

# The Late Earl of D.

By Amyas Northcote

The story which I am about to tell, whilst bearing some resemblance to a type of phenomena which have frequently formed the basis of tales both frankly fictitious or actually experienced, or believed to have been experienced differs in one or two marked respects from this type and is, therefore, worthy of record. Mr. Ellis, whose narrative I transcribe, has given a very clear and exact account of what befell him on that September evening in D. House; but, if it had been possible to ascertain whether the glass of the window had been changed during the fifteen years previous, it might have thrown still further light on how the phenomena were brought about. With this observation I give place to Mr. Ellis.

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I was but a young man when some thirty years ago I became the junior partner in Messrs. Ransome and Ellis, solicitors, of Lincoln's Inn Fields. The practice with which I thus became connected is an old-established one; sound, but of no very great magnitude, although we count several well-known and honoured families amongst our clients. Not the least among these was that of the Earl of D. and his family, the possessors of an ancient but not wealthy estate in the Midland Counties. At the date of my becoming a partner in Messrs. Ransome and Ellis the direct family of D. was reduced to two persons. The present Earl was a man of over middle age, unmarried and permanently resident at D. House, where he occupied himself in local activities, both charitable and official, and bore a high repute among ministers of many denominations as an earnest and sincere Christian gentleman. His lordship in his earlier years had by no means merited this description, having led an extremely wild life, a life not altogether untarnished by performances of a somewhat disreputable nature. He had passed through Eton and Sandhurst and joined a crack cavalry regiment from which, after sundry escapades, he had been requested to resign. Thereafter he had lived the life of a fast man about town, existing, after the expenditure of his private fortune, on his wits, a method of gaining a livelihood which is neither easy nor honourable, nor always successful. On more than one occasion his elder brother, who at that time held the Earldom, came to his assistance, raised money and paid his debts for him, thereby encumbering somewhat seriously a not very wealthy property. However, after the sudden and singular death of the Earl, The Honble. Charles, as he then was, turned over a new leaf and settled down soberly at D. to devote the remainder of his life to the activities I have mentioned. He did not marry, and at his death the title was doomed to extinction, although the property would pass to his sister, Lady Margaret, the other surviving member of the family, or to her children as the case might be. Lady Margaret had long ago quarrelled with her brother and neither she nor her husband visited D. House.

I must now devote a few sentences to the late Earl. This gentleman had been an invalid from very early years, suffering from a form of paralysis which entirely deprived him of the use of his lower extremities. Thus, confined to his bed, his chaise-longue or his wheeled chair, his energies were perforce diverted to literary subjects and, being gifted by nature with an acute and powerful intelligence and a great love of learning, he succeeded in supporting existence not unhappily. By nature he was a kindly and happy soul; fond of such society as he could mingle in, he was

popular among his neighbours and beloved by his tenants and other dependents. He read widely, wrote a little and meditated much. Owing to his malady he was necessarily much alone, but to this he was accustomed and he was well cared for by his confidential nurse-valet, a man named Sinnett.

During a certain September about fifteen years before I joined my firm, Mr. Charles descended upon D. House and his brother for one of his rare visits, visits which my partner well knew usually meant further arrangements being made by Lord D. for money to settle his impecunious brother's affairs. Lord D. could not have been especially attached to his troublesome junior, who had been cast off by their only sister as a hopeless prodigal, but he had a lively sense of the family honour and stretched his resources to avert a stain being cast upon it. Mr. Charles no doubt deliberately reckoned on his brother's sensitiveness in this respect. We do not know exactly what passed between the brothers during this last visit, but I gather that Lady Margaret had been recently protesting strongly against the possible injury to her children's interests that was being caused by Mr. Charles's extravagance and that this protest, coupled with the growing sense that his brother's pocket was a bottomless pit, caused Lord D. to refuse to make any further payments. At any rate during the two or three days of Mr. Charles's stay the relations between the brothers, which had not been cordial for years, grew extremely strained and on the last night of his life Lord D., after a violent quarrel, ordered Mr. Charles to leave the house the next morning for ever.

It now becomes necessary to tell exactly what took place during this fatal evening, as testified to by Mr. Charles, by Sinnett and by a footman.

According to the testimony of all three, the two brothers dined together in almost total silence, broken only by a few forced remarks made for the benefit of the servants. Sinnett, who acted as personal attendant at meal-times on Lord D., was no doubt fully aware of the quarrel, but the other servants might not have been so. After dinner Lord D. was wheeled into the library and established in his chaise-longue and the two brothers were left alone. When the footman took in the coffee at about nine o'clock, he heard angry voices and Lord D. exclaiming, "My patience and my purse are both exhausted. To-morrow you go for good and all, and I'll send £100 to your lodgings to take you to Canada or to the Devil as you choose."

