

CASE XI

The Choking Ghost

Of “—House,” Near Sandyford Place, Glasgow

By Elliott O'Donnell

The last time I was passing through Glasgow, I put up for the night at an hotel near Sandyford Place, and met there an old theatrical acquaintance named Browne, Hely Browne. Not having seen him since I gave up acting, which is now, alas! a good many years, we had much to discuss—touring days, lodgings, managers, crowds, and a dozen other subjects, all included in the vulgar term “shop.” We spent the whole of one evening debating thus, in the smoke-room; whilst the following night we went to an entertainment given by that charming reciter and raconteur, Miss Lilian North, who, apart from her talent, which, in my opinion, places her in the first rank of her profession, is the possessor of extraordinary personal attractions, not the least remarkable of which are her hands. Indeed, it was through my attention being called to the latter, that I am indirectly indebted for this story. Miss North has typically psychic hands—exquisitely white and narrow, and her long, tapering fingers and filbert nails (which, by the way, are always trimly manicured) are the most perfect I have ever seen. I was alluding to them, on our way back to the hotel after her performance, when Hely Browne interrupted me.

“Talking about psychic things, O'Donnell,” he said, “do you know there is a haunted house near where we are staying? You don't? Very well, then, if I tell you what I know and you write about it, will you promise not to allude to the house by its right number? If you do, there will be the dickens to pay—simply call it ‘—House,’ near Sandyford Place. You promise? Good! Let us take a little stroll before we turn in—I feel I want a breath of fresh air—and I will tell you the experience I once had there. It is exactly two years ago, and I was on tour here in *The Green Bushes*. All the usual theatrical ‘diggings’ had been snapped up long before I arrived, and, not knowing where else to go, I went to No.—Sandyford Place, which I saw advertised in one of the local papers as a first-class private hotel with very moderate charges. A wild bit of extravagance, eh? But then one does do foolish things sometimes, and, to tell the truth, I wanted a change badly. I had ‘digg’d’ for a long time with a fellow called Charlie Grosvenor. Not at all a bad chap, but rather apt to get on one's nerves after a while—and he had got on mine—horribly. Consequently, I was not at all sorry for an excuse to get away from him for a bit, even though I had to pay dearly for it. A private hotel in a neighbourhood like that of Sandy-ford Place is a big order for an ordinary comedian. I forget exactly what the terms were, but I know I pulled rather a long face when I was told. Still, being, as I say, tired of the usual ‘digs,’ I determined to try it, and accordingly found myself landed in a nice-sized bedroom on the second floor. The first three nights passed, and nothing happened, saving that I had the most diabolical nightmares—a very unusual thing for me. ‘It was the cheese,’ I said to myself, when I got out of bed the first morning; ‘I will take very good care I don't touch cheese to-night.’ I kept this resolution, but I had the nightmare again, and even, if anything, worse than before. Then I fancied it must be cocoa—I was at that time a teetotaller—so I took hot milk instead; but I had nightmare all the same, and my dreams terrified me to such an extent that I did not dare get out of bed in the morning (it was then winter) till it was broad daylight. It was now becoming a serious matter with me. As you know, an actor more than most people needs sleep, and it soon became as much as I could do to maintain my usual standard of acting. On the fourth night, determining to get rest

at all costs, I took a stiff glass of hot brandy just before getting into bed. I slept,—I could scarcely help sleeping,—but not for long, for I was rudely awakened from my slumbers by a loud crash. I sat up in bed, thinking the whole house was falling about my ears. The sound was not repeated, and all was profoundly silent. Wondering what on earth the noise could have been, and feeling very thirsty, I got out of bed to get a drink of lime-juice. To my annoyance, however, though I groped about everywhere, knocking an ash tray off the mantelpiece and smashing the lid of the soap-dish, I could find neither the lime-juice nor matches. At length, giving it up as a bad job, I decided to get into bed again. With that end in view, I groped my way through the darkness, steering myself by the furniture, the position of which was, of course, quite familiar to me—at least I imagined it was. Judge, then, of my astonishment when I could not find the bed! At first I regarded it as a huge joke, and laughed—how rich! Ha! ha! ha! Fancy not being able to find one's way back to bed in a room of this dimension! Good enough for *Punch*! Too good, perhaps, now. Ha! ha! ha! But it soon grew past a joke. I had been round the room, completely round the room, twice, and still no bed! I became seriously alarmed! Could I be ill? Was I going mad? But no, my forehead was cool, my pulse normal. For some seconds I stood still, not knowing what else to do; then, to make one more desperate attempt, I stuck straight in front of me—and—ran into something—something that recoiled and hit me. Thrilled with amazement, I put up my hand to feel what it was, and touched a noose.”

“A noose!” I ejaculated, interrupting Hely Browne for the first time since he began.

