

CASE XIII

## The Floating Head

*Of the Benrachett Inn, Near the Perth Road, Dundee*

By Elliot O'Donnell

Some years ago, when I was engaged in collecting cases for a book I contemplated publishing, on *Haunted Houses in England and Wales*, I was introduced to an Irish clergyman, whose name I have forgotten, and whom I have never met since. Had the incident he related taken place in England or Wales, I should have noted it down carefully, but as it occurred in Scotland (and I had no intention then of bringing out a volume on Scottish phantasms), I did not do so.

My memory, however, I can assure my readers, in spite of the many ghost tales committed to it,—for scarcely a day passes that I do not hear one,—seldom fails, and the Irish clergyman's story, which I am about to relate, comes back to me now with startling vividness.

One summer evening, early in the eighties, Mr. Murphy—the name by which I will designate the originator of this story—and his wife arrived in Dundee. The town was utterly unknown to them, and they were touring Scotland for the first time. Not knowing where to put up for the night, and knowing no one to whom they could apply for information, they consulted a local paper, and from the long list of hotels and boarding-houses advertised therein selected the Benrachett Inn, near the Perth Road, as being the one most likely to meet their modest requirements. They were certainly not disappointed with the exterior of the hotel they had chosen, for as soon as they saw it they exclaimed simultaneously, "What a delightful old place!" And old it certainly was, for the many-gabled, oaken structure and projecting windows unquestionably indicated the sixteenth century, whilst, to enhance the effect and give it a true touch in detail of "ye ancient times," a huge antique lantern was hung over the entrance. Nor did the interior impress them less favourably. The rooms were large, and low, the ceilings, walls, floors, and staircase all of oak. The diamond-lattice windows, and narrow, tortuous passages, and innumerable nooks and crannies and cupboards, created an atmosphere of combined quaintness and comfort that irresistibly appealed to the Murphys. Viewed under the searching rays of the sun, and cheered by the voices of the visitors, the interior of the house, for artistic taste and cheerfulness, would indeed be hard to beat; but, as Mrs. Murphy's eyes wandered up the stairs and down the corridors, she was filled with misgivings as to how the place would strike her at night.

Though not nervous naturally, and by no means superstitious, at night, when the house was dark and silent, and the moon called forth the shadows, she was not without that feeling of uneasiness which most people—even avowed sceptics, experience when passing the night in strange and novel quarters.

The room they engaged—I cannot say selected, as, the hotel being full, they had "Hobson's choice"—was at the end of a very long passage, at the back of the house, and overlooking the yard. It was a large apartment, and in one of its several recesses stood the bed, a gigantic, ebony four-poster, with spotlessly clean valance, and, what was of even greater importance, well-aired sheets. The other furniture in the room, being of the same sort as that in the majority of old-fashioned hostels, needs no description; but a fixture in the shape of a cupboard, a deep, dark cupboard, let into the wall facing the bed, instantly attracted Mrs. Murphy's attention. There is always something interesting in cupboards, particularly old and roomy cupboards, when it is

night-time and one is about to get into bed. It is then that they suggest all manner of fascinating possibilities.

It was to this cupboard, then, that Mrs. Murphy paid the greatest attention, before commencing to undress prior to getting into bed. She poked about in it for some moments, and then, apparently satisfied that no one was hidden there, continued her investigation of the room. Mr. Murphy did not assist—he pleaded fatigue, and sat on the corner of the bed munching a gingerbread and reading the *Dundee Advertiser* till the operation was over. He then helped Mrs. Murphy unpack their portmanteau, and, during the process, whiled away so much time in conversation, that they were both startled when a clock from some adjacent church solemnly boomed twelve. They were then seized with something approaching a panic, and hastened to disrobe.

“I wish we had a night-light, John,” Mrs. Murphy said, as she got up from her prayers. “I suppose it wouldn’t do to keep one of the candles burning. I am not exactly afraid, only I don’t fancy being left in the dark. I had a curious sensation when I was in the cupboard just now—I can’t exactly explain it—but I feel now that I would like the light left burning.”

“It certainly is rather a gloomy room,” Mr. Murphy remarked, raising his eyes to the black oak ceiling, and then allowing them to dwell in turn on each of the angles and recesses. “And I agree with you it would be nice if we had a night-light, or, better still, gas. But as we haven’t, my dear, and we shall be on our feet a good deal to-morrow, I think we ought to try and get to sleep as soon as possible.”

