

The Occult in Shadows

By Elliott O'Donnell

Many of the shadows, I have seen, have not had material counterparts. They have invariably proved themselves to be superphysical danger signals, the sure indicators of the presence of those grey, inscrutable, inhuman cerebrums to which I have alluded; of phantasms of the dead and of elementals of all kinds. There is an indescribable something about them, that at once distinguishes them from ordinary shadows, and puts me on my guard. I have seen them in houses that to all appearances are the least likely to be haunted—houses full of sunshine and the gladness of human voices. In the midst of merriment, they have darkened the wall opposite me like the mystic writing in Nebuchadnezzar's palace. They have suddenly appeared by my side, as I have been standing on rich, new carpeting or sun-kissed swards. They have floated into my presence with both sunbeams and moonbeams, through windows, doors, and curtains, and their advent has invariably been followed by some form or other of occult demonstration. I spent some weeks this summer at Worthing, and, walking one afternoon to the Downs, selected a bright and secluded spot for a comfortable snooze. I revel in snatching naps in the open sunshine, and this was a place that struck me as being perfectly ideal for that purpose. It was on the brow of a diminutive hillock covered with fresh, lovely grass of a particularly vivid green. In the rear and on either side of it, the ground rose and fell in pleasing alternation for an almost interminable distance, whilst in front of it there was a gentle declivity (up which I had clambered) terminating in the broad, level road leading to Worthing. Here, on this broad expanse of the Downs, was a fairyland of soft sea air, sunshine and rest—rest from mankind, from the shrill, unmusical voices of the crude and rude product of the County Council schools.

I sat down; I never for one moment thought of phantasms; I fell asleep. I awoke; the hot flood-gates of the cloudless heaven were still open, the air translucent over and around me, when straight in front of me, on a gloriously gilded patch of grass, there fell a shadow—a shadow from no apparent substance, for both air and ground were void of obstacles, and, apart from myself, there was no living object in the near landscape. Yet it was a shadow; a shadow that I could not diagnose; a waving, fluctuating shadow, unpleasantly suggestive of something subtle and horrid. It was, I instinctively knew, the shadow of the occult; a few moments more, and a development would, in all probability, take place. The blue sky, the golden sea, the tiny trails of smoke creeping up lazily from the myriads of chimney-pots, the white house-tops, the red housetops, the church spire, the railway line, the puffing, humming, shuffling goods-train, the glistening white roads, the breathing, busy figures, and the bright and smiling mile upon mile of emerald turf rose in rebellion against the likelihood of ghosts—yet, there was the shadow. I looked away from it, and, as I did so, an icy touch fell on my shoulder. I dared not turn; I sat motionless, petrified, frozen. The touch passed to my forehead and from thence to my chin, my head swung round forcibly, and I saw—nothing—only the shadow; but how different, for out of the chaotic blotches there now appeared a well—a remarkably well—defined outline, the outline of a head and hand, the head of a fantastic beast, a repulsive beast, and the hand of a man. A flock of swallows swirled overhead, a grasshopper chirped, a linnets sang, and, with this sudden awakening of nature, the touch and shadow vanished simultaneously. But the hillock had lost its attractions for me, and, rising hastily, I dashed down the decline and hurried homewards. I discovered no reason other than solitude, and the possible burial-place of prehistoric man, for the

presence of the occult; but the next time, I visited the spot, the same thing happened. I have been there twice since, and the same, always the same thing—first the shadow, then the touch, then the shadow, then the arrival of some form or other of joyous animal life, and the abrupt disappearance of the Unknown.

I was once practising bowls on the lawn of a very old house, the other inhabitants of which were all occupied indoors. I had taken up a bowl, and was in the act of throwing it, when, suddenly, on the empty space in front of me I saw a shadow, a nodding, waving, impenetrable, undecipherable shadow. I looked around, but there was nothing visible that could in any way account for it. I threw down the bowl and turned to go indoors. As I did so, something touched me lightly in the face. I threw out my hand and touched a cold, clammy substance strangely suggestive of the leafy branch of a tree. Yet nothing was to be seen. I felt again, and my fingers wandered to a broader expanse of something gnarled and uneven. I kept on exploring, and my grasp closed over something painfully prickly. I drew my hand smartly back, and, as I did so, distinctly heard the loud and angry rustling of leaves. Just then one of my friends called out to me from a window. I veered round to reply, and the shadow had vanished. I never saw it again, though I often had the curious sensation that it was there. I did not mention my experience to my friends, as they were pronounced disbelievers in the superphysical, but tactful inquiry led to my gleaning the information that on the identical spot, where I had felt the phenomena, had once stood a horse-chestnut tree, which had been cut down owing to the strong aversion the family had taken to it, partly on account of a strange growth on the trunk, unpleasantly suggestive of cancer, and partly because a tramp had hanged himself on one of the branches.

