

CASE V

The Sallow-Faced Woman

Of No.—Forrest Road, Edinburgh

By Elliot O'Donnell

The Public unfortunately includes a certain set of people, of the middle class very “middlish,” who are ever on the look-out for some opportunity, however slight and seemingly remote, of bettering themselves socially; and, learning that those in a higher strata of society are interested in the supernatural, they think that they may possibly get in touch with them by working up a little local reputation for psychical research. I have often had letters from this type of “pusher” (letters from genuine believers in the Occult I always welcome) stating that they have been greatly interested in my books—would I be so very kind as to grant them a brief interview, or permit them to accompany me to a haunted house, or give them certain information with regard to Lady So-and-so, whom they have long wanted to know? Occasionally, I have been so taken in as to give permission to the writer to call on me, and almost always I have bitterly repented. The wily one—no matter how wily—cannot conceal the cloven hoof for long, and he has either tried to thrust himself into the bosom of my family, or has written to my neighbours declaring himself to be my dearest friend; and when, in desperation, I have shown him the cold shoulder, he has attacked me virulently in some “rag” of a local paper, the proprietor, editor, or office-boy of which happens to be one of his own clique. I have even known an instance where this type of person has, through trickery, actually gained access to some notoriously haunted house, and from its owners—the family he has long had his eyes on, from a motive anything but psychic—has ferreted out the secret and private history of the haunting. Then, when he has been “found out” and forced to see that his friendship is not wanted, he has, in revenge for the slight, unblushingly revealed the facts that were only entrusted to him in the strictest confidence; and, through influence with the lower stratum of the Press, caused a most glaring and sensational account of the ghost to be published.

With such a case in view, I cannot be surprised that possessors of family ghosts and haunted houses should show the greatest reluctance to be approached on the subject, save by those they feel assured will treat it with the utmost delicacy.

But I have quoted the above breach of confidence merely to give another reason for my constant use of fictitious names with regard to people and places, and having done so (I hope to some purpose), I will proceed with the following story:—

Miss Dulcie Vincent, some of whose reminiscences appeared in my book of *Ghostly Phenomena* last year, is nearly connected with Lady Adela Minkon, who owns a considerable amount of house property, including No.—Forrest Road, in Edinburgh, and whose yacht at Cowes is the envy of all who have cruised in her. Three years ago, Lady Adela stayed at No. —Forrest Road. She had heard that the house was haunted, and was anxious to put it to the test. Lady Adela was perfectly open-minded. She had never experienced any occult phenomena herself, but, very rationally, she did not consider that her non-acquaintance with the superphysical in any way negatived the evidence of those who declare that they have witnessed manifestations; their statements, she reasoned, were just as worthy of credence as hers. She thus commenced her occupation of the house with a perfectly unbiased mind, resolved to stay there for at least a year, so as to give it a fair trial. The hauntings, she was told, were at their height in

the late summer and early autumn. It is, I think, unnecessary to enter into any detailed description of her house. In appearance, it differed very little, if at all, from those adjoining it in construction, it was if anything a trifle larger. The basement, which included the usual kitchen offices and cellars, was very dark, and the atmosphere—after sunset on Fridays, only on Fridays—was tainted with a smell of damp earth, shockingly damp earth, and of a sweet and nauseating something that greatly puzzled Lady Adela. All the rooms in the house were of fair dimensions, and cheerful, excepting on this particular evening of the week; a distinct gloom settled on them then, and the strangest of shadows were seen playing about the passages and on the landings.

“It may be fancy,” Lady Adela said to herself, “merely fancy! And, after all, if I encounter nothing worse than a weekly menu of aromatic smells and easily digested shadows, I shall not suffer any harm”; but it was early summer then—the psychic season had yet to come. As the weeks went by, the shadows and the smell grew more and more pronounced, and by the arrival of August had become so emphatic that Lady Adela could not help thinking that they were both hostile and aggressive.

