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THE GREY ROOM

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BY

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"Brunel's Tower"
"Old Delabole"
"The Three Brothers"
"Storm in a Teacup"
"A Shadow Passes"
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"Green Alleys: A Comedy"
"The Human Boy and the War"

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THE GREY ROOM

BY

EDEN PHILLPOTTS

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1921

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A most exasperating story. People
die at the hand of an undetectable
poison, unknown to science. There's no
detection here; we have at best, a
curious ghost story, with 258 pages
of interesting padding.

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THE GREY ROOM

CHAPTER I

THE piers of the main entrance of Chadlands were of red brick, and upon each reposed a mighty sphere of grey granite. Behind them stretched away the park, where forest trees, nearly shorn of their leaves at the edge of winter, still answered the setting sun with fires of thinning foliage. They sank away through stretches of brake fern, and already amid their trunks arose a thin, blue haze—breath of earth made visible by coming cold. There was frost in the air, and the sickle of a new moon hung where dusk of evening dimmed the green of the western sky.

The guns were returning, and eight men with three women arrived at the lofty gates. One of the party rode a grey pony, and a woman walked on each side of him. They chattered together, and the little company of tweed-clad people passed into Chadlands Park and trudged forward, where the manor house rose half a mile ahead.

Then an old man emerged from a lodge, hidden behind a grove of laurel and bay within the entrance, and shut the great gates of scroll iron. They were of a flamboyant Italian period, and more arrestive than distinguished. Panelled

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upon them, and belonging to a later day than they, had been imposed two iron coats of arms, with crest above and motto beneath—the heraldic bearings of the present owner of Chadlands. He set store upon such things, but was not responsible for the work. A survival himself, and steeped in ancient opinions, his coat, won in a forgotten age, interested him only less than his Mutiny medal—his sole personal claim to public honor. He had served in youth as a soldier, but was still a subaltern when his father died and he came into his kingdom.

Now, Sir Walter Lennox, fifth baronet, had grown old, and his invincible kindness of heart, his archaic principles, his great wealth, and the limited experiences of reality, for which such wealth was responsible, left him a popular and respected man. Yet he aroused much exasperation in local landowners from his generosity and scorn of all economic principles; and while his tenants held him the very exemplar of a landlord, and his servants worshipped him for the best possible reasons, his friends, weary of remonstrance, were forced to forgive his bad precedents and a mistaken liberality quite beyond the power of the average unfortunate who lives by his land. But he managed his great manor in his own lavish way, and marvelled that other men declared difficulties with problems he so readily solved.

That night, after a little music, the Chadlands' house party drifted to the billiard-room, and while most of the men, after a heavy day far afield, were content to lounge by a great open hearth

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where a wood fire burned, Sir Walter, who had been on a pony most of the time, declared himself unwearied, and demanded a game.

"No excuses, Henry," he said; and turned to a young man lounging in an easy-chair outside the fireside circle.

The youth started. His eyes had been fixed on a woman sitting beside the fire, with her hand in a man's. It was such an attitude as sophisticated lovers would only assume in private but the pair were not sophisticated and lovers still, though married. They lacked self-consciousness, and the husband liked to feel his wife's hand in his. After all, a thing impossible until you are married may be quite seemly afterwards, and none of their amiable elders regarded their devotion with cynicism.

"All right, uncle!" said Henry Lennox.

He rose—a big fellow with heavy shoulders, a clean-shaven, youthful face, and flaxen hair. He had been handsome, save for a nose with a broken bridge, but his pale brown eyes were fine, and his firm mouth and chin well modelled. Imagination and reflection marked his countenance.

Sir Walter claimed thirty points on his scoring board, and gave a miss with the spot ball.

"I win to-night," he said.

He was a small, very upright man, with a face that seemed to belong to his generation, and an expression seldom to be seen on a man younger than seventy. Life had not puzzled him; his moderate intellect had taken it as he found it, and, through the magic glasses of good health, good

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temper, and great wealth, judged existence a desirable thing and quite easy to conduct with credit. "You only want patience and a brain," he always declared. Sir Walter wore an eyeglass. He was growing bald, but preserved a pair of grey whiskers still of respectable size. His face, indeed, belied him, for it was moulded in a stern pattern. One had guessed him a martinet until his amiable opinions and easy-going personality were manifested. The old man was not vain; he knew that a world very different from his own extended round about him. But he was puzzle-headed, and had never been shaken from his life-long complacency by circumstances. He had been disappointed in love as a young man, and only married late in life. He had no son, and was a widower—facts that, to his mind, quite dwarfed his good fortune in every other respect. He held the comfortable doctrine that things are always levelled up, and he honestly believed that he had suffered as much sorrow and disappointment as any Lennox in the history of the race.

