

# Obsession, Possession

*Clocks, Chests and Mummies*

By Elliott O'Donnell

As I have already remarked, spirit or unknown brains are frequently present at births. The brains of infants are very susceptible to impressions, and, in them, the thought-germs of the occult brains find snug billets. As time goes on, these germs develop and become generally known as "tastes," "cranks," and "mamas."

It is an error to think that men of genius are especially prone to mamas. On the contrary, the occult brains have the greatest difficulty in selecting thought-germs sufficiently subtle to lodge in the brain-cells of a child of genius. Practically, any germ of carnal thought will be sure of reception in the protoplasmic brain-cells of a child, who is destined to become a doctor, solicitor, soldier, shopkeeper, labourer, or worker in any ordinary occupation; but the thought-germ that will find entrance to the brain-cells of a future painter, writer, actor, or musician, must represent some propensity of a more or less extraordinary nature.

We all harbour these occult missiles, we are all to a certain extent mad: the proud mamma who puts her only son into the Church or makes a lawyer of him, and placidly watches him develop a scarlet face, double chin, and prodigious paunch, would flounce out a hundred and one indignant denials if anyone suggested he had a mania, but it would be true; gluttony would be his mania, and one every whit as prohibitive to his chances of reaching the spiritual plane, as drink, or sexual passion. Love of eating is, indeed, quite the commonest form of obsession, and one that develops soonest. Nine out of ten children—particularly present-day children, whose doting parents encourage their every desire—are fonder of cramming their bellies than of playing cricket or skipping; games soon weary them, but buns and chocolates never. The truth is, buns and chocolate have obsessed them. They think of them all day, and dream of them all night. It is buns and chocolates! wherever and whenever they turn or look—buns and chocolates! This greed soon develops, as the occult brain intended it should; enforced physical labour, or athletics, or even sedentary work may dwarf its growth for a time, but at middle and old age it comes on again, and the buns and chocolates are become so many coursed luncheons and dinners. Their world is one of menus, nothing but menus; their only mental exertion the study of menus, and I have no doubt that "tuck" shops and restaurants are besieged by the ever-hungry spirit of the earth-bound glutton. Though the drink-germ is usually developed later (and its later growth is invariably accelerated with seas of alcohol), it not infrequently feeds its initial growth with copious streams of ginger beer and lemon kali.

Manual labourers—*i.e.* navvies, coal-heavers, miners, etc.—are naturally more or less brutal. Their brain-cells at birth offered so little resistance to the evil occult influences that they received, in full, all the lower germs of thought inoculated by the occult brains. Drink, gluttony, cruelty, all came to their infant cerebrums contemporaneously. The cruelty germ develops first, and cats, dogs, donkeys, smaller brothers, and even babies are made to feel the superior physical strength of the early wearer of hobnails. He is obsessed with a mania for hurting something, and with his strongly innate instinct of self-preservation, invariably chooses something that cannot harm him. Daily he looks around for fresh victims, and finally decides that the weedy offspring of the hated superior classes are the easiest prey. in company with others of his species, he annihilates the boy in Etons on his way to and from school, and the after recollections of the

weakling's bloody nose and teardrops are as nectar to him. The cruelty germ develops apace. The bloody noses of the well-dressed classes are his mania now. He sees them at every turn and even dreams of them. He grows to manhood, and either digs in the road or plies the pick and shovel underground. The mechanical, monotonous exercise and the sordidness of his home surroundings foster the germ, and his leisure moments are occupied with the memory of those glorious times when he was hitting out at someone, and he feels he would give anything just to have one more- blow. Curse the police! If it were not for them he could indulge his hobby to the utmost. But the stalwart, officious man in blue is ever on the scene, and the thrashing of a puny cleric or sawbones is scarcely compensation for a month's hard labour. Yet his mania must be satisfied somehow—it worries him to pieces. He must either smash someone's nose or go mad; there is no alternative, and he chooses the former. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals prevents him skinning a cat; the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children will be down on him at once if he strikes a child, and so he has no other resource left but his wife—he can knock out all her teeth, bash in her ribs, and jump on her head to his heart's content. She will never dare prosecute him, and, if she does, some Humanitarian Society will be sure to see that he is not legally punished. He thus finds safe scope for the indulgence of his crank, and when there is nothing left of his own wife, he turns his unattractive and pusillanimous attentions to someone else's.

