

### CASE III

## The Bounding Figure

*Of "— House," Near Buckingham Terrace, Edinburgh*

By Elliot O'Donnell

No one is more interested in Psychological Investigation Work than Miss Torfrida Vincent, one of the three beautiful daughters of Mrs. H. de B. Vincent, who is, herself, still in the heyday of life, and one of the loveliest of the society women I have met. Though I have known her sisters several years, I only met Torfrida for the first time a few months ago, when she was superintending the nursing of her mother, who had just undergone an operation for appendicitis. One day, when I was visiting my convalescent friend, Torfrida informed me that she knew of a haunted house in Edinburgh, a case which she felt sure would arouse my interest and enthusiasm. "It is unfortunate," she added somewhat regretfully, "that I cannot tell you the number of the house, but as I have given my word of honour to disclose it to no one, I feel sure you will excuse me. Indeed, my friends the Gordons, who extracted the promise from me, have got into sad trouble with their landlord for leaving the house under the pretext that it was haunted, and he has threatened to prosecute them for slander of title.

The house in question has no claim to antiquity. It may be eighty years old—perhaps a little older—and was, at the time of which I speak, let out in flats. The Gordons occupied the second storey; the one above them was untenanted, and used as a storage place for furniture; the first floor and ground floor were divided into chambers and offices. They had not been in their new quarters more than a week, when Mrs. Gordon asked the night porter who it was that made such a noise, racing up their stairs between two and three in the morning. It had awakened her every night, she told him, and she would be glad if the disturbance were discontinued. "I am sorry, Madam, but I cannot imagine who it can be," the man replied. "Of course, it may be some one next door, sounds are so often deceptive; no one inhabits the rooms above you." But Mrs. Gordon was not at all convinced, and made up her mind to complain to the landlord should it occur again. That night nothing happened, but the night after she was roused from her sleep at two o'clock, by a feeling that something dreadful, some dire catastrophe, was about to take place. The house was very still, and beyond the far-away echoes of a policeman's patrol on the hard pavement outside, nothing, absolutely nothing, broke the universal, and as it seemed to her, unnatural silence. Generally at night-time there are sounds one likes to assure oneself are too trivial to be heard during the day—the creaking of boards, stairs (nearly always stairs), and the tapping of some leaf (of course some leaf) at the windows. Who has not heard such sounds, and who in his heart of hearts has not been only too well aware that they are nocturnal, exclusively nocturnal. The shadows of evening bring with them visitors; prying, curious visitors; grim and ghastly visitors; grey, esoteric visitors; visitors from a world seemingly inconsequent, wholly incomprehensible. Mrs. Gordon did not believe in ghosts. She scoffed at the idea of ghosts, and, like so many would-be wits, unreasonably brave by day, and the reverse by night, had hitherto attributed banshees and the like to cats and other animals. But now,—now when all was dark,—pitch dark and hushed, and she, for aught she knew to the contrary, the only one, in that great rambling building, awake, she reviewed again and again, in her mind, that rushing up the stairs. The wind! It could not have been the wind. The wind shuts doors, and rattles windows, and moans, and sighs, and howls and screeches, but it does not walk the house in boots. Neither do

rats! And if she had imagined the noises, why did she not imagine other things; why, for example, did she not see tables dance, and tea-urns walk? All that would be fancy, unblushing, genuine fancy, and if she conjured up one absurdity, why not another! That was a conundrum for any sceptic. Thus did she argue, naturally and logically, in the quite sensible fashion of a lawyer, or a scientist yet, all the while, her senses told her that the atmosphere of the house had undergone some profoundly subtle and unaccountable change,—a change that brought with it a presence, at once sinister and hostile. She longed to strike a light and awake one of her daughters—Diana, by preference; since Diana was the least likely to mind being disturbed, and had the strongest nerves. She made a start, and, loosening the bedclothes that she always liked tightly tucked round her, thrust out a quivering toe. The next instant she drew it back with a tiny gasp of terror. The cold darkness without had suggested to her mind a great, horny hand, mal-shaped and murderous, that was lying in wait to seize her. A deadly sickness overcame her, and she lay back on the pillow, her heart beating with outrageous irregularity and loudness. Very slowly she recovered, and, holding her breath, sidled to the far edge of the bed, and with a dexterous movement, engendered by the desperation of fear, made a lightning-like dab in the direction of the electric bell. Her soft, pink finger missed the mark, and coming in violent contact with the wall, bent the carefully polished nail. She bit her lips to stop a cry of pain, and shrinking back within the folds of her dainty lace embroidered nightdress, abandoned herself to despair. Her consciousness of the Unknown Presence increased, and she instinctively felt the thing pass through the closed door, down on to the landing outside, when it dashed upstairs with a loud clatter, and, entering the lumber-room immediately overhead, began bounding as if its feet were tied together, backwards and forwards across the floor. After continuing for fully half an hour, the noises abruptly ceased and the house resumed its accustomed quiet. At breakfast, Mrs. Gordon asked her daughters if they had heard anything in the night, and they laughingly said “No, not even a mouse!”

