

# Fight With A Ghost

By Q. E. D.

“No, I never believed much in ghosts,” said the doctor. “But I was always rather afraid of them.”

“Have you ever seen one?” asked one of the other men.

The doctor took his cigar out of his mouth and contemplated the ash for a moment or two before replying. “I have had some rather startling experiences,” he said, after a pause, during which the rest of us exchanged glances, for the doctor has seen many things and is not averse to talking about them in congenial company. “Would you care about hearing one of them? It gives me the cold shivers now to speak of it.” We nodded, and the doctor, taking a sip as an antidote to the shivers, began:

“You remember George Carson, who played for the 'Varsity some years ago; big chap, with a light mustache? Well, I saw a good deal of him before he married, while he was reading for the bar in town. It was just after he became engaged to Miss Stonor, who is now Mrs. Carson, that he asked me to go down to a place which his people had taken in the country. Miss Stonor was to be there and he wanted me to meet her. I could not go down for Christmas Day, as I had promised to be with my people. But as I had been working a bit too hard, and wanted a few days' rest, I decided to run down for a few days about the New Year.

“Woodcote was a pleasant enough place to look at. There were two packs of hounds within easy distance, and it was not far enough from a station to cut you off completely from the morning papers. The Carsons had been lucky, I thought, in coming across such a good house at such a moderate figure. For, as George told me, the owner had been obliged to go abroad for his health, and was anxious not to leave the place empty all the winter. It was an old house, with big gables and preposterous corners all over the place, and you couldn't walk ten paces along any of the passages without tumbling up or down stairs. But it had been patched from time to time and, among other improvements, a big billiard-room had been built out at the back. A country house in the winter without a billiard-room, when the frost stops hunting, is just—well, not even a gilded prison. The party was a small one; besides George and his father and mother, there were only a couple of Misses Carson, who, being somewhere in the early teens, didn't count, and Miss Stonor, who, of course, counted a good deal, and, lastly, myself.

“Miss Stonor ought to have been happy, for George Carson, besides being an excellent fellow all around, was by no means a bad match, being an only son with considerable expectations. But, somehow or other, she did not strike me as looking either very well or very happy. She gave me the impression of having something on her mind, which made her alternately nervous and listless. George, I fancied, noticed it, and was puzzled by it, for I caught him several times watching her with an anxious and inquiring look, but, as I was not there as a doctor, of course it was no business of mine, though I discovered the reason before I left Woodcote.

“The second night after my arrival—we had been playing, I remember, a family pool; the rest had gone upstairs to bed—George and I adjourned to a sort of study, which he had arranged upstairs, for a final smoke and a chat before turning in. The study was next to his bedroom, and parted off from it by curtains. As we were settling down I missed my pipe, and remembered that I had laid it down in the billiard-room. On principle I never smoke another man's pipe, so I lit a candle, the house being in darkness, and started away in search of my own. The house looked awfully weird by the flickering light of a solitary candle, and the stairs creaked in a particularly

gruesome way behind me, just for all the world as though someone were following at my heels. I found my pipe where I had expected in the billiard-room, and came back in perhaps a little more hurry than was absolutely necessary. Which, perhaps, explains why I stumbled in the uncertain light over a couple of unforeseen stairs, and dropped my candle. Of course it went out, but after a little groping I found it. Having no matches with me I was obliged to feel my way along the banisters, for it was so dark that I could not see my hand in front of me. And as I slowly advanced, sliding my hand along the broad balustrade at my side, it suddenly slid over something cold and clammy, which was not balustrade at all; for, stopping dead, and closing my fingers round it for an instant, I felt that I was holding another hand, a skinny, bony hand, which writhed itself slowly from my grasp. And though I could hear nothing and see nothing, I was yet conscious that something was brushing past me and going up the stairs.

“ ‘Hi—what’s that? Who are you?’ I called.

“There was no answer.

“I admit that I was in a regular funk. I must have shown it in my face.

“ ‘What’s the matter?’ asked George, as I blundered into his study.

“ ‘Oh, nothing,’ I answered; ‘dropped my candle and lost the way.’

“ ‘But who were you talking to?’

