

CASE XVI

## **The Ghost of the Hindoo Child**

*Or the Hauntings of the White Dove Hotel, Near St. Swithin's Street, Aberdeen*

By Elliott O'Donnell

In the course of many years' investigation of haunted houses, I have naturally come in contact with numerous people who have had first-hand experiences with the Occult. Nurse Mackenzie is one of these people. I met her for the first time last year at the house of my old friend, Colonel Malcolmson, whose wife she was nursing.

For some days I was hardly aware she was in the house, the illness of her patient keeping her in constant seclusion, but when Mrs. Malcolmson grew better, I not infrequently saw her, taking a morning "constitutional" in the beautiful castle grounds. It was on one of these occasions that she favoured me with an account of her psychical adventure.

It happened, she began, shortly after I had finished my term as probationer at St. K.'s Hospital, Edinburgh. A letter was received at the hospital one morning with the urgent request that two nurses should be sent to a serious case near St. Swithin's Street. As the letter was signed by a well-known physician in the town, it received immediate attention, and Nurse Emmett and I were dispatched, as day and night nurses respectively, to the scene of action. My hours on duty were from 9 p.m. till 9 a.m. The house in which the patient was located was the White Dove Hotel, a thoroughly respectable and well-managed establishment. The proprietor knew nothing about the invalid, except that her name was Vining, and that she had, at one period of her career, been an actress. He had noticed that she had looked ill on her arrival the previous week. Two days after her arrival, she had complained of feeling very ill, and the doctor, who had been summoned to attend her, said that she was suffering from a very loathsome Oriental disease, which, fortunately is, in this country, rare. The hotel, though newly decorated and equipped throughout with every up-to-date convenience, was in reality very old. It was one of those delightfully roomy erections that seem built for eternity rather than time, and for comfort rather than economy of space. The interior, with its oak-panelled walls, polished oak floors, and low ceilings, traversed with ponderous oaken beams, also impressed me pleasantly, whilst a flight of broad, oak stairs, fenced with balustrades a foot thick, brought me to a seemingly interminable corridor, into which the door of Miss Vining's room opened. It was a low, wainscoted apartment, and its deep-set window, revealing the thickness of the wall, looked out upon a dismal yard littered with brooms and buckets. Opposite the foot of the bed—a modern French bedstead, by the bye, whose brass fittings and somewhat flimsy hangings were strangely incongruous with their venerable surroundings—was an inglenook, containing the smouldering relics of what had doubtless been intended for a fire, but which needed considerable coaxing before it could be converted from a pretence to a reality. There was no exit save by the doorway I had entered, and no furniture save a couple of rush-bottomed chairs and a table strewn with an untidy medley of writing materials and medicine bottles.

A feeling of depression, contrasting strangely with the effect produced on me by the cheerfulness of the hotel in general, seized me directly I entered the room. Despite the brilliancy of the electric light and the new and gaudy bed-hangings, the air was full of gloom—a gloom which, for the very reason that it was unaccountable, was the more alarming. I felt it hanging

around me like the undeveloped shadow of something singularly hideous and repulsive, and, on my approaching the sick woman, it seemed to thrust itself in my way and force me back.

Miss Vining was decidedly good-looking; she had the typically theatrical features—neatly moulded nose and chin, curly yellow hair, and big, dreamy blue eyes that especially appeal to a certain class of men; like most women, however, I prefer something more solid, both physically and intellectually—I cannot stand “the pretty, pretty.” She was, of course, far too ill to converse, and, beyond a few desultory and spasmodic ejaculations, maintained a rigid silence. As there was no occasion for me to sit close beside her, I drew up a chair before the fire, placing myself in such a position as to command a full view of the bed. My first night passed undisturbed by any incident, and in the morning the condition of my patient showed a slight improvement. It was eight o’clock in the evening when I came on duty again, and, the weather having changed during the day, the whole room echoed and re-echoed with the howling of the wind, which was raging round the house with demoniacal fury.

I had been at my post for a little over two hours—and had just registered my patient’s temperature, when, happening to look up from the book I was reading, I saw to my surprise that the chair beside the head of the bed was occupied by a child—a tiny girl. How she had come into the room without attracting my attention was certainly extraordinary, and I could only suppose that the shrieking of the wind down the wide chimney had deadened the sound of the door and her footsteps.

