

DEATH AT THE MANOR

by Katharine Schellman

EXCERPT

As they walked, Mr. Wright fell in step next to Ofelia. “Have you ever seen a ghost before, Lady Carroway?”

“I have not,” she replied, as polite as ever in spite of the hint of skepticism in her voice. “Pray, what does it look like?”

“Like a lady in white and gray,” he said, and Lily was surprised to see how serious his expression was. His frivolous, unctuous manner had dropped away, and he shivered a little as he gestured toward the windows. “No one has seen her face. The first time I saw her she was standing right there, bathed in moonlight, when I was returning from a late night in the village. And my sister saw her in the early morning only two days ago. Some nights, we have heard her wails echoing through the halls, even when she is nowhere to be seen.”

Lily exchanged a look with her aunt, who seemed surprised by the detail in Thomas Wright’s story and the quaver in his voice. Either he believed wholeheartedly in his ghost, or he was putting on a very convincing performance for his audience.

“And what does she do?” Ofelia asked, sounding a little more somber now, as they drew to a halt in front of the windows. The small party looked around the corner of the hall. It was unremarkable enough, with several large paintings, and a tall, handsome curio cabinet standing in an alcove. An old-fashioned tapestry hung across one wall, though it was worn and faded enough that it was hard to tell exactly what picture it had originally presented.

“Nothing, so far,” Mr. Wright said, a sort of forced theatricality in his voice that left Lily puzzled.

She had expected, based on what Mr. Spencer had said the night before, to find an eager showman in Thomas Wright, ready to bask in the attention of curious neighbors, not a true believer in the supernatural. Glancing at Mr. Spencer out of the corner of her eye, she thought he looked equally puzzled.

“She stands and weeps, or floats around the hall and wails. Usually, if someone tries to draw close, she vanishes. But last month—” Mr. Wright’s voice dropped a little. He still glanced uneasily

toward the other end of the hall, as if momentarily distracted or looking for someone, before quickly returning his attention to his audience. “Last month she became angry when one of our housemaids came upon her unexpectedly. The lady in gray pursued her down the hall, wailing. Poor Etta was so scared that she fell down the stairs in her haste to get away. That was when our servants started leaving.”

“I trust the housemaid has recovered?” Mr. Spencer asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

“She has,” Mr. Wright replied. “But no one has tried to approach the lady in gray again. We think she wishes to be left alone.”

“Well,” Lily said, attempting a return to lightness, “as far as ghosts go, that sounds reasonable enough. I confess I feel that way often enough myself, especially after too many busy nights in a row.”

Ofelia, who had been looking a little wide-eyed, giggled, and Mr. Spencer quickly covered a cough that might have been a chuckle.

Mr. Wright scowled, his expression halfway between unease and displeasure. “I take it you are not a woman who believes in ghosts, Mrs. Adler?”

“I have never had the opportunity to find out whether or not I am,” Lily replied. “The homes I have lived in have all been stubbornly unhaunted.”

“For your sake, madam, I hope they remain that way,” Mr. Wright said. There was an unexpected note of resignation in his voice as he added, “It is not a comfortable thing to live with.”

“I would have thought you to be fond of yours, sir,” Lily said. “If you dislike her so, why go to the trouble of showing visitors around and telling them the story?”

Mr. Wright smiled, some of the showman creeping back into his manner. “Because you are here, dear ladies. And how could I resist such a beautiful audience?”

“Tell me, has your family any idea who this lady in gray might be?” Lily’s aunt asked politely.

He nodded, his voice dropping even further, and they all reflexively drew closer to hear what he was saying. “We each have our own theory, of course,” he said. “I believe it is my father’s great-aunt, Tabitha, whose bedroom was just this way. If you would care to see the spot?” He held out his arm to Ofelia, who took it. Mr. Wright, engrossed in his story once more, turned to lead them down the closest passage. “Tabitha died there some fifty years ago, of a broken heart, they say, after news arrived of the death of her betrothed in the colonies—”

His story was suddenly cut off by screaming. Not a single shriek of surprise or dismay, but a cry that seemed to go on without ceasing. Thomas Wright froze, the genial smile dropping from his face in shock. “Selina?” he called.

The screaming continued, growing more hysterical. Dropping Ofelia's arm, he ran toward the sound, which was coming from the far hallway, past the stairs. The others, stunned into stillness, stared at each other, unsure what to do.

"I think it's Miss Wright," Mr. Spencer said, all traces of merriment gone from his face. "Wait here—I shall see if they need any assistance." He made to go after, but Thomas Wright was already returning, rushing down the hall next to another man, who was carrying the screaming woman.

"The parlor, just next to you, Spencer!" Mr. Wright called. "Open the door!"

Mr. Spencer, the closest to the door, flung it open, and the hysterical woman was carried in. She was laid on a chaise longue in the middle of the dim little room, Mr. Spencer stepping forward to help settle her as the man who had carried her stepped back. Lily, glancing around as she and the other ladies crowded through the door, thought it looked like a space reserved for the family's private use, which made sense on an upper floor. Thomas Wright knelt next to the hysterical woman for a moment, clasping her hands.

"Selina?" he said loudly. But she kept screaming, her eyes wide and darting about the room without seeing anything. Judging by the round cheeks and dark hair they both shared, Lily thought she must be his sister. Whether they had other features in common was hard to tell when Selina Wright was in the middle of hysterics.

"Miss Wright?" Matthew Spencer tried giving her shoulders a shake. "You must stop this at once!"

But she clearly could not hear either of them. Thomas Wright took a deep breath and looked grim as, with a surprising degree of practicality, he slapped her across the face.

The screams stopped abruptly, her blank expression resolving into one of terror before her eyes latched on her brother. Her face crumpled in misery. "Oh, Thomas!" she sobbed, gasping for breath.

He gave her shoulders a little shake. "Selina, stop this—you must tell me what happened." But she only shook her head, clutching at his coat with desperate fists and dropping her head against his shoulder, her weeping shaking them both. Mr. Wright turned to the servant who had carried his sister. "Isaiah, what happened to her?"

Isaiah was a young Black man with very short, curly hair and broad shoulders. His plain, dark clothing marked him clearly as a servant, though it was nothing so formal as the livery that would have been worn in a great house. His wide stance spoke of confidence, and the easy way that Thomas Wright addressed him indicated long service and familiarity.

But there was no confidence on the manservant's face as he hesitated, gulping visibly and shaking his head. His eyes were wide, and he stumbled over his words as he tried to answer, either unsure how to respond or not wanting to. "It's . . . it's Mrs. Wright, sir. She didn't open her door when we knocked, and Miss Wright . . . she asked me to open it, since no one has the key . . . and she was there, sir— Mrs. Wright. She was there but she wasn't moving. There was nothing we could do, but there was no one else there what could have done it. She's dead, sir," he finished in a rush. "Mrs. Wright is dead. She was killed in the night."

Beside her, Lily heard Ofelia gasp, though she didn't turn to look at her friend. Mr. Spencer looked up, his dark eyes wide as he met Lily's from across the room. She stared back at him, frozen in shock, unable to believe what she had just heard.

"Killed?" Thomas Wright demanded, his voice rising with his own disbelief and his arms tightening around his sister.

"It killed her, Thomas," Selina Wright said, raising her head at last. Now that her hysterics had faded, her cheeks had gone ashen with fear. "There was no one else who could have entered that room. The lady in gray killed our mother."