The Departed

Clara Wren had learned early in her life that grief does not ask permission. It arrives quietly, settles deeply, and reshapes everything that follows. Long before her name became known among those seeking consolation, Clara herself had suffered a loss that never truly loosened its grip. Wealth and position offered shelter, but they could not quiet the longing to know that those we love do not simply vanish.

In the years that followed her loss, Clara became familiar with the idea of the *Summerland*. Among spiritualists, mourners, and quiet thinkers alike, it was spoken of not as a heaven promised, but as a place envisioned — a realm believed to exist beside our own, neither above it nor beneath it. A gentle continuation. Endless green fields beneath open skies, where warm winds moved through tall grass and the departed walked without pain or fear. There, it was said, families were reunited, made whole once more, watching and waiting in peace.

Clara never claimed to know whether such a place truly existed. What she understood, intimately, was the comfort the idea provided. To picture a child running freely beneath sunlight rather than lying cold beneath the earth, or a mother resting in warmth rather than darkness, offered something no sermon or science could supply. The Summerland was not a belief to be proven, but a thought to be held — softly, carefully — when grief pressed too close.

This was why she opened her parlour.

Her séances were never spectacles. Clara made no promises of voices or manifestations, nor did she claim authority over the unseen. She spoke often of the Summerland, but always gently — as a possibility, not a certainty. A place one might imagine loved ones had reached, if it brought comfort to do so. She offered a quiet room warmed by candlelight, where sorrow could be spoken aloud without shame, and where grief was neither challenged nor exploited.

She did not charge for her sittings. She was already wealthy, and believed that hope should never be sold. If imagining a loved one safe in that distant, gentle place eased a broken heart — even briefly — then that was reason enough.

Her household was discreet. Mrs. Linton, her housemaid, oversaw the daily rhythms of the home. Their lives were deeply intertwined, bound by affection, loyalty, and an understanding that could not safely exist beyond the walls of the house. In a world that demanded silence, theirs was a companionship built on trust and quiet courage.

It was on a cold November morning in 1890 that something unsettled the careful balance of Clara’s certainty.

She entered the séance room to prepare for that evening’s sitting. The hearth was cold. The curtains still drawn. And upon the centre of the table lay a cabinet photograph.

She had not placed it there.

Mrs. Linton assured her that no one had entered the room since the previous night. The doors had remained locked. The post had brought nothing.

The photograph itself was modest. A cabinet portrait, faintly aged but unmarked by damage. It showed a young boy — head and shoulders only — dressed neatly in a white shirt with an oversized collar. His expression was

unreadable. Not sorrowful. Not smiling. As though caught between moments.
Turning the card over revealed no photographer’s mark. No studio stamp. No city. Only a single name, written carefully in ink now softened with age:
William
At first, Clara attempted to dismiss it. A mislaid photograph. A mistake. Yet no sitter claimed it, and no explanation ever fully satisfied her.
In the days that followed, the comments began.
They were never made during the séance itself. Instead, they arrived quietly, spoken almost as an afterthought. One visitor mentioned seeing a boy on the stairs as she arrived, assuming him to be part of the household. Another spoke of a pale reflection in the glass behind Clara’s chair, visible only for a moment. A third, eyes closed during a sitting, described a small figure standing at the edge of the room, watching.
Each account was offered hesitantly. And yet the details never changed.
A boy of around nine. Neatly dressed. Silent. Still. Gone before a second glance could be taken.
Clara reminded herself of suggestion. Of atmosphere. Of the power imagination could wield in a room shaped by memory and hope. She had always warned her sitters that comfort could shape perception as readily as grief. The Summerland, she knew, had a way of giving form to longing.
And yet, over time, something within her shifted.
The boy’s presence did not bring fear. It brought calm. There was no sense of intrusion, no disturbance of the home. Instead, the house felt gentler for it — as though something lost had quietly returned to its place. Clara noticed that the heaviness she had carried for so many years — the sense of something unfinished — began, slowly, to ease.
She realised then that she was no longer asking whether William was real.
She was certain that he was.
Not because of signs or spectacle. Not because he confirmed the stories she had spoken of for so long. But because of the peace that followed him. Because his presence felt less like an arrival, and more like a reminder — that love does not end, and that those we grieve may remain nearer than we dare to hope.
In the Summerland, it was said, the departed watched over the living not with sorrow, but with patience. They waited not to frighten or to intrude, but to reassure.
And William, Clara came to believe, had not come to be summoned.
He had come to comfort.
From that day onward, the parlour no longer felt like a threshold between worlds, but a shared space — where memory, love, and the gentle promise of reunion could quietly coexist.
For the first time since her own loss, Clara Wren found the certainty she had never sought.