“ ‘I was only swearing at the candle,’ I replied.

“ ‘Oh! I thought perhaps you had seen—somebody,’ replied George.

“Somehow I did not like to tell him the truth, for fear he would laugh at my nervousness. But I determined to keep an eye on my liver, and take a couple of weeks’ complete rest. That night I woke up several times with the feeling of that confounded hand under my own—a clammy hand which writhed as my fingers closed upon it.

“The next morning after breakfast I was in the billiard-room practicing strokes while Carson was over at the stables. Presently the door opened, and Miss Stonor looked in.

“ ‘Come in,’ I said; ‘George will be back from the stables in a few minutes. Meanwhile we can have fifty up.’

“ ‘I wanted to speak to you,’ she said. “She was looking very tired and ill, and I began to think I should not have an uninterrupted holiday after all.

“ ‘Do you believe in ghosts?’ she asked, having closed the door and come up to the table, where she stood leaning with both her hands upon it.

“ ‘No,’ I replied, missing an easy carrom as I remembered my experience of last night, ‘but I believe in fancy.’

“ ‘And, supposing then that a person fancied he saw things, is there any remedy?’

“ ‘What do you mean, Miss Stonor?’ I replied, looking at her in some surprise. ‘Do you mean that you fancy—’

“I stopped, for Miss Stonor turned away, sat down on one of the easy-chairs by the wall, and burst into tears.

“ ‘Oh! please help me,’ she sobbed; ‘I believe I am going mad.’

“I laid down my cue and went over to her.

“ ‘Look here, Miss Stonor,’ I said, taking her hand, which was hot and feverish, ‘I am a doctor, and a friend of George. Now tell me all about it, and I’ll do my best to set it right.’

“She was in a more or less hysterical condition, and her words were freely punctuated by sobs. But gradually I managed to elicit from her that nearly every night since she came to Woodcote she had been awakened in some mysterious way, and had seen a horrible face looking at her from over the top of a screen which stood by the door of her bedroom. As soon as she moved the

face disappeared, which convinced her that the apparition existed only in her imagination. That seemed to distress her even more than if she had believed it to be a genuine ghost, for she thought her brain was giving way.

“I told her that she was only suffering from a very common symptom of nervous disorder, as indeed it was, and promised to send a groom into the village to get a prescription made up for her. And, having made me promise to breathe no word to anyone on the subject, more especially to George, she went away relieved. Nevertheless, I was not quite certain that I had made a correct diagnosis of the case. You see I had been rather upset myself not many hours before. George was longer than I expected at the stable, and I was just going to find him when at the door I met Mrs. Carson.

“‘Can you spare me one moment?’ she said, as I held open the door for her. ‘I wanted to find you alone.’

“‘Certainly, Mrs. Carson, with pleasure; an hour, if you wish,’ I replied.

“‘It is so convenient, you know, to have a doctor in the house,’ she said, with a nervous laugh. ‘Now I want you to prescribe me a sleeping draught. My nerves are rather out of order, and—I don’t sleep as I should.’

“‘Ah,’ I said, ‘do you see faces—and such like things when you wake?’

“‘How do you know?’ she asked quickly.

“‘Oh, I inferred from the other symptoms. We doctors have to observe all kinds of little things.’

“‘Well, of course, I know it is only fancy; but it is just as bad as if it were real. I assure you it is making me quite ill; and I didn’t like to mention it to Mr. Carson or to George. They would think I was losing my head.’

“I gave Mrs. Carson the same prescription as I had written for Miss Stonor, though by that time the conviction had grown upon me that there was something wrong which could not be cured by medicine. However, I decided to say nothing to George about the matter at present. For I could hardly utilize the confidence which had been placed in me by Miss Stonor and Mrs. Carson. And my own experience of the night before would scarcely have appeared convincing to him. But I determined that on the next day—which was Sunday—I would invent an excuse for staying at home from church and make some explorations in the house. There was obviously some mystery at work which wanted clearing up.

