

CASE XIV

The Hauntings of “— House”

In The Neighbourhood Of The Great Western Road, Aberdeen

By Elliott O'Donnell

The following experience of a haunting is that of Mr. Scarfe, who told it me some few summers ago, expressing at the same time great eagerness to accompany me on some of my investigations.

I append it as nearly as possible in his own words:—

I was spending Easter, he began, with some friends of mine in Aberdeen, and, learning from them that there was a haunted house in the immediate vicinity of the Great Western Road, I begged them to try and get me permission to spend a night in it. As good luck would have it, the landlord happened to be a connection of theirs, and although at first rather reluctant to give me leave, lest by doing so he should create a precedent, and, consequently, be pestered to death by people whom he knew to be as anxious as I was to see the ghost, he eventually yielded; and, the following evening at 8 p.m., accompanied only by my dog, Scott, I entered the premises.

I cannot say I felt very comfortable when the door slammed behind me, and I found myself standing alone in a cold, dark passage out of which rose a gloomy staircase, suggestive of all sorts of uncanny possibilities. However, overcoming these nervous apprehensions as best I could, I began a thorough search of the premises, to make sure that no one was hiding there.

Descending first of all into the basement, I explored the kitchen, scullery, larder, and other domestic offices. The place fairly reeked with damp, but this was not to be wondered at, taking in consideration the fact, that the soil was clay, the floor of the very poorest quality of cement, cracked and broken in a dozen and one places, and that there had been no fires in any of the rooms for many months. Here and there in the darkest corners were clusters of ugly cockroaches, whilst more than one monstrous rat scampered away on my approach. My dog, or rather the dog that was lent me, and which went by the name of Scott, kept close at my heel, showing no very great enthusiasm in his mission, and giving even the rodents as wide a berth as possible.

I invariably trust to my psychic faculty (as you know, Mr. O'Donnell, some people are born with the faculty) to enable me to detect the presence of the superphysical. I generally feel the latter incorporated in some inexplicable manner in the ether, or see it inextricably interwoven with the shadows.

Here in the basement it was everywhere—the air was simply saturated with it, and, as the fading sunlight called shadow after shadow into existence, it confronted me enigmatically whichever way I turned.

I went upstairs, and the presence followed me. In one or two of the top bedrooms—more particularly in a tiny garret overlooking the back-yard—the Presence seemed inclined to hover. For some seconds I waited there, in order to see if there would be any further development; there being none—I obeyed the mandates of a sudden impulse and made my way once more to the basement. On arriving at the top of the kitchen stairs, Scott showed a decided disinclination to descend farther. Crouching down, he whined piteously, and when I attempted to grasp him by the collar, snarled in a most savage manner. Consequently, thinking it better to have no companion at all than one so unwilling, I descended without him.

The stairs terminated in a very dark and narrow passage, into which the doors of the kitchen, larder, store room, etc., opened respectively, and at the farther extremity of which was a doorway leading to the backyard. The superphysical Presence seeming to be more pronounced in this passage. than anywhere else, I decided to spend the night in it, and, selecting a spot opposite the entrance to the scullery, I constructed a seat out of two of the drawers of the kitchen dresser, by placing them, one on the other, bottom uppermost on the floor.

