

Man Size in Marble

by E. Nesbit

Part Two

Soon I put Mrs. Dorman's strange tale out of my mind. On Thursday she left us. 'Don't worry about the housework,' she told Laura. 'I can do it when I come back next week.'

Everything seemed fine on that day. And the Friday started well, too. I got up early and lit the kitchen fire. Then my wife came down and we made breakfast together. When we finished clearing up the house became silent.

That afternoon we went for a walk. Laura seemed very happy and we came back to the house hand in hand.

It was only when we sat down together in the kitchen that I noticed that she was now very quiet. 'You are sad, my darling,' I said, half-jokingly.

To my surprise she said, 'Yes, I think I am a little troubled. I don't think I am very well. I have shivered three or four times since we came in. It is not cold, is it?'

'No,' I said. 'Perhaps you are unwell.'

'I don't think so,' she said.

Then after a silence she spoke suddenly. 'What a baby I am! Let's light the candles and have a nice evening together.'

So we spent a happy hour or two at the piano.

At about half past ten I always smoked my last pipe of the evening. Laura still looked ill and I did not want to make her worse with pipe smoke. 'I'll take my pipe outside,' I said.

'Let me come, too.'

'No, darling. Not tonight. You're much too tired. Go to bed - I shan't be long.'

I kissed her goodnight. As I was turning to go, she threw her arms around my neck. She held me tightly while I stroked her hair.

'Come on, darling. You're over-tired. The housework has been too much for you.'

Slowly she let me go. 'We've been very happy today, Jack, haven't we? Don't stay out too long.'

'I won't, my love.'

A late night walk

I walked out of the front door, leaving it unlocked. What a night it was! Above me, dark heavy clouds moved across the sky. Behind them the full moon shone brightly.

The night was silent. There was no sound of rabbits or half-asleep birds. Across the woods, I could see the church in the distance. I thought about our months of happiness.

The church clock struck. Eleven already!

I turned to go in but the night was too lovely. I could not go to our warm rooms yet.

As I left, I looked in through the low window. Laura was half lying on her chair by the fire. I could not see her face but she seemed to be asleep.

I walked away from the cottage and then slowly along the edge of the wood.

Suddenly I heard a noise. It sounded like footsteps echoing mine. I stopped and listened. The noise stopped too.

I went on and again heard the sound of steps. Someone else was in the woods - a wood thief, perhaps. I turned into the wood. Oddly, the footsteps now seemed to come from the path I had just left. An echo, perhaps?

The wood looked beautiful in the moonlight. The big trees reminded me of the columns in the church.

I turned into the Cemetery Walk. Soon I passed through the gate into the churchyard.



Reaching the stone seat where Laura and I had been earlier that afternoon, I sat down for a moment. Then I noticed that the door of the church was

open.

Had we left it unlocked the other night?

Only Laura and I ever visited the church outside of Sunday.

Missing

I went in and I walked up the aisle. Strangely, it was only then that I remembered – with a sudden shiver - about the walking statues. A moment later I was calm again. ‘What nonsense!’ I told myself. ‘Don’t be frightened by a silly story.’

With my hands in my pockets, I carried on walking up the aisle. I wanted to prove to Mrs. Dorman that the statues slept peacefully on Halloween.

In the poor grey light the eastern end of the church looked larger than usual. The columns above the statues looked larger too.

Then the moon came out and my heart jumped. The statues were no longer there.

At first I could not believe my eyes. Were they really gone? Or was I mad?

I bent down and felt with my hands. Nothing. Had someone taken them away as a joke?

I made a torch out of a newspaper which I was carrying in my pocket. Lighting this torch, I held it high above my head. The yellow light lit up the dark columns. I could now see clearly that the statues were gone. And I was alone in the church.

Or was I?

Terrified, I threw down my torch and ran down the aisle. I raced through the cemetery and back through the wood.

Suddenly a figure moved out of the shadows to stand in my path. ‘Get out of the way!’ I shouted, but the figure caught my hands.

It was Doctor Kelly.

‘Let me go!’ I shouted. ‘The marble statues have gone from the church.’

The young Irish doctor laughed. ‘You’ve been smoking that pipe too much!’ he said. ‘And listening to silly stories.’

‘I tell you I’ve seen it with my own eyes!’

‘Well, come back with me. I’m going up to old Palmer’s - his daughter is ill. We can go into the church on the way.’

‘Come on then,’ I said, calming down. ‘Perhaps you are right.’

We walked back to the church. All was silent. The place smelt very damp. When we walked up the aisle I shut my eyes. Then, I heard Dr. Kelly light a match.

‘Here they are,’ he said. ‘You’ve been drinking or dreaming.’

I opened my eyes and saw the two statues. They were in their old place. I breathed deeply.

‘It must have been some trick of the light,’ I said. ‘Or perhaps I have been working too hard. I was sure they were gone.’

The doctor was looking more closely at the statue on the right. ‘There is something strange,’ he said. ‘This hand is broken.’

Foiled?

And so it was. I was certain that it had been perfect the last time Laura and I had been there.

‘Perhaps someone has tried to remove them,’ said the young doctor.

‘Come and have a drink at our house,’ I said. ‘I’m sure there’s a simple explanation for this.’

Dr. Kelly nodded. ‘I suppose it’s too late to go up to Palmer’s now,’ he said. ‘I can go in the morning.’

We walked back to the cottage. On the way, we discussed what had happened. We agreed that my eyes had fooled me.

As we walked up our garden path, I saw something that surprised me. Bright light was coming out through our open front door. The kitchen door was open, too. Had she gone out?

‘Come in,’ I said, and Dr. Kelly followed me into the kitchen. It was full of lit candles, with at least a dozen in unusual places.

I knew that Laura lit candles at night when she was nervous. Poor child! Why had I left her?

We glanced around the room. The window was open and the wind was blowing light from the candles in one direction. Laura’s chair was empty. Her handkerchief and book lay on the floor.

I turned to face the window. It was only then I saw Laura.

‘Oh my God!’

A marble finger

She had fallen back across the window seat. Her head hung down but was clearly facing back into the room.

Had she gone to that window to watch for me? And what had come into the room behind her? What had made her turn with that look of horror on her face?

Her eyes were wide open. They saw nothing now. What had they seen last?

The doctor moved towards her, but I pushed him aside. Taking her in my arms, I cried.

'It's all right, Laura! I've got you safe, my love.'

I held her in my arms and kissed her, but I think I knew she was dead. Her hands were tightly held. In one of them she was holding something.

It was a grey marble finger.

The End

Text © 2019 by Kieran McGovern - Illustration © 2014 by Jane Samson