His only child and her cousin, Henry Lennox, had been brought up together and were of an age —both now twenty-six. The lad was his uncle's heir, and would succeed to Chadlands and the title; and it had been Sir Walter's hope that he and Mary might marry. Nor had the youth any objection to such a plan. Indeed, he loved Mary well enough; there was even thought to be a tacit understanding between them, and they grew up in a friendship which gradually became ardent on the man's part, though it never ripened upon hers.

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But she knew that her father keenly desired this marriage, and supposed that it would happen some day.

They were, however, not betrothed when the war burst upon Europe, and Henry, then one-and-twenty, went from the Officers' Training Corps to the Fifth Devons, while his cousin became attached to the Red Cross and nursed at Plymouth. The accident terminated their shadowy romance and brought real love into the woman's life, while the man found his hopes at an end. He was drafted to Mesopotamia, speedily fell sick of jaundice, was invalided to India, and, on returning to the front, saw service against the Turks. But chance willed that he won no distinction. He did his duty under dreary circumstances, while to his hatred of war was added the weight of his loss when he heard that Mary had fallen in love. He was an ingenuous, kindly youth—a typical Lennox, who had developed an accomplishment at Harrow and suffered for it by getting his nose broken when winning the heavy-weight championship of the public schools in his nineteenth year. In the East he still boxed, and after his love story was ended, the epidemic of poetry-making took Henry also, and he wrote a volume of harmless verse, to the undying amazement of his family.

For Mary Lennox the war had brought a sailor husband. Captain Thomas May, wounded rather severely at Jutland, lost his heart to the plain but attractive young woman with a fine figure who nursed him back to strength, and, as he vowed, had saved his life. He was an impulsive man of

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thirty, brown-bearded, black-eyed, and hot-tempered. He came from a little Somerset vicarage and was the only son of a clergyman, the Rev. Septimus May. Knowing the lady as "Nurse Mary" only, and falling passionately in love for the first time in his life, he proposed on the day he was allowed to sit up, and since Mary Lennox shared his emotions, also for the first time, he was accepted before he even knew her name.

It is impossible to describe the force of love's advent for Mary Lennox. She had come to believe herself as vaguely committed to her cousin, and imagined that her affection for Henry amounted to as much as she was ever likely to feel for a man. But reality awakened her, and its glory did not make her selfish, since her nature was not constructed so to be; it only taught her what love meant, and convinced her that she could never marry anybody on earth but the stricken sailor. And this she knew long before he was well enough to give a sign that he even appreciated her ministry. The very whisper of his voice sent a thrill through her before he had gained strength to speak aloud. And his deep tones, when she heard them, were like no voice that had fallen on her ear till then. The first thing that indicated restoring health was his request that his beard might be trimmed; and he was making love to her three days after he had been declared out of danger. Then did Mary begin to live, and looking back, she marvelled how horses and dogs and a fishing-rod had been her life till now. The revelation bewildered her, and she wrote her emotions in many

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long pages to her cousin. The causes of such changes she did not indeed specify, but he read between the lines, and knew it was a man and not the war that had so altered and deepened her outlook. He had never done it, and he could not be angry with her now, for she had pretended no ardor of emotion to him. Young though he was, he always feared that she liked him not after the way of a lover. He had hoped to open her eyes some day, but it was given to another to do so.

He felt no surprise, therefore, when news of her engagement reached him from herself. He wrote the letter of his life in reply, and was at pains to laugh at their boy-and-girl attachment, and lessen any regret she might feel on his account. Her father took it somewhat hardly at first, for he held that more than sufficient misfortunes, to correct the balance of prosperity in his favor, had already befallen him. But he was deeply attached to his daughter, and her magical change under the new and radiant revelation convinced him that she had now awakened to an emotional fulness of life which could only be the outward sign of love. That she was in love for the first time also seemed clear; but he would not give his consent until he had seen her lover and heard all there was to know about him. That, however, did not alarm Mary, for she believed that Thomas May must prove a spirit after Sir Walter's heart. And so he did. The sailor was a gentleman; he had proposed without the faintest notion to whom he offered his penniless hand, and when he did

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find out, was so bewildered that Mary assured her father she thought he would change his mind.

"If I had not threatened him with disgrace and breach of promise, I do think he would have thrown me over," she said.

And now they had been wedded for six months, and Mary sat by the great log fire with her hand in Tom's. The sailor was on leave, but expected to return to his ship at Plymouth in a day or two. Then his father-in-law had promised to visit the great cruiser, for the Navy was a service of which he knew little. Lennoxes had all been soldiers or clergymen since a great lawyer founded the race.

