

SPOOKY HOLLOW

CAROLYN
WELLS



SPOOKY HOLLOW
A FLEMING STONE STORY

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Chapter I

Prout Has A Fare

Our Pilgrim band of stern and rock-bound forefathers left us a goodly heritage in New England. And, even though we may not still in awed tones call it holy ground, yet the soil where first they trod calls forth a certain respect and admiration not compelled by any other group of these United States.

To be sure they didn't tread all of it. Lots and lots of square miles of ground and lofty soil are still untrodden to any great extent, especially the northern parts of the northern states.

Maine, with its great, beautiful Aroostook County, whose far-flung potato farms have a charm all their own, and whose glistening white farmhouses have their barns hitched on behind like majestic trains of cars—the exquisite tidiness of Maine as a state far outranks all her twelve original sisters.

In New Hampshire the white paint is less immaculate, the state less tidily cleared up, but the woods against a stormy sky their giant branches toss, and the rocking pines of the forest roar their eternal welcome. Timid little lakes nestle confidingly among the hills and the White Mountains cluster in majestic serenity.

And then comes Vermont, beautiful, careless Vermont, forgetful of her white paint, heedless of her broken-down fences, conscious only of her green Green Mountains and the sounding aisles of her dim woods.

East of the Green Mountain Range, in northern Vermont, is wide, rolling country, with here and there a handful of small hills dumped down as though they had been flung at the Range and fell short of

their mark. Among them are valleys and lakes, vistas and scenery, verdure and foliage,—all that goes to make Vermont what her beautiful name means.

And villages. These are not always as picturesque as they should be, but man's place in nature is frequently out of harmony with his surroundings.

What should be a quaint little hamlet with an old white-spired church and a few clustering cottages, is more often a Four Corners or a few rods or perches of a stupid-looking Main Street, totally lacking in pride, prosperity, or paint.

Farm-houses are shabby and fences dilapidated, yet, after all, there are sites and spots—oh, the sites and spots of Vermont!

If one wanted to build ten thousand homes, he could find a satisfying site or spot for each and have as many left over.

In our forefathers' days, the soil where first they trod was considered the very thing for highroads, but now the broad white ribbon of concrete that tangles itself among the green hills is exceedingly convenient, without marring the picture.

And the towns that chance to impinge on or straddle that road are up to date and almost a part of the living, bustling world outside.

But the towns reached by the lesser roads, the older roads,—they have no animal spirits and lead a mere vegetable life.

Unless a great country house has been built on a site or a spot nearby, these little villages have none at all to praise and very few to love.

Hilldale was one of the prettiest of these villages and was in fairly good repair. This was owing to the fact that it had offered an unsurpassed site for a gentleman's country house.

The gentleman had materialized, and so, later, did the house.

It had happened forty years ago. Vicissitudes had removed the

gentleman but the house remained—remained empty for years, and at last, five years ago, had been bought, furnished, and occupied.

Yet the fact of the house, half a mile from the village street, so influenced and stimulated the villagers that unconsciously they lived up to it and gloried in its possession as in an invisible jewel held in trust.

For the house was invisible, by reason of those same dim woods and rocking pines, and moreover, because of high and strong stone walls.

Yet it was there and it was theirs, so Hilldale plumed itself and went about its business.

Off the main travelled road of traffic, it was also off the main line of the railroad and was reached by a tiny spur, whose trains, not impressed by the great house, ran with a debonair disregard of timetables or schedules.

And so, when one of these trains pulled up with a grinding jerk, and the leisurely, easy-going conductor sang out, “Hilldale!” John Haydock, who had risen, almost fell over backward by reason of the sudden stop.

The train was nearly an hour late, and though still well up in the heavens, the November sun was secretly preparing for a quick swoop down and out. The air was damp and raw, with a feeling that portended snow.

Beautiful Vermont had lost her green, but was bravely substituting a glory of red and russet and gold that clad her hills and dales with a blaze of autumn beauty.

John Haydock shivered as he stepped to the station platform, then drew up his overcoat collar, and appreciatively lapped up the beauty of the scene even while he looked about at conditions.

He saw a phlegmatic looking man standing near an elderly Ford, and with admirable sagacity deduced a local taxi driver.

