

The Terror by Night

By E. F. Benson

The transference of emotion is a phenomenon so common, so constantly witnessed, that mankind in general have long ceased to be conscious of its existence, as a thing worth our wonder or consideration, regarding it as being as natural and commonplace as the transference of things that act by the ascertained laws of matter. Nobody, for instance, is surprised, if when the room is too hot, the opening of a window causes the cold fresh air of outside to be transferred into the room, and in the same way no one is surprised when into the same room, perhaps, which we will imagine as being peopled with dull and gloomy persons, there enters some one of fresh and sunny mind, who instantly brings into the stuffy mental atmosphere a change analogous to that of the opened windows. Exactly how this infection is conveyed we do not know; considering the wireless wonders (that act by material laws) which are already beginning to lose their wonder now that we have our newspaper brought as a matter of course every morning in mid-Atlantic, it would not perhaps be rash to conjecture that in some subtle and occult way the transference of emotion is in reality material too. Certainly (to take another instance) the sight of definitely material things, like writing on a page, conveys emotion apparently direct to our minds, as when our pleasure or pity is stirred by a book, and it is therefore possible that mind may act on mind by means as material as that.

Occasionally, however, we come across phenomena which, though they may easily be as material as any of these things, are rarer, and therefore more astounding. Some people call them ghosts, some conjuring tricks, and some nonsense. It seems simpler to group them under the head of transferred emotions, and they may appeal to any of the senses. Some ghosts are seen, some heard, some felt, and though I know of no instance of a ghost being tasted, yet it will seem in the following pages that these occult phenomena may appeal at any rate to the senses that perceive heat, cold, or smell. For, to take the analogy of wireless telegraphy, we are all of us probably "receivers" to some extent, and catch now and then a message or part of a message that the eternal waves of emotion are ceaselessly shouting aloud to those who have ears to hear, and materialising themselves for those who have eyes to see. Not being, as a rule, perfectly tuned, we grasp but pieces and fragments of such messages, a few coherent words it may be, or a few words which seem to have no sense. The following story, however, to my mind, is interesting, because it shows how different pieces of what no doubt was one message were received and recorded by several different people simultaneously. Ten years have elapsed since the events recorded took place, but they were written down at the time.

Jack Lorimer and I were very old friends before he married, and his marriage to a first cousin of mine did not make, as so often happens, a slackening in our intimacy. Within a few months after, it was found out that his wife had consumption, and, without any loss of time, she was sent off to Davos, with her sister to look after her. The disease had evidently been detected at a very early stage, and there was excellent ground for hoping that with proper care and strict regime she would be cured by the life-giving frosts of that wonderful valley.

The two had gone out in the November of which I am speaking, and Jack and I joined them for a month at Christmas, and found that week after week she was steadily and quickly gaining ground. We had to be back in town by the end of January, but it was settled that Ida should

remain out with her sister for a week or two more. They both, I remember, came down to the station to see us off, and I am not likely to forget the last words that passed:

“Oh, don’t look so woebegone, Jack,” his wife had said; “you’ll see me again before long.”

Then the fussy little mountain engine squeaked, as a puppy squeaks when its toe is trodden on, and we puffed our way up the pass.

London was in its usual desperate February plight when we got back, full of fogs and still-born frosts that seemed to produce a cold far more bitter than the piercing temperature of those sunny altitudes from which we had come. We both, I think, felt rather lonely, and even before we had got to our journey’s end we had settled that for the present it was ridiculous that we should keep open two houses when one would suffice, and would also be far more cheerful for us both. So, as we both lived in almost identical houses in the same street in Chelsea, we decided to “toss,” live in the house which the coin indicated (heads mine, tails his), share expenses, attempt to let the other house, and, if successful, share the proceeds. A French five-franc piece of the Second Empire told us it was “heads.”

We had been back some ten days, receiving every day the most excellent accounts from Davos, when, first on him, then on me, there descended, like some tropical storm, a feeling of indefinable fear. Very possibly this sense of apprehension (for there is nothing in the world so virulently infectious) reached me through him: on the other hand both these attacks of vague foreboding may have come from the same source. But it is true that it did not attack me till he spoke of it, so the possibility perhaps inclines to my having caught it from him. He spoke of it first, I remember, one evening when we had met for a good-night talk, after having come back from separate houses where we had dined.

