

# The Steps

By Amyas Northcote

The following story purports to be the actual experience of one of our leading medical men, who, during the late war, attained considerable eminence in the treatment of nervous diseases and affections of the brain. The earlier part of the tale has been collected from other sources for the purpose of bringing about the necessary explanations of the experience itself.

At the beginning of the war, Sir Arthur H. was living with his wife and only unmarried daughter at their place in Hampshire. Sir Arthur was a soldier, and soon after the outbreak of hostilities was despatched to a command Overseas, leaving Lady and Miss H. in charge of Atherfield Court, which is situated in an accessible and pleasant part of Hampshire. The advantages of the neighbourhood caused it to be selected by the War Office as the site for an instructional camp for the new Army, and the quiet lanes around Atherfield were soon alive with khaki-clad men, exotic looking mules and motor vehicles of every type and size. Lady and Miss H. were both of them anxious to take their place in giving pleasure to our young soldiers, and besides occasional entertainments for the men, they threw open the doors of the Court to the officers of their acquaintance, who were cordially invited to bring their friends with them.

Among the officers so brought was a certain Captain X., a man slightly older than most of the officers of his rank and an agreeable, cultivated and travelled man. He was very popular in his Mess and had the reputation of being a capable officer, but no one knew much about him. Like so many other of the men who came to the aid of the old country from Overseas, he had no friends in England and if he had family ties here he never spoke of them.

At first he was very much liked by both Lady and Miss H., and was a very welcome visitor; but after a time the two ladies reached the conclusion that, charming and well-educated as he was, he lacked that indescribable something which characterizes a gentleman. However, they did not vary their hospitality towards him on that account, and he became gradually one of their most frequent visitors.

This state of things was interrupted after a time by Captain X. proposing marriage to Miss H., a proposal which she promptly and emphatically declined. Thereupon he ceased for awhile to visit the Court, but after a certain interval once more reappeared there and gradually resumed his old habit of frequent visits. The ladies did not greatly like this, and endeavoured by a colder manner towards him to discourage any intimacy; and matters remained on this slightly strained footing until Lady H. learned that the battalion to which Captain X. was attached, having completed its training, was about to proceed to France.

A few days before it left Captain X. called, ostensibly to make his farewells, but to the surprise and annoyance of Miss H. he seized an opportunity and once more offered himself as a suitor for her hand. She repulsed him firmly and finally, and a somewhat unpleasant scene took place, Captain X. vowing that come what might he intended to marry her and that, though she might refuse him now, a time would come when he would carry his point. Naturally angered, Miss H. replied equally emphatically that no earthly power would force her to marry him, and the two parted on very strained terms. A few days later the battalion went abroad, nothing further having been heard at Atherfield of Captain X., and in fact nothing more was heard from him.

For some little time various officers of the battalion who had been entertained by the H.'s kept up a desultory correspondence with them, and very occasionally one or other of them mentioned

Captain X.'s name, but he himself neither wrote nor sent any message to Atherfield, and gradually the memory of him became dim, to Lady H. at any rate. Miss H., if indeed she ever thought of him, never spoke of him, and the whole episode of his acquaintance seemed in a fair way to be forgotten.

About a year later Lady H. and her daughter were sitting in the drawing-room at Atherfield, the former busily writing letters for the afternoon post and the latter immersed in a book. Both were silent and deeply intent on their respective occupations. Suddenly Miss H. started and, laying down her book, exclaimed: "Who can that be coming down the passage?" adding after a moment's pause, "It sounds like that horrid Captain X.'s footsteps."

Lady H., who had heard nothing, looked up from her letters, saying placidly:

"That is quite impossible, my dear, and I do not think there is anybody in the passage, at least I hear no one."

Miss H. listened for a moment or so longer and then said:

"No, I was mistaken, but I certainly thought I heard some one walking quickly and rather uncertainly along the passage, and for a second the idea that it was Captain X. came into my head. I cannot think why I should have thought it was him, I fancied I had forgotten him. Anyway," she went on, "I was quite wrong because evidently there was nobody at all and I must have been dreaming."

Saying this, she picked up her book and Lady H. resumed her letters and thought no more about the occurrence.