“I want to go to Homer Vincent’s,” Haydock said, half expecting the man would drawl out “Wal, why don’t ye, then?” after the approved manner of Vermont natives in fiction.

But the influence of the house wouldn’t allow that, and the man merely gave a sort of grunt that seemed to mean “All right,” or “Certainly.”

Moreover, he showed a gleam of curiosity in his hard, weather-beaten blue eyes, and moved with alacrity as he took the stranger’s bag.

But he said nothing as he held the car door open for his passenger, and then took his own place at the wheel.

“Is it far from the village?” Haydock asked. The driver rolled a blue eye around at him.

“Ain’t never been there, eh?” he said. “Well, it’s about halfa mile,—good halfa mile. I ain’t never been in the house myself. Druv up to the entrance now, naginn,—just now, naginn. Great place!”

He spoke in an awe-struck voice, as one might of some masterpiece of God or man, and Haydock said, involuntarily:

“Is it such a beautiful house?”

“Is it? *Is it!* Well, you’ll soon see!”

They had left the village now, and were passing along a wooded country road, beautiful with its pines and hemlocks among the bright autumn leaves. A few roads branched to right or left, but the Ford car clattered straight ahead.

“Mr. Vincent get over his broken leg?” Haydock asked. “Can he walk all right?”

“Yep, mostly. Has a little limp—you’d hardly notice it, though. Course we don’t see him hardly ever.”

“Recluse?”

“Not quite that,—but sticks to his home mostly. Miss Vincent, now,

she's more sociably inclined."

"Miss Rosemary?"

"Well, no, I didn't mean her,—I meant the old lady,—Mr. Vincent's sister. Miss Rosemary, now, she's here, there, and everywhere. Ridin' a horse, drivin' a car, walkin', skatin' and they do say they're goin' to keep an airoplane."

"Really? How up to date they are."

"Well, they are, an' they ain't. Yes, sir, they are, 'n' they ain't. The old man, now—"

"Why do you call Mr. Homer Vincent an old man?"

"Thasso. He can't be mor'n fifty,—'n' yet, he somehow seems old."

"To look at?"

"Well, no; though 's I said, I don't often see him. But if he's passin' in his motor car, he don't look out an' nod at people,—see, an' he don't seem to be smilin'—"

"Grumpy?"

"Not so much that as—"

"Indifferent? Preoccupied?"

"That's more like it. Thinkin' 'bout his own affairs, seemin'ly. An' they do say he does himself mighty well. And why shouldn't he,—seein's he has plenty of money. Why shouldn't he, I say?"

"Is he married?"

The driver turned fully around, leaving the temperamental Ford to its own sweet will for a moment.

"Homer Vincent married!" he exclaimed. "I should say not! Him married!"

"What's so strange about that? Lots of men marry."

“So they do. Oh, well,—no, Mr. Vincent, he ain’t married.”

“What does he do? Any business?”

“Land, no; he’s got more money’n he knows what to do with. He just enjoys himself, one way ‘n’ another,—just one way ‘n’ another. Miss Vincent, now, Miss Anne, she rides about, stylish like, an’ makes fashionable calls on the minister an’ a few families of the town. They been here five years now, an’ yet mighty few people knows ‘em atall.”

“He didn’t build his fine house?”

“Land, no. It was built long ago, by a man named Lamont,—long about eighteen-eighty it was begun. Took years to build it, o’ course.”

“Is it so elaborate, then?”

“Is it? Look, here’s the beginnin’ of the stone wall now. See?”

“Good heavens, what a wall!” and Haydock stared at the high, massive, tessellated structure of carefully hewn and laid blue dolomite, that seemed to extend interminably.

“Yep, that’s it,” and the speaker wagged his head in deep pride of ownership. For Hildale felt that it owned the place individually as well as collectively; and this in utter disregard of any opinion Mr. Vincent might hold on the matter.

“He’s an inventor, you know,” Haydock was further informed, as they neared the gates. “But I don’t think he invents anything.”

The great iron gates stood open but gave access only to a long avenue shaded by almost perfect specimens of the beautiful “wine-glass” elm.

“That kinda ellum tree’s just about gone now,”—said Haydock’s guide. “Mighty few left in all New England. Fine ones, these. Now, here begins the poplar row. See’m,—not Lombardy,—they’re North Carolina poplars. I guess Mr. Vincent set these out. They ain’t long-lived. Well, here we come to the wooded drive. The rest of the way to the house is right through a jungle. I’d hate it.”