But occult thought-germs of this elementary type only thrive where the infant's spiritual or unknown brain is wholly undeveloped. Where the spiritual or unknown brain of an infant is partially developed, the germ-thought to be lodged in it (especially if it be a germ-thought of cruelty) must be of a more subtle and refined nature.

I have traced the growth of cruelty obsession in children one would not suspect of any great tendency to animalism. A refined love of making others suffer has led them to vent inquisitionary tortures on insects, and the mania for pulling off the legs of flies and roasting beetles under spy-glasses has been gradually extended to drowning mice in cages and seeing pigs killed. Time develops the germ; the cruel boy becomes the callous doctor or "sharp-practising" attorney, and the cruel girl becomes the cruel mother and often the frail divorcée. Drink and cards are an obsession with some; cruelty is just as much a matter of obsession with others. But the ingenuity of the occult brain rises to higher things; it rises to the subtlest form of invention when dealing with the artistic and literary temperament. I have been intimately acquainted with authors—well-known in the popular sense of the word—who have been obsessed in the oddest and often most painful ways.

The constant going back to turn door-handles, the sitting in grotesque and untoward positions, the fondness for fingering any smooth and shiny objects, such as mother-of-pearl, develop into manias for change—change of scenery, of occupation, of affections, of people—change that inevitably necessitates misery; for breaking—breaking promises, contracts, family ties, furniture—but breaking, always breaking; for sensuality—sensuality sometimes venial, but often of the most gross and unpardonable nature.

I knew a musician who was obsessed in a peculiarly loathsome manner. Few knew of his misfortune, and none abominated it more than himself. He sang divinely, had the most charming personality, was all that could be desired as a husband and father, and yet was, in secret, a monomaniac of the most degrading and unusual order. In the daytime, when all was bright and cheerful, his mania was forgotten; but the moment twilight came, and he saw the shadows of night stealing stealthily towards him, his craze returned, and, if alone, he would steal surreptitiously out of the house and, with the utmost perseverance, seek an opportunity of

carrying into effect his bestial practices. I have known him tie himself to the table, surround himself with Bibles, and resort to every imaginable device to divert his mind from his passion, but all to no purpose; the knowledge that outside all was darkness and shadows proved irresistible. With a beating heart he put on his coat and hat, and, furtively opening the door, slunk out to gratify his hateful lust. Heaven knows! he went through hell.

I once watched a woman obsessed with an unnatural and wholly monstrous mania for her dog. She took it with her wherever she went, to the theatre, the shops, church, in railway carriages, on board ship. She dressed it in the richest silks and furs, decorated it with bangles, presented it with a watch, hugged, kissed, and fondled it, took it to bed with her, dreamed of it. When it died, she went into heavy mourning for it, and in an incredibly short space of time pined away. I saw her a few days before her death, and I was shocked; her gestures, mannerisms, and expression had become absolutely canine, and when she smiled—smiled in a forced and unnatural manner—I could have sworn I saw Launcelot, her pet!

There was also a man, a brilliant writer, who from a boy had been obsessed with a craze for all sorts of glossy things, more especially buttons. The mania grew; he spent all his time running after girls who were manicured, or who wore shining buttons, and, when he married, he besought his wife to sew buttons on every article of her apparel. In the end, he is said to have swallowed a button, merely to enjoy the sensation of its smooth surface on the coats of his stomach.

This somewhat exaggerated instance of obsession serves to show that, no matter how extraordinary the thought germ, it may enter one's mind and finally become a passion.

That the majority of people are obsessed, though in a varying degree, is a generally accepted fact; but that furniture can be possessed by occult brains, though not a generally accepted fact, is, I believe, equally true.

