they accompanied its progress with starting pupils and gasping breaths.

“Oh! *what* is it, my darling?” cried Netta, seizing Guy, whilst I snatched at Baba.

He stretched himself stiffly in her arms, and, pointing with a trembling finger to a certain spot, gasped, “Oh, Mummy! look, look, *look!*” and with the last word, which was a shriek of horror, he fell into violent convulsions.

But look as we might, we could see nothing, save the bare matting and the bare wall. What frightful object had made itself visible to these innocent children has never been discovered to the present day.

Little Guy, in spite of superhuman efforts to save him, died of brain fever, unintelligible to the last; the only words we could distinguish among his ravings[156] were, “Look, look, look! Oh, Mummy! look, look, look!” and as for Baba, whatever was seen by her is locked within her lips, for she remains dumb to the present day.

The ayah had nothing to disclose; she could only beat her head upon the ground and scream, and declare that she had just left the children for a moment to speak to the milkman.

But other servants confessed that the ayah had been gossiping in the cook-house for more than half an hour. The sole living creature that had been with the children when “It” had appeared to them, was Guy’s little pet monkey, which was subsequently found under the table quite dead.

At first I was afraid that after the shock of Guy’s death poor Netta would lose her reason. Of course they all came to us, that same dreadful afternoon, leaving the birthday feast already

spread, the bran pie in the verandah, the music on the piano; never had there been such a hasty flight, such a domestic earthquake. We endeavoured to keep the mysterious tragedy to ourselves. Little Guy had brain fever; surely it was natural that relations should be together in their trouble, and I declared that I, being a noted nurse, had bodily carried off the child, who was followed by the whole family.

People talked of “A stroke of the sun,” but I believe something of the truth filtered into the Bazaar—where all things are known. Shortly after little Guy’s death Netta took Baba home, declaring she would never, never return to India, and Tom applied for and obtained a transfer to another station. He sold off the household furniture, the pretty knick-knacks, the pictures, all that had gone to make Netta’s house so attractive, for she could not endure to look on them again. They had been in *that* house. As for the Red Bungalow, it is once more closed, and[157] silent. The squirrels and hoo-poos share the garden, the stables are given over to scorpions, the house to white ants. On application to John Mahomed, anyone desirous of becoming a tenant will certainly find that it is still to be had for a mere song!