The jungle was a grove, rather sparse than thick, of pine, spruce, hemlock, and larch, and its shadows were dank and black.

An occasional white birch, slender and ghostly, instead of lightening the gloom, rather added to it, and the rays of the now setting sun could scarcely penetrate the murk.

“Not very cheerful,” was Haydock’s comment.

“Now, here, sir, is the tree that gives the place its name.”

“What is its name?”

“Greatlarch,—that’s what they call it, Greatlarch,—’count o’ that big tree there. See?”

Haydock looked and saw the tallest larch tree he had ever seen. It was enormous, a most magnificent specimen. Surely the name was well chosen.

“That’s a hummer,” he agreed.

“Yep; nothin’ like in these parts,—an’ I don’t believe, nowhere.”

“I don’t either!” said Haydock, regardless of negatives in his enthusiasm.

“Now, you see, sir, we come to the entrance proper. This stone gateway’s where I leave you. Want me to wait?”

“No,” and Haydock dropped his sociable manner and became again a stranger. “What do I owe you?”

“One dollar, sir. Don’t want me to wait? You stayin’ here?”

Haydock looked at him.

“I’m not sure just what I shall do. Have you a telephone?”

“Yes, sir; call 87 Hilldale”

“And your name?”

“Prout. Mr. Vincent knows me. Tell him you want Prout,—that is, if you do want me. To take you back,—you know.”

“Yes, I gathered that was what you meant. Good day, Prout.”

The entrance was a massive arch with a tower on either side.

It seemed to include guard-rooms and connected with what was doubtless a porter’s lodge.

Haydock stared at the heavy stone-work, the beautiful design, and the hint of green velvety lawn through the arch.

He wished the daylight would linger, but it was even now almost gone. The gathering dusk gave the scene an eerie aspect, the great larch whispered as its long branches slowly tossed about, and the pines responded with a murmur of their own.

Seeing no one, Haydock stepped through the deep, wide archway, and then stood still, spellbound at what he saw.

A pile of gray stone, red-tiled roofs, tall chimneys, towers, turrets, dormers,—a perfect example of a French chateau of the period of the Renaissance.

Haydock knew enough of architecture to realize that he was gazing at a masterpiece. He had no idea there was such a building in America. Perfect in every detail, exquisitely set in the midst of rolling lawns, well-placed shrubbery, and noble old trees, with half glimpses, in the fading light, of terraces and gardens beyond.

Deeply impressed, he approached the entrance, a recessed portico on the north side of the house.

Outer doors of massive oak stood open, and he entered a vestibule wainscoted and paved with richly hued marble.

Wrapt in contemplation of the detail work, he pushed an electric bell, and was still unheeding when the door opened and a butler faced him inquiringly.

He felt a slight thrill of disappointment, for, without knowing it, he had subconsciously looked for a lackey in gold lace or at least a powdered and pushed footman.

But this man, beyond all question a butler, and a knowing one, gave Haydock an appraising glance, and in a tone nicely poised between deference and inquiry, said:

“You wish to see—” The voice trailed off to nothingness, but the barrier form of the butler gave way no inch of vantage.

“Mr. Homer Vincent,” said Haydock, suddenly recovering his wits, and speaking with a firm decision.

“By appointment?” But the severity of the butler’s manner perceptibly decreased and he even stepped back from the threshold.

“No, not by appointment,” and John Haydock came under the portal and into the beautiful entrance hall. Again he was nearly swept off his feet by what he saw. Marble walls and floors, painted friezes, vistas of rooms opening one from another—surely he was transported to some Arabian Nights’ Dream.

And again he was recalled to equanimity by that calm, cool voice:

“What name shall I give Mr. Vincent?”

And after the merest instant of hesitation, Haydock said:

“Tell him Henry Johnson wishes to see him,—on business, private, personal, and important.”

This speech was accompanied by a straight, sharp glance at the man, and the visitor, half turning, began to give himself up to contemplation of his surroundings.

“Yes, sir. Will you step in the reception room, sir?”

The reception room, in a large circular tower, was at the right as one entered the house, and to this Haydock went.

