

CASE X

The Haunted Bath

“—House,” Near Blythswood Square, Glasgow

By Elliot O’Donnell

When Captain W. de S. Smythe went to look over “—House,” in the neighbourhood of Blythswood Square, Glasgow, the only thing about the house he did not like was the bathroom—it struck him as excessively grim. The secret of the grimness did not lie, he thought, in any one particular feature—in the tall, gaunt geyser, for example (though there was always something in the look of a geyser when it was old and dilapidated, as was the case with this one, that repelled him), or in the dark drying-cupboard, or in the narrow, slit-like window; but in the room as a whole, in its atmosphere and general appearance. He could not diagnose it; he could not associate it with anything else he had ever experienced; it was a grimness that he could only specify as grim—grim with a grimness that made him feel he should not like to be alone there in the dead of night. It was a nuisance, because the rest of the house pleased him; moreover, the locality was convenient, and the rent moderate, very moderate for such a neighbourhood. He thought the matter well over as he leaned in the doorway of the bathroom. He could, of course, have the room completely renovated—new paper, new paint, and a fresh bath. Hot-water pipes! The geyser should be done away with. Geysers were hideous, dangerous, and—pshaw, what nonsense!—Ghostly! Ghostly! What absurd rot! How his wife would laugh! That decided the question. His wife! She had expressed a very ardent wish that he should take a house in or near Blythswood Square, if he could get one on anything like reasonable terms, and here was his chance. He would accompany the agent of the property to the latter’s office, and the preliminaries should be forthwith settled.

Six weeks later, he and his family were installed in the house, which still reeked with the smell of fresh paint and paper. The first thing the Captain did when he got there was to steal away slyly to the bathroom, and as soon as he opened the door his heart sank. Despite the many alterations the room had undergone, the grimness was still there—there, everywhere. In the fine new six-foot bath, with its glistening, gleaming, wooden framework; in the newly papered, newly painted cupboard; in the walls, with their bright, fresh paper; in the snowy surface of the whitewashed ceiling; in the air,—the very air itself was full of it. The Captain was, as a rule, very fond of his bath, but in his new quarters he firmly resolved that some one else should use the bath before he made the experiment. In a very few days the family had all settled down, and every one, with the exception of the Captain, had had a bath, but no matter how many and how bitter were his wife’s

he positively *could* not, bring himself to wash in the bathroom—*alone*. It was all right so long as the door was open, but his wife resolutely refused to allow him to keep it open, and the moment it was shut his abject terror returned—a terror produced by nothing that he could in any way analyse or define. At last, ashamed of his cowardice, he screwed up courage, and, with a look of determined desperation in his eyes and mouth—an expression which sent his wife into fits of laughter—set out one night from his bedroom, candle in hand, and entered the bathroom. Shutting and locking the door, he lighted another candle, and, after placing them both on the mantelshelf, turned on the bath water, and began to undress.

“I may as well have a peep in the cupboard,” he said, “just to satisfy myself no one is hiding there—for every one in the house knows how I hate this beastly bathroom—with the intention of playing me a practical joke. Supposing one of the maids—Polly, for example, I’m sure she’d be quite capable—took it into her pretty head to”—but here the Captain was obliged to stop; he really was not equal to facing, even in his mind’s eye, the situation such a supposition involved, and at the bare idea of such a thing his countenance assumed a deeper hue, and—I am loth to admit—an amused grin. The grin, however, died out as he cautiously opened the door and peered furtively in; no one—nothing was there! With a breath of relief he closed the door again, placed a chair against it, and, sitting down, proceeded to pull off his clothes. Coat, vest, under-garments, he placed them all tenderly in an untidy heap on the floor, and then, with a last lingering, affectionate look at them, walked sedately towards the bath. But this sedateness was only momentary. The first few steps he walked, but, a noise in the grate startling him, he suddenly assumed an air of the greatest gaiety, and, bowing with mock gallantry to his trousers, he now waltzed coquettishly to the bath. It was grim, horribly grim, and horribly hot too, for, when he felt the temperature with one of his squat, podgy toes, it made him swear quite involuntarily. Turning on the cold water, and slapping his thighs playfully, he felt again. Too hot yet, far too hot even for him! He loved heat. More cold! and he was hoisting one chubby leg to feel again, when, a repetition of the noise in the grate making him swing round, he lost his balance, and descended on the floor with a hard, a very hard, bump. For some seconds he lay still, too sulky and aggrieved even to get up, but, the draught from under the ill-fitting door tickling his bare flesh in the most immodest fashion, he roused himself from this lethargy, and was about to raise himself from the floor, when the lights went out—went out without a moment’s warning, and he found himself engulfed in the most funereal darkness. To say he was startled is to put it very mildly—he was absolutely terror-stricken—far too terror-stricken to think of moving now, and least of all of getting up and groping for the matches. Indeed, when he came to think of it, he had not seen any matches in the room, and he had not brought any with him, his wife had flurried him so much. The moment the candles were extinguished the grimness sensibly increased, and he could feel all around him, thickly amalgamated with the ether, a superphysical presence, at once hostile and horrible. Then, to bring his terror to a climax, there issued from the bath a loud rubbing and splashing, as if some one, some very heavy person, was vigorously washing. The water rose and fell, squished and bubbled as it does when one is lying at full length in it, raising and lowering oneself, kicking and plunging first on one side and then on the other. Whilst, to add to the realism, Captain Smythe distinctly heard gasping and puffing; and the soft, greasy sound of a well-soaped flannel. He could indeed follow every movement of the occupant of the bath as graphically as if he had seen him—from the brisk scrubbing of body and legs to the finicky process of cleaning the ears and toes.