“We all sat up rather late that night. There seemed to be a general disinclination to go to bed. We stayed all together in the billiard-room until nearly midnight, and then loitered about in the hall, talking in an aimless sort of fashion. But at last Mrs. Carson said good-night, with a confidential nod to me, and Miss Stonor murmured, ‘So many thanks; I’ve got it,’ and they both went upstairs. George and I parted in the corridor above. Our rooms were opposite each other.

“I did not begin undressing at once, but sat down and tried to piece together some theory to account for the uncanniness of things. But the more I thought, the more perplexing it became. There was no doubt whatever that I had put my hand on something extremely alive and extremely unpleasant the night before. The bare recollection of it made me shudder. What living thing could possibly be creeping about the house in the dark? It was a man’s hand. Of that I was certain from the size of it. George Carson was out of the question, for he was in his room all the time. Nor was it likely that Mr. Carson, senior, would steal about his own house in his socks and refuse to answer when spoken to. The only other man in the house was an eminently respectable looking butler; and his hand, as I had noted particularly when he poured out my wine at dinner, was plump and soft, whereas the mysterious hand on the balustrade was thin and bony. And then,

what was the real explanation of the face which had appeared to the two ladies? Indigestion might have explained either singly. Extraordinary coincidences do sometimes occur, but it seemed too extraordinary that a couple of ladies—one old and one young—should suffer from the same indigestion in the same house, at the same time, and with the same symptoms. On the whole, I did not feel at all comfortable, and looked carefully in all the cupboards and recesses, as well as under the bed, before starting to undress. Then I went to the door, intending to lock it. Just as my hand was upon the key, I heard a soft step in the corridor outside, accompanied by a sound which was something between a sigh and a groan. Very faint, but quite unmistakable, and, under the circumstances, discomposing. It might, of course, be George. Anyhow, I decided to look and see. I turned the handle gently and opened the door. There was nothing to be seen in the corridor. But on the opposite side I could see a door open, and George's head peeping round the corner.

“ ‘Hullo!’ he said.

“ ‘Hullo!’ I replied.

“ ‘Was that you walking up the passage?’ he asked.

“ ‘No,’ I answered, ‘I thought it might be you.’

“ ‘Then who the devil was it?’ he said. ‘I’ll swear I heard someone.’

“There was silence for a few moments. I was wondering whether I had better tell him of the fright I had already had, when he spoke again:

“ ‘I say, just come here for a bit, old fellow; I want to speak to you.’

“I stepped across the passage, and we went together into the little study which adjoined his bedroom.

“ ‘Look here,’ he said, poking up the fire, which was burning low, ‘doesn’t it strike you that there is something very odd about this house?’

“ ‘You mean—’

“ ‘Well, I wouldn’t say anything about it to the master or Miss Stonor for fear of frightening them. All the same, scarcely a night passes but I hear curious footsteps on the stairs. You’ve heard them yourself, haven’t you?’

“ ‘Now you mention it,’ I said, ‘I confess I have.’

“ ‘And, what is more,’ he continued, ‘I was sitting here two nights ago half asleep, and—it seems ridiculous, I know, but it’s a fact—I suddenly saw a horrible face glaring at me from between those curtains behind you. It was gone in a moment, but I saw it as plainly as I see you.’

“I moved my seat uneasily.

“ ‘Did you look in your bedroom or in the passage?’ I asked.

“ ‘Yes—at once,’ he replied. ‘There was nothing to be seen; but twice again that night I heard footsteps passing—good God!’

“He started up in his chair, staring straight over my shoulder. I turned quickly and saw the curtains which parted off the bedroom swing together.

“ ‘What is it?’ I asked, breathlessly.

“ ‘I saw it again—the same face—between the curtains.’

“I tore the hangings aside, and rushed into the next room. It was empty. The lamp was burning upon a side table, and the door was open, just as George had left it. In the passage outside all was quiet. I came back into the study and found George running his fingers through his hair in perplexity.

“ ‘There is clearly one person too many in the house,’ I said. ‘I think we ought to draw the place and find out who it is.’