The butler disappeared, and Haydock studied the room.

It was of the period known as Perpendicular Gothic, and the side walls, delicately paneled in old oak, reached to the richly ornamented and domed ceiling.

The chimney-piece, which curved with the circular wall of the room, was of the rare Italian marble known as Red of Vecchiano, and it was Haydock's study of this that was interrupted by the entrance of his host.

"You like it?" Homer Vincent said in a tone of slight amusement. "It is the only bit of that stone ever brought to this country."

Turning, Haydock saw a moderately tall man with moderately broad shoulders. His hands were in his pockets, and the smile that had sounded in his voice was perceptible on his strong, well-cut lips.

He stood erect, his head thrown a trifle back, as if sizing up the situation.

"If you like, I'll show you the whole house," he offered. "It's worth seeing."

And now, Haydock looked at him as if sizing him up. Seemingly he had forgotten the house in his interest in its owner.

He saw a strong face, which, though now smiling with courtesy, yet looked as if, on occasion, it could be hard, even severe.

This may have been imagination, for Homer Vincent's whole manner and attitude betokened only a friendly welcome.

But Haydock noted the firm curve of the chin, the straight line of the lips, and the haughty, aristocratic effect of the Roman nose, and concluded, offhand, that Homer Vincent was a power.

The dark hair was thickly streaked with gray, and the deep-set gray eyes were of a peculiar penetration. And yet, important though the man doubtless was, he had an air of indolence, of impatience under

annoyance, that was unmistakable and impossible to ignore.

“Well,” he said, shortly, “well, Mr. Henry Johnson, what do you want to see me about?”

With a cautionary glance out through the doorway, Haydock leaned toward him and whispered two words in his ear.

Vincent permitted himself a slight raising of the eyebrows,—an unusual concession to interest or surprise.

“You do right to be discreet,” he said; “let us go to my own private room,—it is just across the hall.”

He led the guest across toward the circular room in the opposite turret, corresponding with the reception room.

And this time Haydock couldn't restrain his exclamations.

“Let the business wait a few moments,” said Vincent, almost gleefully. “I admit I am proud of my home; let me show you a little of it.

“You see, it was built many years ago by one Lamont, an eccentric millionaire. It is an exact copy of one of the finest of the French chateaux. Moreover, it is built of the most magnificent marbles ever perhaps collected under one roof. Just the walls of this hall show French Griotte, Porte Venere, Verde Martin, and here you see American Black,—from Glens Falls. The floor is Morial marble from Lake Champlain.

“Ahead of you, looking toward the back of the house, you see the Atrium, copied faithfully from the Erectheum at Athens. We will not go there now,—nor to the Organ wing, where I have one of the largest and finest pipe organs in the world. We will go now into my own private room, and you shall tell me all about this matter you speak of.”

They crossed the hall, Haydock scarce able to tear his eyes from the cabinets, paintings, and rare pieces of furniture. The tall chimney-piece of the hall, Vincent said, was of Bois de Orient marble from Africa.

“Why all these rare marbles?” Haydock cried.

“It was Lamont’s fad,” Vincent replied. “And I’m glad he did it, for it saved my having to collect them. I bought the place complete, though totally unfurnished. It has been my pleasure to collect suitable furnishings and I have enjoyed the task.”

“I should say so!” and Haydock stared about the room they entered, which was Vincent’s very own.

Circular in form, it was finished in rare woods with a mantel of Siena marble and bronze, which showed figures of Hercules in statuary marble. The furniture, while not over-ornate, was in keeping with the character of the room. In the center was a great flat-topped desk, carved and inlaid, and at this the two men sat down.

It was after an hour’s conversation that Vincent said: “I will send for my sister,—we must consult with her.”

A bell brought the imperturbable, yet eagerly solicitous butler, whose name, Haydock now learned, was Mellish.

“Go to Miss Anne,” Vincent directed; “ask her to join me here if she will be so good. Tell her I have a caller here. And, by the way, Mr. Johnson, will you not stay the night? Then we can talk at our leisure and, also, I can show you over the house, which I feel sure will interest you.”

Haydock looked at his host questioningly, decided he meant his invitation sincerely, and accepted.

“But I have no evening togs with me,” he demurred.