“Yes, a noose!” he repeated, “suspended in mid-air. As you can imagine, I was greatly astonished, for I knew there had been nothing that I could be now mistaking for a noose in the room overnight. I stretched out my arms to feel to what it was fastened, but, to add to my surprise, the cord terminated in thin air. Then I grew frightened, and, dropping my arms, tried to move away from the spot; I could not—my feet were glued to the floor. With a gentle, purring sound the noose commenced fawning—I use that word because the action was so intensely bestial, so like that of a cat or snake—round my neck and face. It then rose above me, and, after circling furiously round and round and creating a miniature maelstrom in the air, descended gradually over my head. Lower and lower it stole, like some sleek, caressing slug. Now past the tips of my ears, now my nose, now my chin, until with a tiny thud it landed on my shoulders, when, with a fierce snap, it suddenly tightened. I endeavoured to tear it off, but every time I raised my hands, a strong, magnetic force drew them to my side again; I opened my mouth to shriek for help, and an icy current of air froze the breath in my lungs. I was helpless, O'Donnell, utterly, wholly helpless. Cold, clammy hands tore my feet from the floor; I was hoisted bodily up, and then let drop. A frightful pain shot through me. A hundred wires cut into my throat at once. I gasped, choked, suffocated, and in my mad efforts to find a foothold kicked out frantically in all directions. But this only resulted in an increase of my torments, since with every plunge the noose grew tauter. My agony at last grew unbearable; I could feel the sides of my raw and palpitating thorax driven into one another, while every attempt to heave up breath from my bursting lungs was rewarded with the most excruciating paroxysms of pain—pain more acute than I thought it possible for any human being to endure. My head became ten times its natural size; blood—foaming, boiling blood—poured into it from God knows where, and under its pressure my eyes bulged in their sockets, and the veins in my nose cracked. Terrific thunderings echoed and re-echoed in my ears; my tongue, huge as a mountain, shot against my teeth; a sea of fire raged through my brain, and then—blackness—blackness inconceivable. When I recovered consciousness, O'Donnell, I found myself standing, cold and shivering, but otherwise sound and whole, on the chilly oilcloth. I had, now, no difficulty in finding my way back to bed, and in

about an hour's time succeeded in falling asleep. I slept till late, and, on getting up, tried to persuade myself that my horrible experience was but the result of another nightmare.

“As you may guess, after all this, I did not look forward to bedtime, and counted the minutes as they flew by with the utmost regret. Never had I been so sorry when my performance at the theatre was over, and the lights of my hotel once again hove in sight. I entered my bed-room in fear and trembling, and was so apprehensive lest I should be again compelled to undergo the sensations of hanging, that I decided to keep a light burning all night, and, for that reason, had bought half a pound of wax candles. At last I grew so sleepy that I could keep awake no longer, and, placing the candlestick on a chair by the bed, I scrambled in between the sheets. Without as much as a sip of spirits, I slept like a top. When I awoke the room was in pitch darkness. A curious smell at once attracted my notice. I thought, at first, it might be but the passing illusion of a dream. But no—I sniffed again—it was there—there, close to me—under my very nose—the strong, pungent odour of drugs; but not being a professor of smells, nor even a humble student of physics, I was consequently unable to diagnose it, and could only arrive at the general conclusion that it was a smell that brought with it very vivid recollections of a chemist's shop and of my old school laboratory. Wondering whence it originated, I thrust my face forward with the intention of trying to locate it, when, to my horror, my lips touched against something cold and flabby. In an agony of fear I reeled away from it, and, the bed being narrow, I slipped over the edge and bumped on to the floor.

“Now I think it is quite possible that up to this point you may have attributed my unhappy experience to nothing more nor less than a bad dream, but your dream theory can no longer hold good, for, on coming in such sudden contact with the floor, I gave my funny-bone a knock, which, I can assure you, made me thoroughly awake, and the first thing I noticed on recovering my scattered senses—was the smell. I sat up, and saw to my terror my bed was occupied, but occupied in the most alarming manner. On the middle of the pillow was a face, the face of—I looked closer; I would have given every penny I possessed not to have done so, but I could not help myself—I looked closer, and it was—the face of my brother; my brother Ralph—you may recollect my mentioning him to you, for he was the only one of us who was at that time making money—whom I believed to be in New York. He had always been rather sallow, but apart from the fact that he now looked very yellow, his appearance was quite natural. Indeed, as I gazed at him, I grew so convinced it was he that I cried out, ‘Ralph!’ The moment I did so, there was a ghastly change: his eyelids opened, and his eyes—eyes I recognised at once—protruded to such a degree that they almost rolled out; his mouth flew open, his tongue swelled, his whole countenance became convulsed with the most unparalleled, and for that reason indescribable, expression of agony, whilst the yellowness of his complexion deepened to a livid, lurid black, that was so inconceivably repellent and hellish that I sprang away from the bed—appalled. There was then a gasping, rasping noise, and a voice that, despite its unnatural hollowness, I identified as that of Ralph, broke forth: ‘I have been wanting to speak to you for ages, but *something*, I cannot explain, has always prevented me. I have been dead a month; not cancer, but Dolly. Poison. Good-bye, Hely. I shall rest in peace now.’ The voice stopped; there was a rush of cold air, laden with the scent of the drug, and tainted, faintly tainted, with the nauseating smell of the grave, and—the face on the pillow vanished. How I got through the remainder of the night I cannot say—I dare not think. I dare only remember that I did not sleep. I was devoted to Ralph, and the thought that he had perished in the miserable manner suggested by the apparition, completely prostrated me. In the morning I received a black-edged letter from my mother, stating that she had just heard from Dolly, my brother's wife, saying Ralph had died from cancer in the

throat. Dolly added in a postscript that her dearly beloved Ralph had been very good to her, and left her well provided for. Of course, we might have had the body exhumed, but we were poor, and Ralph's widow was rich; and in America, you know, everything goes in favour of the dollars. Hence we were obliged to let the matter drop, sincerely trusting Dolly would never take it into her head to visit us. She never did. My mother died last year—I felt her death terribly, O'Donnell; and as I no longer have any fixed abode, but am always touring the British provinces, there is not much fear of Ralph's murderess and I meeting. It is rather odd, however, that after my own experience at the hotel, I heard that it had borne the reputation for being haunted for many years, and that a good many visitors who had passed the night in one of the rooms (presumably mine) had complained of hearing strange noises and having dreadful dreams. How can one explain it all?

“One can't,” I responded, as we turned in for the night.