About eight o’clock on the evening of the second Friday in the month, Lady Adela was purposely alone in the basement of the house. The servants especially irritated her; like the majority of present-day domestics, products of the County Council schools, they were so intensely supercilious and silly, and Lady Adela felt that their presence in the house minimised her chances of seeing the ghost. No apparition with the smallest amount of self-respect could risk coming in contact with such inane creatures, so she sent them all out for a motor drive, and, for once, rejoiced in the house to herself. A curious proceeding for a lady! True! but then, Lady Adela was a lady, and, being a lady, was not afraid of being thought anything else; and so acted just as unconventionally as she chose. But stay a moment; she was not alone in the house, for she had three of her dogs with her—three beautiful boarhounds, trophies of her last trip to the Baltic. With such colossal and perfectly trained companions Lady Adela felt absolutely safe, and ready—as she acknowledged afterwards—to face a whole army of spooks. She did not even shiver when the front door of the basement closed, and she heard the sonorous birring of the motor, drowning the giddy voices of the servants, grow fainter and fainter until it finally ceased altogether.

When the last echoes of the vehicle had died away in the distance, Lady Adela made a tour of the premises. The housekeeper’s room pleased her immensely—at least she persuaded herself it did. “Why, it is quite as nice as any of the rooms upstairs,” she said aloud, as she stood with her face to the failing sunbeams and rested her strong white hand on the edge of the table. “Quite as nice. Karl and Max, come here!”

But the boarhounds for once in their lives did not obey her with a good grace. There was something in the room they did not like, and they showed how strong was their resentment by slinking unwillingly through the doorway.

“I wonder why that is?” Lady Adela mused; “I have never known them do it before.” Then her eyes wandered round the walls, and struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the room, which had suddenly grown dark. She tried to assure herself that this was but the natural effect of the departing daylight, and that, had she watched in other houses at this particular time, she would have noticed the same thing. To show how little she minded the gloom, she went up to the darkest corner and prodded the walls with her riding-whip. She laughed—there was nothing there, nothing whatsoever to be afraid of, only shadows. With a careless shrug of her shoulders, she strutted into the passage, and, whistling to Karl and Max who, contrary to their custom,

would not keep to heel, made another inspection of the kitchens. At the top of the cellar steps she halted. The darkness had now set in everywhere, and she argued that it would be foolish to venture into such dungeon-like places without a light. She soon found one, and, armed with candle and matches, began her descent. There were several cellars, and they presented such a dismal, dark appearance, that she instinctively drew her skirts tightly round her, and exchanged the slender riding-whip for a poker. She whistled again to her dogs. They did not answer, so she called them both by name angrily. But for some reason (some quite unaccountable reason, she told herself) they would not come.

She ransacked her mind to recall some popular operatic air, and although she knew scores she could not remember one. Indeed, the only air that filtered back to her was one she detested—a Vaudeville tune she had heard three nights in succession, when she was staying with a student friend in the Latin Quarter in Paris. She hummed it loudly, however, and, holding the lighted candle high above her head, walked down the steps. At the bottom she stood still and listened. From high above her came noises which sounded like the rumbling of distant thunder, but which, on analysis, proved to be the rattling of window-frames. Reassured that she had no cause for alarm, Lady Adela advanced. Something black scudded across the red-tiled floor, and she made a dash as it with her poker. The concussion awoke countless echoes in the cellars, and called into existence legions of other black things that darted hither and thither in all directions. She burst out laughing—they were only beetles! Facing her she now perceived an inner cellar, which was far gloomier than the one in which she stood. The ceiling was very low, and appeared to be crushed down beneath the burden of a stupendous weight; and as she advanced beneath it she half expected that it would “cave in” and bury her.

A few feet from the centre of this cellar she stopped; and, bending down, examined the floor carefully. The tiles were unmistakably newer here than elsewhere, and presented the appearance of having been put in at no very distant date. The dampness of the atmosphere was intense; a fact which struck Lady Adela as somewhat odd, since the floor and walls looked singularly dry. To find out if this were the case, she ran her fingers over the walls, and, on removing them, found they showed no signs of moisture. Then she rapped the floor and walls, and could discover no indications of hollowness. She sniffed the air, and a great wave of something sweet and sickly half choked her. She drew out her handkerchief and beat the air vigorously with it; but the smell remained, and she could not in any way account for it. She turned to leave the cellar, and the flame of her candle burned blue. Then for the first time that evening—almost, indeed, for the first time in her life—she felt afraid, so afraid that she made no attempt to diagnose her fear; she understood the dogs’ feelings now, and caught herself wondering how much they knew.