“ ‘All right,’ said he, picking up the poker from the fireplace; ‘if it’s anything made of flesh and blood this will be useful, and if not—’

“He stopped short, for at that instant the most awful shriek of horror rang through the house—a shriek of wild, uncontrollable terror, such as I had never heard before and I never hope to hear again. One moment we stood staring at each other, dumbfounded. The next George Carson had dashed out of the room and down the corridor to the stairs. I followed close behind him. For we both knew that none but a woman in mortal fear would shriek like that, and that that woman was Miss Stonor.

“Down the stairs we tumbled pell-mell in the darkness. But before I reached the landing below, where Miss Stonor’s room was, I felt, as I had felt the evening before, something brush swiftly past me. As I ran I turned and caught at it in the dark. But my hand gripped only empty air. I was just about to turn back and follow it, when a cry from George arrested me, and, looking down, I saw him standing over the prostrate form of Miss Stonor. The door of her room was open, and by the moonlight which streamed into the room I could see her lying in her white nightdress across the threshold. What followed in the next few minutes I can scarcely recall with accuracy. The whole house was aroused by the poor girl’s awful shriek. She was quite unconscious when we came upon her, but she revived more or less as soon as Mrs. Carson and one of the terrified servants had lifted her into bed again. Nothing intelligible could be gathered from her, however, as to the cause of her fright; she only repeated, hysterically, again and again:

“ ‘Oh, the face; the face!’

“When I saw I could do her no further good for the present, I took George by the arm and led him out of the room.

“ ‘Look here, George,’ I said, ‘we must find out the reason of this at once. I am certain I felt something go by me as I came downstairs. Now does that staircase lead anywhere but to our rooms?’

“George considered for a moment.

“ ‘Yes,’ he replied; ‘there is a door at the end of the passage which leads up into a sort of lumber room.’

“ ‘Then we’ll explore it,’ I said. ‘For my part I can’t go to sleep until I’ve got to the bottom of this. Get the man to bring a lantern along.’

“The butler looked as though he didn’t half like the enterprise, and, to tell the truth, no more did I. It was the uncanniest job I ever undertook. However, we started, the three of us. First of all we searched the rooms on the floor above, where George and I slept. Everything was just as we had left it. Then I pushed open the door at the end of the corridor. A crazy-looking staircase led up into darkness. We went cautiously up, I first with a candle, then George, and last of all the butler with a lantern. At the top we stepped into a big, rather low room, with beams across the ceiling, and a rough, uneven floor. Our lights threw strange shadows into the corners, and more than once I started at what looked like a crouching human figure. We searched every corner. There was nothing to be seen but a few old boxes, a roll or two of matting, and some broken chairs. But in the far corner George pointed out to me a rickety ladder which ended at a closed trap-door. Just then I distinctly heard the curious, half groaning, half sighing sound which had already puzzled me in the corridor below. We stood still and looked at one another. We all heard the sound.

“ ‘Whatever it is, it’s up there,’ I said. ‘The question is, who is going up?’

“George put his candle down upon the floor and stepped upon the ladder. It cracked beneath his weight. He stopped.

“ ‘Come down; it won’t bear you,’ I said. ‘I shall have to go.’

“I don’t know that I was ever in such a queer funk as I was while I slowly mounted that ladder, and pushed open the trap-door. I had formed no clear idea of what I expected to find there. Certainly I was not prepared for what happened. For no sooner was the trap-door fully open than there fell—literally fell—upon me from the darkness above a thing in human shape, which kicked and spat and tore at me as I stood clinging to the ladder. It lasted but a moment or so, but in that moment I lived a lifetime of terror. The ladder swayed and cracked beneath me, and I fell to the floor with the thing gripping my throat like a vise. The next instant George had stunned it with a blow from the poker and dragged it off urn. It lay upon its back on the floor—a ragged, hideous, loathsome shape. And the mystery was solved.”

“But you haven’t told us what it really was,” said one of the listeners.

The doctor smiled.

“It was the owner of the house,” he replied. “He had not gone abroad. He had gone to a private lunatic asylum with homicidal mania upon him. About a fortnight before this he had managed to escape; and, having made his way to his former home, had concealed himself, with a cunning often shown by lunatics, in the loft. I suppose he had found enough to eat in his nightly rambles about the house. The only wonder is that he didn’t kill someone before he was caught.”