

CASE II
The Top Attic
In Pringle's Mansion, Edinburgh
By Elliot O'Donnell

A charming lady, Miss South, informs me that no house interested her more, as a child, than Pringle's Mansion, Edinburgh. Pringle's Mansion, by the bye, is not the real name of the house, nor is the original building still standing—the fact is, my friend has been obliged to disguise the locality for fear of an action for slander of title, such as happened in the Egham Case of 1904-7.

Miss South never saw—save in a picture—the house that so fascinated her; but through repeatedly hearing about it from her old nurse, she felt that she knew it by heart, and used to amuse herself hour after hour in the nursery, drawing diagrams of the rooms and passages, which, to make quite realistic, she named and numbered.

There was the Admiral's room, Madame's room, Miss Ophelia's room, Master Gregory's room, Letty's (the nurse's) room, the cook's room, the butler's room, the housemaid's room—and—the Haunted Room.

The house was very old—probably the sixteenth century—and was concealed from the thoroughfare by a high wall that enclosed it on all sides. It had no garden, only a large yard, covered with faded yellow paving-stones, and containing a well with an old-fashioned roller and bucket.

When the well was cleaned out, an event which took place periodically on a certain date, every utensil in the house was called into requisition for ladling out the water, and the Admiral, himself supervising, made every servant in the establishment take an active part in the proceedings. On one of these occasions, the Admiral announced his intention of going down the well in the bucket. That was a rare moment in Letty's life, for when the Admiral had been let down in the bucket, the rope broke!

Indeed, the thought of what the Laird would say when he came up, almost resulted in his not coming up at all. However, some one, rather bolder than the rest, retained sufficient presence of mind to effect a rescue, and the timid ones, thankful enough to survive the explosion, had to be content on "half-rations till further orders."

But in spite of its association with such a martinet, and in spite of her ghostly experiences in it, Letty loved the house, and was never tired of singing its praises.

It was a two-storeyed mansion, with roomy cellars but no basement. There were four reception-rooms—all oak-panelled—on the ground floor; numerous kitchen offices, including a cosy housekeeper's room; and a capacious entrance hall, in the centre of which stood a broad oak staircase. The cellars, three in number, and chiefly used as lumber-rooms, were deep down and dank and horrid.

On the first floor eight bedrooms opened on to a gallery overlooking the hall, and the top storey, where the servants slept, consisted solely of attics connected with one another by dark, narrow passages. It was one of these attics that was haunted, although, as a matter of fact, the ghost had been seen in all parts of the house.

When Letty entered the Admiral's service she was but a bairn, and had never even heard of ghosts; nor did the other servants apprise her of the hauntings, having received strict injunctions not to do so from the Laird.

But Letty's home, humble though it was, had been very bright and cheerful, and the dark precincts of the mansion filled her with dismay. Without exactly knowing why she was afraid, she shrank in terror from descending into the cellars, and felt anything but pleased at the prospect of sleeping alone in an attic. Still nothing occurred to really alarm her till about a month after her arrival. It was early in the evening, soon after twilight, and she had gone down into one of the cellars to look for a boot-jack, which the Admiral swore by all that was holy must be found before supper. Placing the light she had brought with her on a packing-case, she was groping about among the boxes, when she perceived, to her astonishment, that the flame of the candle had suddenly turned blue. She then felt icy cold, and was much startled on hearing a loud clatter as of some metal instrument on the stone floor in the far-off corner of the cellar. Glancing in the direction of the noise, she saw, looking at her, two eyes—two obliquely set, lurid, light eyes, full of the utmost devilry. Sick with terror and utterly unable to account for what she beheld, she stood stock-still, her limbs refusing to move, her throat parched, her tongue tied. The clanging was repeated, and a shadowy form began slowly to crawl towards her. She dared not afterwards surmise what would have happened to her, had not the Laird himself come down at this moment. At the sound of his stentorian voice the phantasm vanished. But the shock had been too much for Letty; she fainted, and the Admiral, carrying her upstairs as carefully as if she had been his own daughter, gave peremptory orders that she should never again be allowed to go into the cellar alone.

But now that Letty herself had witnessed a manifestation, the other servants no longer felt bound to secrecy, and soon poured into her ears endless accounts of the hauntings.

Every one, they informed her, except Master Gregory and Perkins (the butler) had seen one or other of the ghosts, and the cellar apparition was quite familiar to them all. They also declared that there were other parts of the house quite as badly haunted as the cellar, and it might have been partly owing to these gruesome stories that poor Letty always felt scared, when crossing the passages leading to the attics. As she was hastening down one of them, early one morning, she heard some one running after her. Thinking it was one of the other servants, she turned round, pleased to think that some one else was up early too, and saw to her horror a dreadful-looking object, that seemed to be partly human and partly animal. The body was quite small, and its face bloated, and covered with yellow spots. It had an enormous animal mouth, the lips of which, moving furiously without emitting any sound, showed that the creature was endeavouring to speak but could not. The moment Letty screamed for help the phantasm vanished.