She whistled to them again, not because she thought they would respond,—she knew only too well they would not,—but because she wanted company, even the company of her own voice and she had some faint hope, too, that whatever might be with her in the cellar, would not so readily disclose itself if she made a noise. The one cellar was passed, and she was nearly across the floor of the other when she heard a crash. The candle dropped from her hand, and all the blood in her body rushed to her heart. She could never have imagined it was so terrible to be frightened. She tried to pull herself together and be calm, but she was no longer mistress of her limbs. Her knees knocked together and her hands shook. “It was only the dogs,” she feebly told herself, “I will call them”; but when she opened her mouth, she found her throat was paralysed—not a syllable would come. She knew, too, that she had lied, and that the hounds could not have been responsible for the noise. It was like nothing she had ever heard, nothing she could imagine; and although she struggled hard against the idea, she could not help associating the sound with

the cause of the candle burning blue, and the sweet, sickly smell. Incapable of moving a step, she was forced to listen in breathless expectancy for a recurrence of the crash. Her thoughts become ghastly. The inky sea of darkness that hemmed her in on every side suggested every sort of ghoulish possibility, and with each pulsation of her overstrained heart her flesh crawled. Another sound—this time not a crash, nothing half so loud or definite—drew her eyes in the direction of the steps. An object was now standing at the top of them, and something lurid, like the faint, phosphorescent glow of decay, emanated from all over it; but *what* it was, she could not for the life of her tell. It might have been the figure of a man, or a woman, or a beast, or of anything that was inexpressibly antagonistic and nasty. She would have given her soul to have looked elsewhere, but her eyes were fixed—she could neither turn nor shut them. For some seconds the shape remained motionless, and then with a sly, subtle motion it lowered its head, and came stealing stealthily down the stairs towards her. She followed its approach like one in a hideous dream—her heart ready to burst, her brain on the verge of madness. Another step, another, yet another; till there were only three left between her and it; and she was at length enabled to form some idea of what the thing was like.

It was short and squat, and appeared to be partly clad in a loose, flowing garment, that was not long enough to conceal the glistening extremities of its limbs. From its general contour and the tangled mass of hair that fell about its neck and shoulders, Lady Adela concluded it was the phantasm of a woman. Its head being kept bent, she was unable to see the face in full, but every instant she expected the revelation would take place, and with each separate movement of the phantasm her suspense became more and more intolerable. At last it stood on the floor of the cellar, a broad, ungainly, horribly ungainly figure, that glided up to and past her into the far cellar. There it halted, as nearly as she could judge on the new tiles, and remained standing. As she gazed at it, too fascinated to remove her eyes, there was a loud, reverberating crash, a hideous sound of wrenching and tearing, and the whole of the ceiling of the inner chamber came down with an appalling roar. Lady Adela thinks that she must then have fainted, for she distinctly remembers falling—falling into what seemed to her a black, interminable abyss. When she recovered consciousness, she was lying on the tiles, and all around was still and normal. She got up, found and lighted her candle, and spent the rest of the evening, without further adventure, in the drawing-room.

All the week Lady Adela struggled hard to master a disinclination to spend another evening alone in the house, and when Friday came she succumbed to her fears. The servants were poor, foolish things, but it was nice to feel that there was something in the house besides ghosts. She sat reading in the drawing-room till late that night, and when she lolled out of the window to take a farewell look at the sky and stars before retiring to rest, the sounds of traffic had completely ceased and the whole city lay bathed in a refreshing silence. It was very heavenly to stand there and feel the cool, soft air—unaccompanied, for the first time during the day, by the rattling rumbling sounds of locomotion and the jarring discordant murmurs of unmusical voices—fanning her neck and face.