“No matter, we will be informal. I am myself not overly given to conventions and my niece is dining out. Mellish, take Mr. Johnson’s bag to the south guest room, and make him comfortable there.”

Mellish departed, and after informing Miss Vincent, went about his other errands.

“Man here,” he announced a little later to his wife, who was also the Vincents’ cook. “Nicish chap, but addle-pated. So took up with the house he don’t know what he’s saying.”

“They’re often took like that,” returned Mrs. Mellish, placidly. “Where’s he put?”

“In the south room.”

“H’m; master must set a pile by him.”

“I don’t know about that. I’m not sure they ever met before.”

“Too bad Miss Rosemary’s out,—she likes a stranger here now and then.”

“Oh, Miss Rosemary wouldn’t look at him. He’s not her sort,” said Mellish.

Chapter II

The Guest At Greatlarch

The organ hall at Greatlarch was a massive west wing, with transepts looking north and south. The hall, as large as a small church, was Corinthian in design, with side walls of antique oak, marvellously carved and gilded, that had been brought from England in panels. High above the antique oak cornice rose the vaulted, coffered ceiling and at the east end was a balcony that might be reached from the second story. A rose window in the third story also looked down into the beautiful room.

In the semicircular west end was the great organ, and at its keyboard sat Homer Vincent, his capable hands caressing the keys with a gentle yet an assured touch. He usually spent the hour before dinner at the organ, and those who knew him could divine his mood from the music they heard.

Tonight his mood was variable, uncertain. He struck slow, close harmonies in a desultory fashion, his fine head bowed a trifle as if in deep thought. Then, suddenly, he would lift his head, and the organ would peal forth a triumphant strain, like a song of victory. Or some crashing chords would resound for a moment, to be followed by a silence or by a return to the slow, meditative harmonies.

Sometimes he would play works of the masters and again he would drift into improvisations of his own.

As the dinner hour drew near, Anne Vincent came from her room on a mezzanine floor, and went directly to the gallery that overlooked the organ room.

A slight little lady, a spinster of forty-seven, she had enough

pretensions to good looks to warrant her pride in dress. Her hair would have been gray, but for discreet applications of a certain concoction. It would have been straight, but for the modern invention known as a permanent wave. And so, she presented to the world a beautifully coifed head of dark-brown hair, whose frantic frizz was persuaded to lie in regular, though somewhat intractable waves. Her eyes were gray, like her brother's, but more bright and piercing. Her air was alert, observant and interested. Where Homer Vincent showed utter indifference to the universe at large, his sister manifested interest, even curiosity, toward all mundane matters.

Her slight figure was youthful, her manner animated, and her clothes were in exquisite taste and bore the labels of the best modistes.

Tonight she wore a Georgette gown of a pale apricot color, simply made, but with delicate, floating draperies that betokened the skilled hand of an artist. Her only ornament was a large and perfect ruby, set in finely wrought gold work.

With a light step she tripped down the short mezzanine stairs to the upper front hall. This was no less beautiful than the hall below. It was flanked on either side by four Corinthian columns with gilded capitals, and the panelled ceiling was modelled after one in the Ducal Palace at Venice.

Save for the Tower rooms on either side, this hall took up the entire front of the house, and from it a balcony rested on the portico above the main entrance.

Through the hall Miss Anne went, her high-heeled slippers making no sound on the rugs, which were skins of polar bears.

Through to the balcony above the organ room she passed and stood, one slim hand on the carved balustrade, looking down at her brother.

"Poor Homer," she thought to herself; "he doesn't know what to do. But of course Mr. Johnson is right in the matter,—and of course he knows—my! it means a lot of money! Well, Homer has plenty—if he will only think so. A strange man, that Mr. Johnson—now I think I like

him,—and then—I don't—I wish I—but, of course,—my heavens! here he comes now!”

Anne Vincent looked up with a smile as Haydock joined her on the balcony.

The man was still rolling his eyes about as if in a very ecstasy of delight in what he saw.

This was his first glimpse of the organ, as after their talk Vincent had sent him to his room to tidy up for dinner.

“I regret my informal attire—” he began, as he joined Miss Anne, but she brushed aside his apology.

“It's all right,” she said; “we're always informal when we're alone. Now I should like elaborate dress every night, but my brother and my niece wouldn't hear to such a thing. So you're quite all right, Mr. Johnson. What do you think of the organ?”