He blew out the candle as he spoke, and quickly scrambled into bed. A long hush followed, broken only by the sound of breathing, and an occasional ticking as of some long-legged creature on the wall and window-blind. Mrs. Murphy could never remember if she actually went to sleep, but she is sure her husband did, as she distinctly heard him snore—and the sound, so detestable to her as a rule, was so welcome to her then. She was lying listening to it, and wishing with all her soul she could get to sleep, when she suddenly became aware of a smell—a most offensive, pungent odour, that blew across the room and crept up her nostrils. The cold perspiration of fear at once broke out on her forehead. Nasty as the smell was, it suggested something more horrible, something she dared not attempt to analyse. She thought several times of rousing her husband, but, remembering how tired he had been, she desisted, and, with all her faculties abnormally on the alert, she lay awake and listened. A deathlike hush hung over the house, interrupted at intervals by the surreptitious noises peculiar to the night—enigmatical creaks and footsteps, rustlings as of drapery, sighs and whisperings—all very faint, all very subtle, and all possibly, just possibly, attributable to natural causes. Mrs. Murphy caught herself—why, she could not say—waiting for some definite auditory manifestation of what she instinctively felt was near at hand. At present, however, she could not locate it, she could only speculate on its whereabouts—it was somewhere in the direction of the cupboard. And each time the stench came to her, the conviction that its origin was in the cupboard grew. At last, unable to sustain the suspense any longer, and urged on by an irresistible fascination, she got softly out of bed, and, creeping stealthily forward, found her way with surprisingly little difficulty (considering it was pitch dark and the room was unfamiliar to her) to the cupboard.

With every step she took the stink increased, and by the time she had reached the cupboard she was almost suffocated. For some seconds she toyed irresolutely with the door handle, longing to be back again in bed, but unable to tear herself away from the cupboard. At last, yielding to the demands of some pitilessly exacting unknown influence, she held her breath and swung open the door. The moment she did so the room filled with the faint, phosphorescent glow of decay, and

she saw, exactly opposite her, a head—a human head—floating in mid-air. Petrified with terror, she lost every atom of strength, and, entirely bereft of the power to move or articulate a sound, she stood stock-still staring at it. That it was the head of a man, she could only guess from the matted crop of short red hair that fell in a disordered entanglement over the upper part of the forehead and ears. All else was lost in a loathsome, disgusting mass of detestable decomposition, too utterly vile and foul to describe. On the abnormal thing beginning to move forward, the spell that bound Mrs. Murphy to the floor was broken, and, with a cry of horror, she fled to the bed and awoke her husband.

The head was by this time close to them, and had not Mrs. Murphy dragged her husband forcibly out of its way, it would have touched him.

His terror was even greater than hers; but for the moment neither could speak. They stood clutching one another in an awful silence. Mrs. Murphy at length gasped out, "Pray, John, pray! Command the thing in the name of God to depart." Mr. Murphy made a desperate effort to do so, but not a syllable would come. The head now veered round and was moving swiftly towards them, its awful stench causing them both to retch and vomit. Mr. Murphy, seizing his stick, lashed at it with all his might. The result was one they might well have expected. The stick met with no resistance, and the head continued to advance. Both Mr. and Mrs. Murphy then made a frantic attempt to find the door, the head still pursuing them, and, tripping over something in their wild haste, fell together on the floor. There was now no hope, the head had caught them up; it hovered immediately above them, and, descending lower, lower, and lower, finally passed right through them, through the floor, and out of sight. It was long ere either of them could sufficiently recover to stir from the floor, and when they did move, it was only to totter to their bed, and to lie with the bedclothes well over their heads, quivering and quaking till the morning.

The hot morning sun dissipating their fears, they got up, and, hurrying downstairs, demanded an interview with their landlord. It was in vain the latter argued it was all a nightmare they showed the absurdity of such a theory by vehemently attesting they had both simultaneously experienced the phenomena. They were about to take their departure, when the landlord, retracting all he had said, offered them another room and any terms they liked, "if only they would stay and hold their tongues."

"I know every word of what you say is true," he said, in such submissive tones that the tender hearts of Mr. and Mrs. Murphy instantly relented, and they promised to remain. "But what am I to do? I cannot shut up a house which I have taken on a twenty years' lease, because one room in it is haunted—and, after all, there is only one visitor in twenty who is disturbed by the apparition. What is the history of the head? Why, it is said to be that of a pedlar who was murdered here over a hundred years ago. The body was hidden behind the wainscoting, and his head under the cupboard floor. The miscreants were never caught; they are supposed to have gone down in a ship that sailed from this port just about that time and was never heard of again."

This is the gist of the story the clergyman told me, and, believing it as I undoubtedly do to be true, there is every reason to suppose that the inn, to which I have, of course, given a fictitious name, if still in existence, is still haunted.