“I have felt most awfully down all day,” he said; “and just after receiving this splendid account from Daisy, I can’t think what is the matter.”

He poured himself out some whisky and soda as he spoke.

“Oh, touch of liver,” I said. “I shouldn’t drink that if I were you. Give it me instead.”

“I was never better in my life,” he said.

I was opening letters, as we talked, and came across one from the house agent, which, with trembling eagerness, I read.

“Hurrah,” I cried, “offer of five gu^{as} — why can’t he write it in proper English — five guineas a week till Easter for number 31. We shall roll in guineas!”

“Oh, but I can’t stop here till Easter,” he said.

“I don’t see why not. Nor by the way does Daisy. I heard from her this morning, and she told me to persuade you to stop. That’s to say, if you like. It really is more cheerful for you here. I forgot, you were telling me something.”

The glorious news about the weekly guineas did not cheer him up in the least.

“Thanks awfully. Of course I’ll stop.”

He moved up and down the room once or twice.

“No, it’s not me that is wrong,” he said, “it’s It, whatever It is. The terror by night.”

“Which you are commanded not to be afraid of,” I remarked.

“I know; it’s easy commanding. I’m frightened: something’s coming.”

“Five guineas a week are coming,” I said. “I shan’t sit up and be infected by your fears. All that matters, Davos, is going as well as it can. What was the last report? Incredibly better. Take that to bed with you.”

The infection — if infection it was — did not take hold of me then, for I remember going to sleep feeling quite cheerful, but I awoke in some dark still house and It, the terror by night, had

come while I slept. Fear and misgiving, blind, unreasonable, and paralysing, had taken and gripped me. What was it? Just as by an aneroid we can foretell the approach of storm, so by this sinking of the spirit, unlike anything I had ever felt before, I felt sure that disaster of some sort was presaged.

Jack saw it at once when we met at breakfast next morning, in the brown haggard light of a foggy day, not dark enough for candles, but dismal beyond all telling.

“So it has come to you too,” he said.

And I had not even the fighting-power left to tell him that I was merely slightly unwell. Besides, never in my life had I felt better.

All next day, all the day after that fear lay like a black cloak over my mind; I did not know what I dreaded, but it was something very acute, something that was very near. It was coming nearer every moment, spreading like a pall of clouds over the sky; but on the third day, after miserably cowering under it, I suppose some sort of courage came back to me: either this was pure imagination, some trick of disordered nerves or what not, in which case we were both “disquieting ourselves in vain,” or from the immeasurable waves of emotion that beat upon the minds of men, something within both of us had caught a current, a pressure. In either case it was infinitely better to try, however ineffectively, to stand up against it. For these two days I had neither worked nor played; I had only shrunk and shuddered; I planned for myself a busy day, with diversion for us both in the evening.

“We will dine early,” I said, “and go to the ‘Man from Blankley’s.’ I have already asked Philip to come, and he is coming, and I have telephoned for tickets. Dinner at seven.”

Philip, I may remark, is an old friend of ours, neighbour in this street, and by profession a much-respected doctor.

Jack laid down his paper.

“Yes, I expect you’re right,” he said. “It’s no use doing nothing, it doesn’t help things. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, beautifully,” I said rather snappishly, for I was all on edge with the added burden of an almost sleepless night.

“I wish I had,” said he.

This would not do at all.

“We have got to play up!” I said. “Here are we two strong and stalwart persons, with as much cause for satisfaction with life as any you can mention, letting ourselves behave like worms. Our fear may be over things imaginary or over things that are real, but it is the fact of being afraid that is so despicable. There is nothing in the world to fear except fear. You know that as well as I do. Now let’s read our papers with interest. Which do you back, Mr. Druce, or the Duke of Portland, or the Times Book Club?”

That day, therefore, passed very busily for me; and there were enough events moving in front of that black background, which I was conscious was there all the time, to enable me to keep my eyes away from it, and I was detained rather late at the office, and had to drive back to Chelsea, in order to be in time to dress for dinner instead of walking back as I had intended.

Then the message, which for these three days had been twittering in our minds, the receivers, just making them quiver and rattle, came through.