“I have no adjectives left, Miss Vincent. The whole place stuns me, I can scarcely believe I am in America,—I feel transported to the France of the Renaissance.”

“You are familiar with the history of that period?” She looked at him curiously.

“No,” he replied, honestly enough. “No, I am not. But I know this is all of that era, and anyway, it so overwhelms me, I can't quite analyze my emotions.”

“Yes, I felt like that when we first came here. But five years have made me feel at home in this atmosphere. Your room, Mr. Johnson, is just above my own. It looks out on the south gardens and I am sure you noticed the lagoon and the Greek Temple?”

“Of course I did, though the twilight view made me only more anxious to see it all by daylight.”

“Which you can do in the morning. My niece will be here then, and she

will show you the grounds. That Greek Temple is a Mausoleum.”

“A wondrously beautiful one!”

“Yes, is it not? And now, dinner is served,—come Mr. Johnson,” and then, “Come, Homer,” she called to her brother at the organ.

Vincent met them in the lower hall, and ushered them into the Atrium. This, perhaps the most imposing feature of the house, was a pure and perfect example of Greek Ionic architecture.

From the floor of native white marble, rose sixteen monolithic columns with gilded capitals and bases of Bois de Orient and Vert Maurin marble. The side walls were of Rose of Ivory marble quarried in the Atlas mountains of North Africa.

These details Homer Vincent told his guest as they passed through the great room, and drew his attention to the tall plate-glass windows that formed the whole southern end.

Between the Ionic columns of the semicircular south portico could be seen the lagoon with its fountain, and at its far end gleamed the pure white of the Greek Temple against a dark setting of pines and larches.

Johnson sighed as they turned to the dining room, another marvel of Italian Renaissance, in antique English oak, with tall chimney-piece of French Griotte and Belgium Black marbles.

“I wonder,” Haydock said, whimsically, as they took their seats, “if the native marble of Vermont resents the presence of these imported strangers.”

“I have thought that, too,” and Miss Anne’s eyes twinkled, “I am sure it is the case.”

“They dislike one another,” Vincent said, taking up the jest. “The Italian and African marbles scorn the Vermont stone, however pure and white. But they are silent about it, for the most part. In our living room is a chimney-piece of Porte Venere or ‘Black and Gold’ marble from Spezia, which, with its gold bronze ornaments is one of the

handsomest and most expensive features of the house. You will forgive my descanting on these things, Mr. Johnson, but I own up that this house is my hobby, and I am a bit daft over it.”

“I don’t wonder,” declared Haydock, with honest enthusiasm. “And I am glad to hear these details. Of course, I am especially interested, because of—”

“I am going to ask of you,” Vincent interrupted him, “not to discuss during dinner the business on which you came here. It is,” he smiled, “bad for our digestion to think deeply while eating, and too, I want you to do justice to the art of my cook.”

The dinner, indeed, as well as the service of it, was entirely in harmony with the surroundings, and though there was no unnecessary pomp or ceremony, the details were perfect and correct.

Mellish, like a guardian spirit, hovered about, and two waitresses under his jurisdiction were sufficient to insure the comfort of the party.

“I am sorry your niece is not at home,” Haydock said, as Rosemary’s name was casually mentioned.

“You shall see her tomorrow,” Vincent promised. “This evening we must have another confab in my study as to our business, and I trust we shall settle it to the satisfaction of all. Mr.—er—Johnson, you must remain here for a time as our guest.”

“Thank you,” Haydock said, simply. “I trust I may do so.”

He looked at Miss Anne, as if expecting a confirmation of the invitation, but she said nothing.

“I suppose,” he said, “that, having your sister and your niece, you have not felt the need of a wife as chatelaine of this wonder-home.”

Homer Vincent smiled.

“I’m afraid,” he said, “no wife would put up with my vagaries. I’m not

an easy man to live with—”

“Oh, now, Homer,” his sister protested, “you sha’n’t malign yourself. If my brother is a bit spoiled, Mr. Johnson, it is because my niece and I pet and humor him. It is our pleasure to do so. You see, my brother is a very remarkable man.”