Two days later Lady H. when looking through the list of Killed in Action in the *Times* noticed the name of Captain X. She did not associate this event in any way with the recent occurrence in the drawing-room, which she had completely forgotten, neither did she mention the notice to her daughter. The latter probably saw it herself, however, although she did not speak of it to Lady H. Both mother and daughter appeared anxious to avoid any allusion to the dead man of whom neither had any pleasant recollection.

About a week after the notice in the paper, Lady H. began to observe a change in her daughter's usual placid and cheerful manner. She had begun to grow nervous and wore an uneasy look. She made no complaints and at first eluded her mother's efforts to penetrate into what was wrong, but at last a mother's love and anxiety prevailed and Miss H. confessed that at intervals, in fact ever since the afternoon in the drawing-room, she had had an impression of the sound of approaching footsteps. These footsteps, she said, occurred at irregular intervals and at any time and place. They might be heard as she sat with her mother, or when she was out of doors or alone in her room. They always began some way off, approached hastily and, at first especially, rather irregularly and they always ceased at some little distance from her. What agitated her most was that the steps resembled those of the late Captain X. of whose memory she now felt a sickening fear and horror. Lady H., a practical, matter-of-fact woman, with no belief in what she called ghost humbug, was somewhat puzzled over her daughter's story, but on consideration put it down to fancy and a disturbed digestion, both of which she proceeded to treat, the former with advice and remonstrance, the latter with various simple remedies.

Miss H. grew no better under this treatment and Lady H. presently called in the services of their local doctor, a man of neither greater nor less ability than the mass of country practitioners. This gentleman also ascribed Miss H.'s trials to the purely physical causes of indigestion and followed in Lady H.'s footsteps in the matter of remedies with as little success as had attended her efforts. Miss H. grew worse and more nervous, and ultimately the local doctor, confessing his inability to deal properly with the case, recommended that the advice of a nerve specialist be

asked and gave Lady H. the name and address of the well known physician in London, who may now be left to tell the remainder of the story in his own words.

“On a certain date, which I need not more particularly specify, I received a letter from Dr. B. of Atherfield, Hampshire, saying that he had requested Lady H. to bring her daughter to me for advice. Dr. B.’s letter was not very clearly worded, but I gathered from it that Miss H. believed herself to be suffering from some form of haunting, a belief which Dr. B. did not wholly share. His country medical experience had not afforded him opportunities of studying the numerous subtle varieties of psychic affections, or I might say afflictions, which torment sensitive and receptive minds. While, therefore, he attributed Miss H.’s trouble to physical causes primarily, which causes might affect the mental and nervous system, I was prepared from the first to consider that this was far more likely to be a case of mental disturbance reacting on the body.

“Well, in due course Lady H. wrote for an appointment for herself and her daughter, and presented herself and the young lady in my consulting room on the prescribed date. On a first inspection I was not seriously disturbed by Miss H.’s appearance. She looked in good health and her various organs were in good working order. I listened to her and her mother’s stories and came to the conclusion that the probabilities pointed to the first sound of footsteps being genuinely clairaudient, that the late Captain X. had at the moment of his death, which I gathered was instantaneous, been deeply absorbed in the thought of Miss H., and that under laws which are known to exist, although by no means understood, had been transported spiritually to her neighbourhood and had become manifest by chair-audience to her during his approach. There are too many well authenticated cases of apparitions at the point of death for us any longer to disbelieve in their possibility, but the continuance of such manifestations for any length of time after bodily extinction are, as has been shown by Mr. Myers, of much more rare and less well-evidenced occurrence.

“Accordingly, whilst prepared to admit that in the first instance Miss H. had been the percipient of a genuine manifestation, I was inclined to believe that the subsequent recurrence of the footsteps was due to an unconscious agitation of her subconscious self and that they were genuine hallucinations, having no real existence. To remove those impressions it appeared to me desirable to prescribe a course of hypnotic suggestion; but I had no sooner hinted at this form of treatment than I found myself strongly opposed by Lady H., who emphatically declared her entire disbelief in and religious revolt from any such proceeding. Obligated to abandon the treatment, owing to this opposition, I fell back upon prescribing a tonic and a complete change of scene, and I advised Lady H. to take her daughter to the sea for a three weeks’ stay and to let me know on her return how the patient did.

“The ladies promised to follow my directions and left me, after which I allowed the whole case to fade from my mind.