There was now an intermission of the disturbances, and no further demonstration occurred for about a month. Diana was then sleeping in her mother’s room, Mrs. Gordon being away on a visit to Lady Voss, who was entertaining a party of friends at her shooting-box in Argyle. One evening, as Diana was going into her bedroom to prepare for dinner, she saw the door suddenly swing open, and something, she could not tell what—it was so blurred and indistinct—come out with a bound. Tearing past her on to the landing, it rushed up the stairs with so much clatter that Diana imagined, though she could see nothing, that it must have on its feet, heavy lumbering boots. Filled with an irresistible curiosity, in spite of her alarm, Diana ran after it, and, on reaching the upper storey, heard it making a terrific racket in the room above the one in which she now slept. Nothing daunted, however, she boldly approached, and, flinging open the door, perceived its filmy outline standing before a shadowy and very antique eight-day clock, which apparently it was in the habit of winding. A great fear now fell on Diana. What was the thing? And supposing it should turn round and face her, what should she see? She was entirely isolated from her sisters, and the servants—alone—the light fading—in a big, gloomy room full of strange old furniture which suggested hiding-places for all sorts of grim possibilities. She was assured now that the thing she had followed was nothing human, neither was it a delusion, for when she shut her eyes and opened them, it was still there—and, oddly enough, it was now more distinct than it was when she had seen it downstairs. A curious feeling of helplessness stole over Diana; the power of speech forsook her; and her limbs grew rigid. She was so fearful, too, of attracting the notice of the mysterious thing that she hardly dare breathe, and each pulsation of her heart sent cold chills of apprehension down her spine. Once she endured agonies through a

mad desire to sneeze, and once her lips opened to scream as something suspiciously like the antennae of a huge beetle, and which she subsequently discovered was a “devil’s coach-horse,” tickled the calf of her leg. She fancied, too, that all sorts of queer shapes lurked in the passage behind her, and that innumerable unseen eyes were malignantly rejoicing in her terror. At last, the climax to her suspense seemed at hand. The unknown thing, until now too busy with the clock to take heed of her, paused for a moment or so, as if undecided what to do next, and then slowly began to veer round. But the faint echo of a voice below, calling her by name, broke the hypnotic spell that bound Diana to the floor, and with a frantic spring she cleared the threshold of the room. She then tore madly downstairs, never halting till she reached the dining-room, where she sank on a sofa, and, more dead than alive, panted out to her amazed sisters a full account of all that had transpired.

That night she shared her sister’s bedroom, but neither she nor her sister slept.

From this time till the return of Mrs. Gordon, nothing happened. It was one evening after she came back, when she was preparing to get into bed, that the door of her own room unexpectedly opened, and she saw standing, on the threshold, the unmistakable figure of a man, short and broad, with a great width of shoulders, and very long arms. He was clad in a peajacket, blue serge trousers, and jack-boots. He had a big, round, brutal head, covered with a tangled mass of yellow hair, but where his face ought to have been there was only a blotch, underlying which Mrs. Gordon detected the semblance to something fiendishly vindictive and immeasurably nasty. But, in spite of the horror his appearance produced, her curiosity was aroused with regard to the two objects he carried in his hands, one of which looked like a very bizarre bundle of red and white rags, and the other a small bladder of lard. Whilst she was staring at them in dumb awe, he swung round, and, hitching them savagely under his armpits, rushed across the landing, and, with a series of apish bounds, sprang up the staircase and disappeared in the gloom.

This was the climax; Mrs. Gordon felt another such encounter would kill her. So, in spite of the fact that she had taken the flat for a year, and had only just commenced her tenancy, she packed up her goods and left the very next day. The report that the building was haunted spread rapidly, and Mrs. Gordon had many indignant letters from the landlord. She naturally made inquiries as to the early history of the house, but of the many tales she listened to, only one, the authenticity of which she could not guarantee, seemed to suggest any clue to the haunting.

It was said that a retired Captain in the Merchant Service, many years previously, had rented the rooms she had occupied.

He was an extraordinary individual, and, despite the fact that he had lived so far inland, would never wear any but nautical clothes—blue jersey and trousers, reefer coat and jack-boots. But this was not his only peculiarity. His love of grog eventually brought on delirium tremens, and his excessive irritability in the interval between each attack was a source of anxiety to all who came in contact with him. At that time there happened to be a baby in the rooms overhead, whose crying so annoyed the Captain that he savagely informed its mother that if she did not keep it quiet, he would not be answerable for the consequences. His warnings having no effect, he flew upstairs one day, when she was temporarily absent, and, snatching up the bread knife from the table, decapitated the infant. He then stuffed both its head and body into a grandfather’s clock which stood in one corner of the room, and, retiring to his own quarters, drank till he was insensible.

He was, of course, arrested on a charge of murder, but being found “insane” he was committed during His Majesty’s pleasure to a lunatic asylum.

He eventually committed suicide by opening an artery in his leg with one of his finger-nails.

As the details of this tragedy filled in so well with the phenomena they had witnessed, the Gordons could not help regarding the story as a very probable explanation of the hauntings. But, remember, its authenticity is dubious.