I was naturally, of course, very indignant that she had dared to come in without rapping, and, getting up from my seat I was preparing to address her and bid her go, when she lifted a wee white hand and motioned me back. I obeyed because I could not help myself—her action was accompanied by a peculiar,—an unpleasantly peculiar, expression that held me spellbound; and without exactly knowing why, I stood staring at her, tongue-tied and trembling. As her face was turned towards the patient, and she wore, moreover, a very wide-brimmed hat, I could see nothing of her features; but from her graceful little figure and dainty limbs, I gathered that she was probably both beautiful and aristocratic. Her dress, though not perhaps of the richest quality, was certainly far from shoddy, and there was something in its style and make that suggested foreign nationality,—Italy—or Spain—or South America—or even the Orient, the probability of the latter being strengthened by her pose, which was full of the serpent-like ease which is characteristic of the East. I was so taken up with watching her that I forgot all about my patient, until a prolonged sigh from the bed reminded me of her existence. With an effort I then advanced, and was about to approach the bed, when the child, without moving her head, motioned me back, and—again I was helpless. The vision I had obtained of the sick woman, brief though it was, filled me with alarm. She was tossing to and fro on the blankets, and breathing in the most agonised manner as if in delirium, or enthralled by some particularly dreadful nightmare. Her condition so frightened me, that I made the most frantic efforts to overcome my inertia. I did not succeed, however, and at last, utterly overcome by my exertion, I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, the chair by the bed was vacant—the child had gone. A tremendous feeling of relief surged through me, and, jumping out of my seat, I hastened to the bedside—my patient was worse, the fever had increased, and she was delirious. I took her temperature. It was 104. I now sat close beside her, and my presence apparently had a soothing effect. She speedily grew calmer, and after taking her medicine gradually sank into a gentle sleep which lasted until late in the morning. When I left her she had altogether recovered from the relapse. I, of course, told the doctor of the child’s visit, and he was very angry.

“Whatever happens, Nurse,” he said, “take care that no one enters the room to-night; the patient’s condition is far too critical for her to see any one, even her own daughter. You must keep the door locked.”

Armed with this mandate, I went on duty the following night with a somewhat lighter heart, and, after locking the door, once again sat by the fire. During the day there had been a heavy fall of snow; the wind had abated, and the streets were now as silent as the grave.

Ten, eleven, and twelve o’clock struck, and my patient slept tranquilly. At a quarter to one, however, I was abruptly roused from a reverie by a sob, a sob of fear and agony that proceeded from the bed. I looked, and there—there, seated in the same posture as on the previous evening, was the child. I sprang to my feet with an exclamation of amazement. She raised her hand, and, as before, I collapsed—spellbound—paralysed. No words of mine can convey all the sensations I experienced as I sat there, forced to listen to the moaning and groaning of the woman whose fate had been entrusted to my keeping. Every second she grew worse, and each sound rang in my ears like the hammering of nails in her coffin. How long I endured such torment I cannot say, I dare not think, for, though the clock was within a few feet of me, I never once thought of looking at it. At last the child rose, and, moving slowly from the bed, advanced with bowed head towards the window. The spell was broken. With a cry of indignation I literally bounded over the carpet and faced the intruder.

“Who are you?” I hissed. “Tell me your name instantly! How dare you enter this room without my permission?”

As I spoke she slowly raised her head. I snatched at her hat. It melted away in my hands, and, to my unspeakable terror, my undying terror, I looked into the face of a corpse!—the corpse of a Hindoo child, with a big, gaping cut in its throat. In its lifetime the child had, without doubt, been lovely; it was now horrible—horrible with all the ghastly disfigurements, the repellent disfigurements, of a long consignment to the grave. I fainted, and, on recovering, found my ghostly visitor had vanished, and that my patient was dead. One of her hands was thrown across her eyes, as if to shut out some object on which she feared to look, whilst the other grasped the counterpane convulsively.

It fell to my duty to help pack up her belongings, and among her letters was a large envelope bearing the postmark “Quetta.” As we were on the look-out for some clue as to the address of her relatives, I opened it. It was merely the cabinet-size photograph of a Hindoo child, but I recognised the dress immediately—it was that of my ghostly visitor. On the back of it were these words: “Natalie. May God forgive us both.”

Though we made careful inquiries for any information as to Natalie and Miss Vining in Quetta, and advertised freely in the leading London papers, we learned nothing, and in time we were forced to let the matter drop. As far as I know, the ghost of the Hindoo child has never been seen again, but I have heard that the hotel is still haunted—haunted by a woman.