I found Jack already dressed, since it was within a minute or two of seven when I got in, and sitting in the drawing-room. The day had been warm and muggy, but when I looked in on the way up to my room, it seemed to me to have grown suddenly and bitterly cold, not with the

dampness of English frost, but with the clear and stinging exhilaration of such days as we had recently spent in Switzerland. Fire was laid in the grate but not lit, and I went down on my knees on the hearth-rug to light it.

“Why, it’s freezing in here,” I said. “What donkeys servants are! It never occurs to them that you want fires in cold weather, and no fires in hot weather.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake don’t light the fire,” said he, “it’s the warmest muggiest evening I ever remember.”

I stared at him in astonishment. My hands were shaking with the cold. He saw this.

“Why, you are shivering!” he said. “Have you caught a chill? But as to the room being cold let us look at the thermometer.”

There was one on the writing-table.

“Sixty-five,” he said.

There was no disputing that, nor did I want to, for at that moment it suddenly struck us, dimly and distantly, that It was “coming through.” I felt it like some curious internal vibration.

“Hot or cold, I must go and dress,” I said.

Still shivering, but feeling as if I was breathing some rarefied exhilarating air, I went up to my room. My clothes were already laid out, but, by an oversight, no hot water had been brought up, and I rang for my man. He came up almost at once, but he looked scared, or, to my already-startled senses, he appeared so.

“What’s the matter?” I said.

“Nothing, sir,” he said, and he could hardly articulate the words. “I thought you rang.”

“Yes. Hot water. But what’s the matter?”

He shifted from one foot to the other.

“I thought I saw a lady on the stairs,” he said, “coming up close behind me. And the front door bell hadn’t rung that I heard.”

“Where did you think you saw her?” I asked.

“On the stairs. Then on the landing outside the drawing-room door, sir,” he said. “She stood there as if she didn’t know whether to go in or not.”

“One — one of the servants,” I said. But again I felt that It was coming through.

“No, sir. It was none of the servants,” he said.

“Who was it then?”

“Couldn’t see distinctly, sir, it was dim-like. But I thought it was Mrs. Lorimer.”

“Oh, go and get me some hot water,” I said.

But he lingered; he was quite clearly frightened.

At this moment the front-door bell rang. It was just seven, and already Philip had come with brutal punctuality while I was not yet half dressed.

“That’s Dr. Enderly,” I said. “Perhaps if he is on the stairs you may be able to pass the place where you saw the lady.”

Then quite suddenly there rang through the house a scream, so terrible, so appalling in its agony and supreme terror, that I simply stood still and shuddered, unable to move. Then by an effort so violent that I felt as if something must break, I recalled the power of motion, and ran downstairs, my man at my heels, to meet Philip who was running up from the ground floor. He had heard it too.

“What’s the matter?” he said. “What was that?”

Together we went into the drawing-room. Jack was lying in front of the fireplace, with the chair in which he had been sitting a few minutes before overturned. Philip went straight to him

and bent over him, tearing open his white shirt.

“Open all the windows,” he said, “the place reeks.”

We flung open the windows, and there poured in so it seemed to me, a stream of hot air into the bitter cold. Eventually Philip got up.

“He is dead,” he said. “Keep the windows open. The place is still thick with chloroform.”

Gradually to my sense the room got warmer, to Philip’s the drug-laden atmosphere dispersed. But neither my servant nor I had smelt anything at all.

A couple of hours later there came a telegram from Davos for me. It was to tell me to break the news of Daisy’s death to Jack, and was sent by her sister. She supposed he would come out immediately. But he had been gone two hours now.

I left for Davos next day, and learned what had happened. Daisy had been suffering for three days from a little abscess which had to be opened, and, though the operation was of the slightest, she had been so nervous about it that the doctor gave her chloroform. She made a good recovery from the anesthetic, but an hour later had a sudden attack of syncope, and had died that night at a few minutes before eight, by Central European time, corresponding to seven in English time. She had insisted that Jack should be told nothing about this little operation till it was over, since the matter was quite unconnected with her general health, and she did not wish to cause him needless anxiety.

And there the story ends. To my servant there came the sight of a woman outside the drawing-room door, where Jack was, hesitating about her entrance, at the moment when Daisy’s soul hovered between the two worlds; to me there came — I do not think it is fanciful to suppose this — the keen exhilarating cold of Davos; to Philip there came the fumes of chloroform. And to Jack, I must suppose, came his wife. So he joined her.