Very shortly after this Mr. Charles left the library and went towards the smoking-room. To reach this room he had to pass that occupied by Sinnett, and the latter swore at the inquest on Lord D's. body that Mr. Charles had gone straight to this room and remained there. Sinnett further testified that at about half-past nine Lord D. had rung his bell; that he had gone in to him and found him much excited, and that Lord D. had said to him, "I have done with Mr. Charles for ever. He has worn out my patience at last and I have told him to leave the house to-morrow morning. See to it that the dog-cart is got ready for the half-past ten train." He then added that he was feeling nervous and upset, asked Sinnett to hand him a book and said he would ring when he wished to go to bed. This he usually did at about half-past ten. Sinnett continued, that a little after ten Mr. Charles had left the smoking-room and come to his room, where he had called his brother by a vile name and had said that he was being cast off for ever but that he would revenge himself by dragging the family name through the dirt and then, with more abuse of his brother and sister, had gone upstairs to his own room and shut the door. Sinnett remained in his room till nearly half-past eleven during which time he heard no sounds in the house (the servants, I should say, all slept and lived in another wing) and then, wondering at Lord D's. not summoning him, he had gone to the library. On opening the door he saw his master extended in the chaise-longue and on approaching him he realized that he was dead. He thereupon at once gave the alarm. Mr.

Charles was the nearest to the scene and appeared in a few minutes in his night-clothes and was completely overcome by the sad sight. A doctor was promptly sent for, a small country practitioner, who unhesitatingly gave a certificate of heart failure, and it was only at the new Lord D.'s earnest wish that an inquiry was held, the verdict at which was Death from Natural Causes.

I have given Sinnett's story at the inquest at some length as he was really the only important witness. The new Lord D. himself testified readily enough to the fact of the quarrel with his brother, admitted that he had been in a financially desperate position and generally impressed the coroner and jury with a sense of his absolute frankness. On the actual death he could throw no light. He was in bed, though not asleep, when he heard Sinnett calling below and he rushed down to meet the frightened servants, pouring in from the other wing. The story was all complete and exact and though there were some who could not help vague suspicions of all not being right, and among them Lady Margaret was to be numbered, yet there was nothing to be done. Lord D. was not well received when he next visited London, and he left town without delay to take up his abode at D. and lead the life which I have already described and which gradually gained him the applause of many serious-minded persons, as well as a certain popularity in the County.

Such was the position of affairs at D. when one day my senior partner, Mr. Ransome, who was at the moment laid up at home with the gout, sent me a letter which he had received from Lord D. asking him to go down to D. at once on some family business. I had never met Lord D. up to that time, and as the illness of my partner had thrown an unusual amount of work on me I was not over anxious to take time from the office for a visit to D. However, Mr. Ransome was anxious that I should go, partly in order to enable me to make his lordship's personal acquaintance and partly because he did not wish to refuse to accede to the wishes of a valuable client. It was accordingly arranged that I should go down to D. one afternoon, spend the evening at work and return to London the next day. This programme was duly commenced and one warm afternoon late in September found me arriving at D. House in a smart dog-cart.

The door was opened to me by a footman, and I was ushered at once into a study, where I found a middle-aged, serious looking but handsome gentleman, who introduced himself as Lord D. His appearance was irreproachable and his manners were suave and urbane, but there was something about him which repelled me; it was indefinable, but I had rather the feeling that here was a man who lived permanently masked. After a cup of tea and a brief chat, Lord D. expressed his regret at the shortness of my stay and suggested that, as time was of value, perhaps I would wish to begin my work now. On my expressing my assent he rose and showed the way to a large room, which I saw at a glance was the library, the room in which, it will be recollected, the late Lord D. had died. As his successor opened the door, I thought I noticed what appeared to be an almost imperceptible hesitation about crossing the threshold, but I may well have been wrong, for 'without apparent pause Lord D. led me across the room to an opposite door, which he proceeded to unlock, explaining as he did so that it was that of the muniment room, where were stored the papers I should need in my researches. Having shown me where to look for them, and having expressed the hope that I should find the library—which he said was not often used—comfortable to work in, Lord D. took his departure, leaving me to survey my surroundings.

The library was a long and rather low room. At one end was the fireplace, in which, despite the warm weather, a large fire was blazing. At the other end were two windows. In the centre of one side of the room was the entrance door and opposite to it that of the muniment room. A large writing-table stood between the two windows and a small round table was near the fireplace. Some chairs were scattered about and I especially noticed a chaise-longue fitted with a book

holder, which had been pushed into one corner and which I guessed was the one in which the late lord had been found dead. After this survey of the room, I collected my papers, settled down, and worked quietly until the bell warned me it was time to prepare for dinner.

On going down to the drawing-room I was civilly greeted by Lord D. and we proceeded to the dining-room where I saw the butler for the first time. This man I already knew to be Sinnett, the late lord's body servant, who had been retained by the present peer as his butler. The man impressed me most unfavourably. He stood carelessly behind Lord D.'s chair, taking no active part in the service of the meal and wearing an air of ill-concealed insolence. I observed that he watched me closely and suspiciously as if in some way he felt my presence inimical to him.