“Exactly three weeks later it was revived by the receipt of a letter from Lady H. written from her London house and asking me to call and see Miss H. as soon as possible, as they had returned from the sea with the trouble not only unabated but greatly increased.

“At the time I was very busy, but I managed to get round to Street fairly early on the following morning. After a brief interview with Lady H., who was extremely agitated, I was shown up alone to Miss H.’s sitting-room, a pleasant apartment at the back of the house and approached by a short, oilcloth-covered passage.

“I was greatly shocked by the change in the young lady’s appearance. Physically she had deteriorated greatly, as was apparent at the first glance, but mentally her condition was even more alarming. She had apparently lost all control over herself, trembled violently for no

ostensible reason, and appeared to be constantly keenly listening for some dreaded sound. She greeted me eagerly and instantly began:

“ ‘Oh, doctor, can you not help me? I know you thought when I saw you before you could do something, if only Mother, would have allowed it; and now I will insist on doing anything you tell me, anything, if only I can be relieved from him.’

“ ‘Tell me more of your trouble,’ I said. ‘Are you still haunted by the sound of footsteps?’

“ ‘Haunted,’ she said. ‘Haunted, yes, that is just the word. You know I told you I was troubled by footsteps coming from a distance and stopping well away from me. They did not come often then, but they do now; they come all the time,’ she went on, ‘and come clearer and louder and they come nearer. Nearer, nearer, they come close to me and, oh God, one day he will reach and touch me and then—’”

She stopped for a moment and I was thinking what I could say to reassure her when she suddenly caught hold of my arm.

“ ‘There they are now,’ she cried. ‘Listen, they are coming down the passage. Listen, listen.’

“Her distress and agitation were so extreme that I could not control myself for a moment and we both sat in dead silence listening. I am not a nervous or imaginative man and in my cool moments I am sure I was mistaken; but at that instant I could have sworn that I heard a footfall on the oilcloth outside.

“ ‘Do you hear him?’ she cried again. ‘He is coming, oh, help me.’

“I took her hands in mine and looked her steadily in the face.

“ ‘Control yourself,’ I said. ‘You are safe, you cannot be harmed.’

“As I spoke her look of she said:

‘He has stopped; he has gone again—but he will come back. He will never really go away till he can take me too.’

“I did my best to reassure her and presently she grew calmer and promised me that she would certainly not listen for the recurrence of the steps, and would endeavour to surround herself with a form of protective envelope, evolved out of her own inner thoughts and will power, so as to ward them off. I was, however, determined at once to commence a course of hypnotic suggestion; with the consent of Lady H. if possible, if not, without. Accordingly I went downstairs and after an earnest conversation with her at last I carried my point. I was then obliged to leave the house to attend to other pressing duties, but I settled to return that afternoon and commence the treatment. In the meantime I arranged with Lady H. that, pending my return, either she or some trusty servant should remain constantly with Miss H.

“That afternoon, in accordance with my promise, I returned to — Street to find the house in sad trouble, the butler, who opened the door, informing me that Miss H. had died suddenly a short time before. While talking to him about the event, I saw Dr. K., a family physician of my acquaintance, descending the stairs. He greeted me and, telling me that he was the London medical attendant of the H. family, took me into a room on the ground floor to tell me what details he could of the tragedy.

“It appeared that after my visit Miss H. had grown more cheerful and confident of herself. She had been quickly joined by her mother, and the two ladies had remained together till after luncheon, when they went into the drawing-room. A short time after this Lady H. was called to the telephone and, knowing that her absence would be short and thinking Miss H. might, in her happier frame of mind, be left for this brief space of time, she went downstairs to the instrument, leaving Miss H. lying on a sofa alone in the drawing-room. Lady H. had just finished her conversation and was hanging up the receiver when she was startled by hearing a loud scream for

help. She rushed upstairs to find Miss H. stretched on the floor in a corner of the room some distance from her sofa, dead.

“After a few questions had been asked and answered, I asked Dr. K. for his opinion as to the cause of death, and he replied:

“ ‘Heart failure, undoubtedly caused in my opinion by a shock; but I can form no opinion as to its nature, as there was nothing in Miss H.’s surroundings in the drawing-room of an unusual or alarming character.’

“He presently offered to allow me to inspect the body, and I can only say that I have never seen on any living or dead face such an agonized look of fear and horror as on that of the dead girl.”