It was now half-past nine; the traffic in the street overhead was beginning to diminish—the rumbling of drays or heavy four-wheelers had almost ceased, whilst the jingling of hansom and even the piercing boot-hoot and loud birr-birr of motors was fast becoming less and less frequent. I put out my candle and waited; and, as I waited, the hush and gloom of the house deepened and intensified, until, by midnight, all round me was black and silent—black with a blackness that defies penetration, and silent with a silence that challenges only the rivalry of the grave. Occasionally I heard sounds—such, for example, as the creaking of a board, the flopping of a cockroach, and the growling of Scott—sounds which in the daytime would have been too trivial to attract attention, but which now assumed the most startling and exaggerated proportions. From time to time I felt my pulse and took my temperature to make sure that I was perfectly normal, whilst at one o'clock, the hour when human vitality begins to be on the wane, I ate some chicken and ham sandwiches, which I helped down with a single glass of oatmeal stout. So far, beyond my feeling that there was a superphysical something in the house, nothing had occurred. There had not been the slightest attempt at manifestation, and, as the minutes sped swiftly by I began to fear that, perhaps, after all the hauntings were only of a negative nature. As the clock struck two, however, Scott gave an extra savage snarl, and the next moment came racing downstairs. Darting along the passage and tearing towards me, he scrambled up the overturned drawers, and, burying his face in my lap, set up the most piteous whinings. A sensation of icy coldness, such as could not have been due to any physical cause, now surged through me; and, as I got out my pocket flashlight ready for emergencies, I heard an unmistakable rustling in the cellar opposite. At once my whole attention became riveted in the direction of this sound, and, as I sat gazing fixedly in front of me, the darkness was suddenly dissipated and the whole passage, from one end to the other, was illuminated by a phosphorescent glow; which glow I can best describe as bearing a close resemblance, in kind though not in degree, to the glow of a glow-worm. I then saw the scullery door slowly begin to open. A hideous fear seized me. What—what in the name of Heaven should I see? Transfixed with terror, unable to move or utter a sound, I crouched against the wall paralysed, helpless; whilst the door opened wider and wider.

At last, at last after an interval which to me was eternity, Something, an as yet indefinite shadowy Something, loomed in the background of the enlarging space. My suspense was now sublime, and I felt that another second or so of such tension would assuredly see me swoon.

The shadowy Something, however, quickly developed, and, in less time than it takes to write, it assumed the form of a woman—a middle-aged woman with a startlingly white face, straight nose, and curiously lined mouth, the two front upper teeth of which projected considerably and were very long. Her hair was black, her hands coarse, and red, and she was clad in the orthodox shabby print of a general servant in some middle-class family. The expression in her wide-open, glassy blue eyes as they glared into mine was one of such intense mental and physical agony that I felt every atom of blood in my veins congeal. Creeping stealthily forward, her gaze still on me, she emerged from the doorway, and motioning to me to follow, glided up the staircase. Up, up, we went, the cold, grey dawn greeting us on our way. Entering the garret to which I have already

alluded, the phantasm noiselessly approached the hearth, and, pointing downward with a violent motion of the index finger of its right hand, suddenly vanished. A great feeling of relief now came over me, and, yielding to a reaction which was the inevitable consequence of such a severe nervous strain, I reeled against the windowsill and shook with laughter.

Equanimity at length reasserting itself, I carefully marked the spot on the floor, indicated by the apparition, and descending into the basement to fetch Scott, made hurried tracks to my friends' house, where I was allowed to sleep on till late in the day. I then returned to the haunted house with the landlord, and my friend, and, on raising the boarding in the garret, we discovered a stamped and addressed envelope.

As the result of our combined inquiries, we learned that a few years previously the house had been occupied by some trades-people of the name of Piblington, who, some six or seven months before they left the house, had had in their employment a servant named Anna Webb. This servant, the description of whose person corresponded in every way with the ghost I had seen, had been suspected of stealing a letter containing money, and had hanged herself in the cellar.

The letter, I gathered, with several others, had been given to Anna to post by Mrs. Piblington, and as no reply to the one containing money was received, Anna was closely questioned. Naturally nervous and highly strung, the inquisition confused her terribly, and her embarrassment being construed into guilt, she was threatened with prosecution. "As a proof of my innocence," she scribbled on a piece of paper, which was produced at the subsequent inquest, "I am going to hang myself. I never stole your letter, and can only suppose it was lost in the post."

The mere fact of the accused committing suicide would, in many people's opinion, point to guilt; and as the postal order was never traced, it was generally concluded that Anna had secreted it, and had been only waiting till inquiries ceased, and the affair was forgotten, to cash it. Of course, the letter I found was the missing one, and although apparently hidden with intent, the fact of its never having been opened seemed to suggest that Anna was innocent, and that the envelope had, by some extraordinary accident, fallen unnoticed by Anna through the crack between the boards. Anyhow, its discovery put an end to the disturbances and the apparition of the unfortunate suicide—whether guilty or innocent, and the Judgment Day can alone determine that—has never been seen since.