After dinner and the departure of this ill-looking fellow, Lord D. and I smoked and chatted pleasantly on various subjects till about nine o'clock, when I suggested that I should go and finish my work as I was to make an early start the next day. Lord D. agreed, so, bidding him goodnight, I returned to the library.

I found the room insufferably hot; the night was warm, and the servants had piled up the fire with perfect disregard of the temperature outside. Accordingly, before beginning work, I threw open one of the windows and then settled down to my papers. I worked steadily and uninterruptedly for some time and at last, my work finished, I bundled up my documents, restored the various deeds to the muniment room and, having generally cleared up, walked over to the window and closed it, before finally leaving the room.

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My hand was raised to fasten the catch of the window when, as I vaguely looked at the lighted room behind me reflected in its dark panes, I was startled at seeing a man walk quickly across it. The door was, I knew, shut and I had heard no sound and, when I swung quickly round to face the intruder, I found myself to be looking at a room as empty as I had believed it to be. Thinking that my eyes had played me false, I turned again to the window and was again confronted with the reflection of the man, who was now standing near the centre of the room. Again I looked behind me, to see nothing, and again I turned to the window and its reflections. I was in no sense alarmed, but I began to feel strongly that I was about to experience something unusual and uncanny, and it was with great curiosity that I gazed at the darkened glass.

I now saw that the whole appearance of the room differed from its actuality. The lamp no longer stood on the writing-table but on the little round one I have before referred to. The chaise-longue was drawn out near this table and in it I saw part of the back of a recumbent figure. Close to the chair stood the man I had previously seen entering the room whom I now recognized to be Lord D. as he might have been some years before. With a shock I guessed I was probably seeing a vision of the last hours of the late Lord D.—for I took the figure in the chair to be his—and I watched with breathless interest.

The two men appeared to be engaged in a violent dispute and the younger, at any rate, to be beside himself with rage. He seemed to be threatening the almost motionless figure in the chair; who in turn I perceived to be making determined gestures of refusal. Suddenly the door opened and a third man appeared, whom I saw to be Sinnett. He did not advance into the room, but stood near the doorway, watching. The brothers, however, became aware of his presence, for the younger hastily crossed the room, caught Sinnett by the arm and began what seemed to be an appeal to him. While this was going on I saw, and the movement was curiously and firmly impressed on me, the reclining figure draw out a pencil and write a few words in the book it was

holding. As it did so, Mr. Charles, for so I shall call him, released his hold of Sinnett and sprang across the room towards his brother. As he advanced the latter let fall his book, a large red bound volume, nearly square, and raised his hands. Mr. Charles did not hesitate. He snatched a cushion from under the sick man's head and pressed it down upon his face.

I turned with a cry of horror, but the room lay still and quiet as ever and I forced myself once more to turn back to the window. But all was over and the reflection in the glass showed no more than the peaceful room.

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Dazed and sickened at what I had seen I sought my own room and lay wondering what I should do. I was determined on one thing, namely to leave the house without another sight of Lord D. or Sinnett. Therefore at the close of a weary night, I wrote a few lines to Lord D. to explain that I had finished my task and was leaving for London on the early train. Another thought then struck me. Why had the red bound book that Lord D. had been holding so impressed itself upon my mind, and had he written anything therein which would serve to bring his murderer to justice? The dawn was breaking, but no one was astir when I crept down to the library and searched eagerly for some little time for the book. Happily its distinctive shape and binding rendered my search successful. I found the book, anxiously looked it through and saw scribbled faintly and hurriedly on one of the pages the words "C. is going to murder—" That was all. Then I knew the vision of the night before to be real.

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For a time I hesitated as to the course to pursue, but ultimately I decided to remove the leaf carefully and show it to Mr. Ransome. On arriving in town I lost no time in seeking him out, telling him my story, and asking his advice as to what to do to obtain justice for the dead Earl. His opinion, however, chilled my enthusiasm, since he pointed out that no jury could possibly convict the present Earl on the testimony of a vision in a window pane and an unsigned and unfinished pencilled note. He agreed with me, that morally there could be no doubt of the present Earl's guilt, and rather ruefully assented to my argument that we could no longer continue to have any relations with him. It was, therefore, arranged that as soon as Mr. Ransome returned to business he should write severing the connection, but Fate disposed otherwise.

Two days after my visit to D., Lord D. was flung from his dog-cart as he returned from a meeting and was instantly killed. Immediately after his death and before Lady Margaret had been able to take possession of D. House, Sinnett disappeared and was never heard of again. He took nothing at his flitting, but it was found that for years past he had been in receipt of a considerable income from Lord D's. purse.

Of course my story was never told to Lady Margaret. I took an early opportunity of replacing the extracted leaf in its place, having first carefully obliterated the words written on it, and the cause for our resignation having been removed my firm continued and still continues to act as solicitors for the family.