The game of billiards proceeded, and Henry caught his uncle in the eighties and ran out with an unfinished fifteen. Then Ernest Travers and his wife—old and dear friends of Sir Walter—played a hundred up, the lady receiving half the game. Mr. Travers was a Suffolk man, and had fagged for Sir Walter at Eton. Their comradeship had lasted a lifetime, and no year passed without reciprocal visits. Travers also looked at life with the eyes of a wealthy man. He was sixty-five, pompous, large, and rubicund — a "backwoodsman" of a pattern obsolescent. His wife, ten years younger than himself, loved pleasure, but she had done more than her duty, in her opinion, and borne him two sons and a daughter. They were colorless, kind-hearted people who lived in a circle of others like themselves. The war had sobered them, and at an early stage robbed them of their younger boy.

Nelly Travers won her game amid congratula-

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tions, and Tom May challenged another woman, a Diana, who lived for sport and had joined the house party with her uncle, Mr. Felix Fayre-Michell. But Millicent Fayre-Michell refused.

"I've shot six partridges, a hare, and two pheasants to-day," said the girl, "and I'm half asleep."

Other men were present also of a type not dissimilar. It was a conventional gathering of rich nobodies, each a big frog in his own little puddle, none known far beyond it and none with sufficient intellect or ability to create for himself any position in the world save that won by the accident of money made by their progenitors.

Had it been necessary for any of them to earn his living, only in some very modest capacity and on a very modest plane might they have done so. Of the entire company only one—the youngest—could claim even the celebrity that attached to his little volume of war verses.

And now upon the lives of these every-day folk was destined to break an event unique and extraordinary. Existence, that had meandered without personal incident save of a description common to them all, was, within twelve hours, to confront men and women alike with reality. They were destined to endure at close quarters an occurrence so astounding and unparalleled that, for once in their lives, they would find themselves interesting to the wider world beyond their own limited circuit, and, for their friends and acquaintance, the centre of a nine days' wonder.

Most of them, indeed, merely touched the hem

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of the mystery and were not involved therein, but even for them a reflected glory shone. They were at least objects of attraction elsewhere, and for many months furnished conversation of a more interesting and exciting character than any could ever claim to have provided before.

The attitude to such an event, and the opinions concerning it, of such people might have been pretty accurately predicted; nor would it be fair to laugh at their terror and bewilderment, their confusion of tongues and the fatuous theories they adventured by way of explanation. For wiser than they—men experienced in the problems of humanity and trained to solve its enigmas—were presently in no better case.

A very trivial and innocent remark was prelude to the disaster; and had the speaker guessed what his jest must presently mean in terms of human misery, grief, and horror, it is certain enough that he would not have spoken.

The women were gone to bed and the men sat around the fire smoking and admiring Sir Walter's ancient blend of whisky. He himself had just flung away the stump of his cigar and was admonishing his son-in-law.

"Church to-morrow, Tom. None of your larks. When first you came to see me, remember, you went to church twice on Sunday like a lamb. I'll have no backsliding."

"Mary will see to that, governor."

"And you, Henry."

Sir Walter, disappointed of his hopes respecting his nephew and daughter, had none the less

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treated the young man with tact and tenderness. He felt for Henry; he was also fond of him and doubted not that the youth would prove a worthy successor. Thomas May was one with whom none could quarrel, and he and his wife's old flame were now, after the acquaintance of a week, on friendly terms.

"I sha'n't fail, uncle."

"Will anybody have another whisky?" asked Sir Walter, rising.

It was the signal for departure and invariably followed the stroke of a deep-mouthed, grandfather clock in the hall. When eleven sounded, the master rose; but to-night he was delayed. Tom May spoke.

"Fayre-Michell has never heard the ghost story, governor," he said, "and Mr. Travers badly wants another drink. If he doesn't have one, he won't sleep all night. He's done ten men's work to-day."

Mr. Fayre-Michell spoke.

"I didn't know you had a ghost, Sir Walter. I'm tremendously interested in psychical research and so on. If it's not bothering you and keeping you up——"

"A ghost at Chadlands, Walter?" asked Ernest Travers. "You never told me."

"Ghosts are all humbug," declared another speaker—a youthful "colonel" of the war.

"I deprecate that attitude, Vane. It may certainly be that our ghost is a humbug, or, rather, that we have no such thing as a ghost at all. And that is my own impression. But an idle general-

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ity is always futile—indeed, any generality usually is. You have, at least, no right to say, 'Ghosts are all humbug.' Because you cannot prove they are. The weight of evidence is very much on the other side."