It was whilst the bather was occupied thus that the cupboard door began to open very quietly and stealthily, and Captain de Smythe heard the chair he had so carefully placed against it being gradually propelled across the floor.

Then something, he would have given anything to tell what, came out and began to steal towards him. He tried to crawl out of its way, but could not; his limbs no longer acted conjointly with his brain, and when he opened his mouth to shout at it, his voice withered away in his throat. It came up to him, and directly it touched his naked skin he knew it was a woman—a woman with a much-beflounced silk skirt and silk petticoats—a woman whose person was perfumed with violets (a scent for which the Captain had a particular weakness), and without doubt, loaded with jewellery. Her behaviour did not betray any symptoms of embarrassment

when she encountered the Captain lying on the floor, but, planting one icy-cold high-heeled shoe on his chest and the other on his cheek, she stepped on him as if he had been an orthodox cushion or footstool, purposely placed there for her convenience. A hollow exclamation, which died away in a gasp, issued from the bath, as the woman, with a swift movement of her arms, threw something over it. What followed, the Captain could only surmise, but from the muttered imprecations and splashes in the water, it seemed to him that nothing short of murder was taking place. After a while the noises in the bath grew feebler and feebler, and when they finally ceased, the woman, with a sigh of relief, shook the water from her arms, and, stepping off the Captain, moved towards the fireplace. The spell which had, up to the present, enthralled the unfortunate Captain, was now broken, and, thinking that his ghostly visitor had be-taken herself right away, he sat up. He had hardly done so before the darkness was rudely dissipated, and, to his horror, he saw looking at him, from a distance of only a few feet, a white, luminous face, presumably that of a woman. But what a woman! What a devil!—what a match for the most lurid of any of Satan’s male retainers. Yet she was not without beauty—beauty of the richest sensual order; beauty that, had it been flesh and blood, would have sent men mad. Her hair, jet’ black, wavy, and parted in the centre, was looped over her shell-like ears, which were set unusually low and far back on her head; her nose was of that rare and matchless shape termed Grecian; and her mouth—in form, a triumph of all things heavenly, in expression, a triumph of all things hellish. The magnificent turn of its short upper lip, and the soft voluptuous line of its under lip; its sportive dimples and ripe red colour; its even rows of dazzling, pearly teeth were adorable; but they appealed to the senses, and in no sense or shape to the soul. Her brows, slightly irregular in outline, met over the nose; her eyelashes were of great length, and her eyes—slightly, ever so slightly, obliquely set, and larger than those of living human beings—were black, black as her hair; and the pupils sparkled and shone with the most damnable expression of satanical hatred and glee. The whole thing, the face and the light that emanated from it, was so entirely awful and devilish, that Captain Smythe sat like one turned to stone, and it was not until long after it had vanished that he groped his way to the door, and in Adam’s costume, for he dared not stay to put on his clothes, fled down the passage to his bedroom.

From his wife he got little sympathy; her sarcasm was too deep for words, and she merely ordered her husband on no account to breathe a word of his “silliness” before either the children or the servants. The injunction, however, which was naturally carried out to the letter, was futile as a precaution, for, on running into the bathroom one morning when every one else was downstairs, the eldest boy, Ronald, saw, floating in the bath, the body of a hoary-headed old man. It was bloated and purplish blue, and had big, glassy eyes that stared at him in such a hideous, meaningless manner that he uttered a scream of terror and fled. Alarmed at the noise, most of the household ran to see what had happened. Only the Captain remained behind. He knew only too well, and he hid, letting his wife and the servants go upstairs alone. They entered the bathroom—there was nothing in the bath, not even water, but, as they were leaving, they ran into a dark, handsome, evil-eyed woman, clad in the most costly of dresses, and sparkling with jewellery. She glided past them with sly, silent, footsteps, and vanished by the cupboard. Cured of scepticism, and throwing dignity to the wind, the Captain’s wife raced downstairs, and, bursting into the drawing-room, flung herself on the sofa in hysterics.

Within a week the house was once again empty, and the rumour getting about that it was haunted, the landlord threatened the Smythes with an action for slander of title. But I do not think the case was taken to court, the Smythes agreeing to contradict the report they had originated. Astute inquiries, however, eventually led them to discover that a lady, answering to

the description of the ghost they had seen, had once lived at——House. Of Spanish descent, she was young, beautiful, and gay; and was married to a man, an extremely wealthy man (people remembered how rich he was after he died), old enough to be her grandfather. They had nothing in common, the husband only wanting to be quiet, the wife to flirt and be admired. Their neighbours often heard them quarrel, and it was declared that the wife possessed the temper of a fiend. The man was eventually found dead in his bath, and there being no indications of violence, it was generally supposed that he had fainted, (his wife having been previously heard to declare that he often had fainting fits), and had thus been accidentally drowned. The beautiful young widow, who inherited all his money, left the house immediately and went abroad, and the neighbours, when questioned by the Smythes as to whether anything had been seen of her since, shook their heads dubiously, but refused to commit themselves.