But her worst experience was yet to come. The spare attic which she was told was so badly haunted that no one would sleep in it, was the room next to hers. It was a room Letty could well believe was haunted, for she had never seen another equally gloomy. The ceiling was low and sloping, the window tiny, and the walls exhibited all sorts of odd nooks and crannies. A bed, antique and worm-eaten, stood in one recess, a black oak chest in another, and at right angles with the door, in another recess, stood a wardrobe that used to creak and groan alarmingly every time Letty walked a long the passage. Once she heard a chuckle, a low, diabolical chuckle, which she fancied came from the chest; and once, when the door of the room was open, she caught the glitter of a pair of eyes—the same pale, malevolent eyes that had so frightened her in the cellar. From her earliest childhood Letty had been periodically given to somnambulism, and one night, just about a year after she went into service, she got out of bed, and walked, in her sleep, into the Haunted Room. She awoke to find herself standing, cold and shivering, in the middle of the floor, and it was some seconds before she realised where she was. Her horror, when she did discover where she was, is not easily described. The room was bathed in moonlight, and the

beams, falling with noticeable brilliancy on each piece of furniture the room contained, at once riveted Letty's attention, and so fascinated her that she found herself utterly unable to move. A terrible and most unusual silence predominated everywhere, and although Letty's senses were wonderfully and painfully on the alert, she could not catch the slightest sound from any of the rooms on the landing.

The night was absolutely still, no breath of wind, no rustle of leaves, no flapping of ivy against the window; yet the door suddenly swung back on its hinges and slammed furiously. Letty felt that this was the work of some supernatural agency, and, fully expecting that the noise had awakened the cook, who was a light sleeper (or pretended she was), listened in a fever of excitement to hear her get out of bed and call out. The slightest noise and the spell that held her prisoner would, Letty felt sure, be broken. But the same unbroken silence prevailed. A sudden rustling made Letty glance fearfully at the bed; and she perceived, to her terror, the valance swaying violently, to and fro. Sick with fear, she was now constrained to stare in abject helplessness. Presently there was a slight, very slight movement on the mattress, the white dust cover rose, and, under it, Letty saw the outlines of what she took to be a human figure, gradually take shape. Hoping, praying, that she was mistaken, and that what appeared to be on the bed was but a trick of her imagination, she continued staring in an agony of anticipation. But the figure remained—extended at full length like a corpse. The minutes slowly passed, a church clock boomed two, and the body moved. Letty's jaw fell, her eyes almost bulged from her head, whilst her fingers closed convulsively on the folds of her night-dress. The unmistakable sound of breathing now issued from the region of the bed, and the dust-cover commenced slowly to slip aside. Inch by inch it moved, until first of all Letty saw a few wisps of dark hair, then a few more, then a thick cluster; then something white and shining—a protruding forehead; then dark, very dark brows; then two eyelids, yellow, swollen, and fortunately tightly closed; then—a purple conglomeration of Letty knew not what—of anything but what was human. The sight was so monstrous it appalled her; and she was overcome with a species of awe and repulsion, for which the language of mortality has no sufficiently energetic expression. She momentarily forgot that what she looked on was merely superphysical, but regarded it as something alive, something that ought to have been a child, comely and healthy as herself—and she hated it. It was an outrage on maternity, a blot on nature, a filthy discredit to the house, a blight, a sore, a gangrene. It turned over in its sleep, the cover was hurled aside, and a grotesque object, round, pulpy, webbed, and of leprous whiteness—an object which Letty could hardly associate with a hand—came grovelling out. Letty's stomach heaved; the thing was beastly, indecent, vile, it ought not to live! And the idea of killing flashed through her mind. Boiling over with indignation and absurdly forgetful of her surroundings, she turned round and groped for a stone to smash it. The moonlight on her naked toes brought her to her senses—the thing in the bed was a devil! Though brought up a member of the Free Church, with an abhorrence of anything that could in any way be contorted into Papist practices, Letty crossed herself. As she did so, a noise in the passage outside augmented her terror. She strained her ears painfully, and the sound developed into a footstep, soft, light, and surreptitious. It came gently towards the door; it paused outside, and Letty intuitively felt that it was listening. Her suspense was now so intolerable, that it was almost with a feeling of relief that she beheld the door slowly—very slowly—begin to open. A little wider—a little wider—and yet a little wider; but still nothing came. Ah! Letty's heart turned to ice. Another inch, and a shadowy something slipped through and began to wriggle itself stealthily over the floor. Letty tried to divert her gaze, but could not—an irresistible, magnetic attraction kept her eyes glued to the gradually approaching horror. When within a few feet of her

it halted; and again Letty felt it was listening—listening to the breathing on the bed, which was heavy and bestial. Then it twisted round, and Letty watched it crawl into the wardrobe. After this there was a long and anxious wait. Then Letty saw the wardrobe door slyly open, and the eyes of the cellar—inexpressibly baleful, and glittering like burnished steel in the strong phosphorescent glow of the moon, peep out,—not at her but *through* her,—at the object lying on the bed. There were not only eyes, this time, but a form,—vague, misty, and irregular, but still with sufficient shape to enable Letty to identify it as that of a woman, tall and thin, and with a total absence of hair, which was emphasised in the most lurid and ghastly fashion. With a snakelike movement, the evil thing slithered out of the wardrobe, and, gliding past Letty, approached the bed. Letty was obliged to follow every proceeding. She saw the thing deftly snatch the bolster from under the sleeping head; noted the gleam of hellish satisfaction in its eyes as it pressed the bolster down; and watched the murdered creature's contortions grow fainter, and fainter, until they finally ceased. The eyes then left the room; and from afar off, away below, in the abysmal cellars of the house, came the sound of digging—faint, very faint, but unquestionably digging. This terminated the grim, phantasmal drama for that night at least, and Letty, chilled to the bone, but thoroughly alert, escaped to her room. She spent her few remaining hours of rest wide-awake, determining never to go to bed again without fastening one of her arms to the iron staples.

With regard the history of the house, Letty never learned anything more remarkable than that, long ago, an idiot child was supposed to have been murdered in the haunted attic—by whom, tradition did not say. The Admiral and his family left Pringle's Mansion the year Letty became Miss South's nurse, and as no one would stay in the house, presumably on account of the hauntings, it was pulled down, and an inexcusably inartistic edifice was erected in its place.