"Sorry," said Colonel Vane, a man without pride. "I didn't know you believed in 'em, Sir Walter."

"Most emphatically I believe in them."

"So do I," declared Ernest Travers. "Nay, so does my wife—for the best possible reason. A friend of hers actually saw one."

Mr. Fayre-Michell spoke.

"Spiritualism and spirits are two quite different things," he said. "One may discredit the whole business of spiritualism and yet firmly believe in spirits."

He was a narrow-headed, clean-shaven man with grey hair and moustache. He had a small body on very long legs, and though a veteran now, was still one of the best game shots in the West of England.

Ernest Travers agreed with him. Indeed, they all agreed. Sir Walter himself summed up.

"If you're a Christian, you must believe in the spirits of the dead," he declared; "but to go out of your way to summon these spirits, to call them from the next world back to ours, and to consult people who profess to be able to do so—extremely doubtful characters, as a rule—that I think is much to be condemned. I deny that there are any living mediums of communication between the spirit world and this one, and I should always

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judge the man or woman who claimed such power to be a charlatan. But that spirits of the departed have appeared and been recognized by the living, who shall deny?

"My son-in-law has a striking case in his own recent experience. He actually knows a man who was going to sail on the *Lusitania,* and his greatest friend on earth, a soldier who fell on the Marne, appeared to him and advised him not to do so. Tom's acquaintance could not say that he heard words uttered, but he certainly recognized his dead friend as he stood by his bedside, and he received into his mind a clear warning before the vision disappeared. Is that so, Tom?"

"Exactly so, sir. And Jack Thwaites—that was the name of the man in New York—told four others about it, and three took his tip and didn't sail. The fourth went; but he wasn't drowned. He came out all right."

"The departed are certainly proved to appear in their own ghostly persons—nay, they often have been seen to do so," admitted Travers. "But I will never believe they are at our beck and call, to bang tambourines or move furniture. We cannot ring up the dead as we ring up the living on a telephone. The idea is insufferable and indecent. Neither can anybody be used as a mouthpiece in that way, or tell us the present position or occupation and interests of a dead man—or what he smokes, or how his liquor tastes. Such ideas degrade our impressions of life beyond the grave. They are, if I may say so, disgustingly anthropomorphic. How can we even take it for

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granted that our spirits will retain a human form and human attributes after death?"

"It would be both weak-minded and irreligious to attempt to get at these things, no doubt," declared Colonel Vane.

"And they make confusion worse confounded by saying that evil spirits pretend sometimes to hoodwink us by posing as good spirits. Now, that's going too far," said Henry Lennox.

"But your own ghost, Sir Walter?" asked Fayre-Michell. "It is a curious fact that most really ancient houses have some such addition. Is it a family spectre? Is it fairly well authenticated? Does it reign in a particular spot of house or garden? I ask from no idle curiosity. It is a very interesting subject if approached in a proper spirit, as the Psychical Research Society, of which I am a member, does approach it."

"I am unprepared to admit that we have a ghost at all," repeated Sir Walter. "Ancient houses, as you say, often get some legend tacked on to them, and here a garden walk, or there a room, or passage, is associated with something uncanny and contrary to experience. This is an old Tudor place, and has been tinkered and altered in successive generations. We have one room at the eastern end of the great corridor which always suffered from a bad reputation. Nobody has ever seen anything in our time, and neither my father nor grandfather ever handed down any story of a personal experience. It is a bedroom, which you shall see, if you care to do so. One very unfortunate and melancholy thing happened in it. That

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was some twelve years ago, when Mary was still a child—two years after my dear wife died."

"Tell us nothing that can cause you any pain, Walter," said Ernest Travers.

"It caused me very acute pain at the time. Now it is old history and mercifully one can look back with nothing but regret. One must, however, mention an incident in my father's time, though it has nothing to do with my own painful experience. However, that is part of the story—if story it can be called. A death occurred in the Grey Room when I was a child. Owing to the general vague feeling entertained against it, we never put guests there, and so long ago as my father's day it was relegated to a store place and lumber-store. But one Christmas, when we were very full, there came quite unexpectedly on Christmas Eve an aunt of my father—an extraordinary old character who never did anything that might be foreseen. She had never come to the family reunion before, yet appeared on this occasion, and declared that, as this was going to be her last Christmas on earth, she had felt it right to join the clan—my father being the head of the family. Her sudden advent strained our resources, I suppose, but she herself reminded us of the Grey Room, and, on hearing that it was empty, insisted on occupying it. The place is a bedroom, and my father, who personally entertained no dislike or dread of it, raised not the least objection to the strong-minded old lady's proposal. She retired, and was found dead on Christmas morning. She had not gone to bed,

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