All sorts of extraordinary shadows have come to me in the Parks, the Twopenny Tube, and along the Thames Embankment. At ten o'clock, on the morning of 1st April 1899, I entered Hyde Park by one of the side gates of the Marble Arch, and crossing to the island, sat down on an empty bench. The sky was grey, the weather ominous, and occasional heavy drops of rain made me rejoice in the possession of an umbrella. On such a day, the park does not appear at its best. The Arch exhibited a dull, dirty, yellowish-grey exterior; every seat was bespattered with mud; whilst, to render the general aspect still more unprepossessing, the trees had not yet donned their mantles of green, but stood dejectedly drooping their leafless branches as if overcome with embarrassment at their nakedness. On the benches around me sat, or lay, London's homeless—wretched-looking men in long, tattered overcoats, baggy, buttonless trousers, cracked and laceless boots, and shapeless bowlers, too weak from want of food and rest even to think of work, almost incapable, indeed, of thought at all—breathing corpses, nothing more, with premature signs of decomposition in their filthy smell. And the women—the women were, if possible, ranker—feebly pulsating, feebly throbbing, foully stinking, rotten, living deaths. No amount of soap, food, or warmth could reclaim them now. Nature's implacable law—the survival of the fittest, the weakest to the wall—was here exhibited in all its brutal force, and, as I gazed at the weakest, my heart turned sick within me.

Time advanced; one by one the army of tatterdemalions crawled away, God alone knew how, God alone knew where. In all probability God did not care. Why should He? He created Nature and Nature's laws.

A different type of humanity replaced this garbage: neat and dapper girls on their way to business; black-bowled, spotless-leathered, a-guinea-a-week clerks, casting longing glances at the pale grass and countless trees (their only reminiscence of the country), as they hastened their pace, lest they should be a minute late for their hateful servitude; a policeman with the characteristic stride and swinging arms; a brisk and short-stepped postman; an apoplectic-looking, second-

hand-clothes-man; an emaciated widow; a typical charwoman; two mechanics; the usual brutal-faced labourer; one of the idle rich in shiny hat, high collar, cutaway coat, prancing past on a coal-black horse; and a bevy of nursemaids.

To show my mind was not centred on the occult,—bootlaces, collar-studs, the two buttons on the back of ladies' coats, dyed hair, servants' feet, and a dozen and one other subjects, quite other than the superphysical, successively occupied my thoughts. Imagine, then, my surprise and the shock I received, when, on glancing at the gravel in front of me, I saw two shadows—two enigmatical shadows. A dog came shambling along the path, showed its teeth, snarled, sprang on one side, and, with bristling hair, fled for its life. I examined the plot of ground behind me; there was nothing that could in any way account for the shadows, nothing like them. Something rubbed against my leg. I involuntarily put down my band; it was a foot—a clammy lump of ice, but, unmistakably, a foot. Yet of what? I saw nothing, only the shadows. I did not want to discover more; my very soul shrank within me at the bare idea of what there might be, what there was. But, as is always the case, the superphysical gave me no choice; my hand, moving involuntarily forward, rested on something flat, round, grotesque, horrid, something I took for a face, but a face which I knew could not be human. Then I understood the shadows. Uniting, they formed the outline of something lithe and tall, the outline of a monstrosity with a growth even as I had felt it—flat, round, grotesque, and horrid. Was it the phantasm of one of those poor waifs and strays, having all their bestialities and diseases magnified; or was it the spirit of a tree of some unusually noxious nature?

I could not divine, and so I came away unsatisfied. But I believe the shadow is still there, for I saw it only the last time I was in the Park.