“And my sister is blindly prejudiced in my favor,” Vincent tossed back. “We are a very happy family, and perhaps the more so that each of us follows his or her own sweet will.”

Although no outward change took place on the features of the blank-countenanced Mellish, yet could one have seen into his brain, there was indication of unseemly derision and unholy mirth.

For, as a matter of fact, every one at Greatlarch, whether family, guest, or servant, followed the sweet will of Homer Vincent.

At least, he did if he knew what was good for himself.

Yet Vincent was no tyrant. He was merely a man whose only desire in life was creature comfort; whose only pursuit was his own pleasure; whose only ambition was to be let alone.

His sister and niece might do what they would, so long as they did not interfere with his plans. His servants might have much liberty, many indulgences, if they would but attend perfectly to his wants or needs. Guests could have the freedom of the place, if they kept out of his way when not wanted.

Homer Vincent was not so much selfish as he was self-indulgent,—self-centered. He was scholarly and loved his books; musical, and loved his organ; artistic and aesthetic, and loved his house and his collections; he was of an inventive turn of mind, and loved to potter about in his various workrooms and laboratories, without being bothered as to what he was doing.

In return for these favors he gave his sister and niece pretty much a free hand to do as they chose, checking them now and then in the matter of expenditures. For though the Vincent fortune was large, it

was not inexhaustible, and the upkeep of the place was enormous. Yet it must be kept up in a manner to please Homer Vincent's ideas of comfort, even though this necessitated curtailing the hospitalities toward which Miss Anne and Rosemary inclined.

Homer was kindly by nature; he really disliked to deny Anne anything she wanted, but, as he said, they couldn't entertain all Hilldale all the time, especially as they had no desire to accept return hospitalities.

And if Miss Anne did have such an undesirable desire, she kept it to herself, for she adored her clever brother.

Her other brother, the father of Rosemary, had died five years before, an event which resulted in the girl's coming to live with these relatives.

The household was harmonious,—if and when the two women sank their own wills in the will of Homer Vincent. Otherwise not.

Not that there was ever any friction, or unpleasantness.

Vincent had a way of attaining his end without such. And, perhaps through habit, perhaps following the line of least resistance, both the older woman and the girl willingly capitulated when conditions required it.

For Rosemary loved her Uncle Homer, and Miss Anne fairly worshipped him.

It went without saying, therefore, that Vincent's hint that business matters should not be discussed at the table, was effectual.

Haydock acquitted himself fairly well. The interest he felt in the business which had brought him thither, and the absorbing entertainment of this beautiful home, filled his mind to the exclusion of all else. And since the first subject was for the moment taboo, he pursued the other with zest.

"The man who built this was a genius," he declared.

"It was built," Vincent informed him, "by a prominent firm of New

York architects, but as they faithfully copied an old French chateau, they had little need for originality. Of course it was a folly. These great palaces often are. After getting it, the owner found he hadn't sufficient fortune left to keep it up. So it came into the market, and years later I was fortunate enough to get it at a great bargain. Probably I paid not half of the original building cost."

"Lack of funds wasn't the only reason that Mr. Lamont wanted to sell it," Miss Anne said, with a glance at her brother.

"No," and Homer Vincent looked grave. "There is a tragedy connected with the place, but I try not to let it affect my nerves or even linger in my memory. I wish you would do the same, Anne."

"Oh, it doesn't get on my nerves, Homer, but I can't put it out of my memory, altogether. I am reminded of it too often."

"May I hear the story?" asked Haydock, looking from one to the other.

"If you wish," Vincent said, a little unwillingly; "but it's not a cheerful one."

"Anything connected with this wonderful place must be of interest," Haydock declared, and Anne Vincent began the tale.

"It's a ghost story," she said, her eyes showing a sort of horrified fascination. "You see, Mrs. Lamont, the wife of the former owner, was murdered in her bed—"

"Now, Anne," her brother interrupted, "we don't know that she was—it may have been a suicide."

"No," Miss Anne declared, positively, "she was murdered, and her ghost still haunts the place."

"Have you seen it?" Haydock asked. He had deep interest in the occult.

"I haven't seen it,—but I've heard of it," she replied, in a whisper. "What do you suppose it does? It plays the harp—the Wild Harp!"

"Oh, come now, Anne, don't bore Mr. Johnson with your fairy tales."