Lady Adela, used as she was to the privacy of her yacht, and the freedom of her big country mansion, where all sounds were regulated at her will, chafed at the near proximity of her present habitation to the noisy thoroughfare, and vaguely looked forward to the hours when shops and theatres were closed, and all screeching, harsh-voiced products of the gutter were in bed. To her the nights in Waterloo Place were all too short; the days too long, too long for anything. The heavy, lumbering steps of a policeman at last broke her reverie. She had no desire to arouse his curiosity; besides, her costume had become somewhat disordered, and she had the strictest sense

of propriety, at least in the presence of the lower orders. Retiring, therefore, with a sigh of vexation, she sought her bedroom, and, after the most scrupulous attention to her toilet, put out the lights and got into bed. It was just one when she fell asleep, and three when she awoke with a violent start. Why she started puzzled her. She did not recollect experiencing any very dreadful dream, in fact no dream at all, and there seemed nothing in the hush—the apparently unbroken hush—that could in any way account for her action. Why, then, had she started? She lay still and wondered. Surely everything was just as it was when she went to sleep! And yet! When she ventured on a diagnosis, there was something different, something new; she did not think it was actually in the atmosphere, nor in the silence; she did not know where it was until she opened her eyes—and then she *knew*. Bending over her, within a few inches of her face, was another face, the ghastly caricature of a human face. It was on a larger scale than that of any mortal Lady Adela had ever seen; it was long in proportion to its width—indeed, she could not make out where the cranium terminated at the back, as the hinder portion of it was lost in a mist. The forehead, which was very receding, was partly covered with a mass of lank, black hair, that fell straight down into space; there were no neck nor shoulders, at least none had materialised; the skin was leaden-hued, and the emaciation so extreme that the raw cheek-bones had burst through in places; the size of the eye sockets which appeared monstrous, was emphasised by the fact that the eyes were considerably sunken; the lips were curled downwards and tightly shut, and the whole expression of the withered mouth, as indeed that of the entire face, was one of bestial, diabolical malignity. Lady Adela's heart momentarily stopped, her blood ran cold, she was petrified; and as she stared helplessly at the dark eyes pressed close to hers, she saw them suddenly suffuse with fiendish glee. The most frightful change then took place: the upper lip writhed away from a few greenish yellow stumps; the lower jaw fell with a metallic click, leaving the mouth widely open, and disclosing to Lady Adela's shocked vision a black and bloated tongue; the eyeballs rolled up and entirely disappeared, whilst their places were immediately filled with the foulest and most loathsome indications of advanced decay. A strong, vibratory movement suddenly made all the bones in the head rattle and the tongue wag, whilst from the jaws, as if belched up from some deep-down well, came a gust of wind, putrescent with the ravages of the tomb, and yet, at the same time, tainted with the same sweet, sickly odour with which Lady Adela had latterly become so familiar. This was the culminating act; the head then receded, and, growing fainter and fainter, gradually disappeared altogether. Lady Adela was now more than satisfied,—there was not a house more horribly haunted in Scotland,—and nothing on earth would induce her to remain in it another night.

However, being anxious, naturally, to discover something that might, in some degree, account for the apparitions, Lady Adela made endless inquiries concerning the history of former occupants of the house; but, failing to find out anything remarkable in this direction, she was eventually obliged to content herself with the following tradition: It was said that on the site of No. — Forrest Road there had once stood a cottage occupied by two sisters (both nurses), and that one was suspected of poisoning the other; and that the cottage, moreover, having through their parsimonious habits got into a very bad state of repair, was blown down during a violent storm, the surviving sister perishing in the ruins. Granted that this story is correct, it was in all probability the ghost of this latter sister that appeared to Lady Adela. Her ladyship is, of course, anxious to let No.—Forrest Road, and as only about one in a thousand people seem to possess the faculty of seeing psychic phenomena, she hopes she may one day succeed in getting a permanent tenant. In the meanwhile, she is doing her level best to suppress the rumour that the house is haunted.