In a former work, entitled *Some Haunted Houses of England and Wales*, published by Mr Eveleigh Nash, I described how a bog-oak grandfather's clock was possessed by a peculiar type of elemental, which I subsequently classified as a vagrarian, or kind of grotesque spirit that inhabits wild and lonely places, and, not infrequently, spots where there are the remains of prehistoric (and even later-day) man and beast. In another volume called *The Haunted Houses of London*, I narrated the haunting of a house in Portman Square by a grandfather's clock, the spirit in possession causing it to foretell death by striking certain times; and I have since heard of hauntings by phenomena of a more or less similar nature.

The following is an example. A very dear friend of mine was taken ill shortly before Christmas. No one at the time suspected there was anything serious the matter with her, although her health of late had been far from good. I happened to be staying in the house just then, and found, that for some reason or other, I could not sleep. I do not often suffer from insomnia, so that the occurrence struck me as somewhat extraordinary. My bedroom opened on to a large, dark landing. In one corner of it stood a very old grandfather's clock, the ticking of which I could distinctly hear when the house was quiet. For the first two or three nights of my visit the clock was as usual, but, the night before my friend was taken ill, its ticking became strangely irregular. At one moment it sounded faint, at the next moment, the reverse; now it was slow, now quick; until at length, in a paroxysm of curiosity and fear, I cautiously opened my door and peeped out. It was a light night, and the glass face of the clock flashed back the moonbeams with startling brilliancy. A grim and subdued hush hung over the staircases and landings. The ticking was now low; but as I listened intently, it gradually grew louder and louder, until, to my horror, the colossal frame swayed violently backwards and forwards. Unable to stand the sight of it any longer, and fearful of what I might see next, I retreated into my room, and, carefully locking the

door, lit the gas, and got into bed. At three o'clock the ticking once again became normal. The following night the same thing occurred, and I discovered that certain other members of the household had also heard it. My friend rapidly grew worse, and the irregularities of the clock became more and more pronounced, more and more disturbing. Then there came a morning, when, between two and three o'clock, unable to lie in bed and listen to the ticking any longer, I got up. An irresistible attraction dragged me to the door. I peeped out, and there, with the moonlight concentrated on its face as before, swayed the clock, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, slowly and solemnly; and with each movement there issued from within it a hollow, agonised voice, the counterpart of that of my sick friend, exclaiming, "Oh dear! Oh dear! It is coming! It is coming!"

I was so fascinated, so frightened, that I could not remove my gaze, but was constrained to stand still and stare at it; and all the while there was a dull, mechanical repetition of the words: "Oh dear! Oh dear! It is coming, it is coming!" Half an hour passed in this manner, and the hands indicated five minutes to three, when a creak on the staircase made me look round. My heart turned to ice—there, half-way down the stairs, was a tall, black figure, its polished ebony skin shining in the moonbeams. I saw only its body at first, for I was far too surprised even to glance at its face. As it glided noiselessly towards me, however, obeying an uncontrollable impulse, I looked. There was no face at all, only two eyes—two long, oblique, half-open eyes—grey and sinister, inexpressibly, hellishly sinister—and, as they met my gaze, they smiled gleefully. They passed on, the door of the clock swung open, and the figure stepped inside and vanished! I was now able to move, and re-entering my room, I locked myself in, turned on the gas, and buried myself under the bedclothes.

I left the house next day, and shortly afterwards received the melancholy tidings of the death of my dear friend. For the time being, at least, the clock had been possessed by an elemental spirit of death.

I know an instance, too, in which a long, protracted whine, like the whine of a dog, proceeded from a grandfather's clock, prior to any catastrophe in a certain family; another instance, in which loud thumps were heard in a grandfather's clock before a death; and still another instance in which a hooded face used occasionally to be seen in lieu of the clock's face.

In all these cases, the clocks were undoubtedly temporarily possessed by the same type of spirit—the type I have classified "Clanogrian" or Family Ghost—occult phenomena that, having attached themselves in bygone ages to certain families, sometimes cling to furniture (often not inappropriately to clocks) that belonged to those families; and, still clinging, in its various removals, to the piece they have "possessed," continue to perform their original grizzly function of foretelling death.

Of course, these charnel prophets are not the only phantasms that "possess" furniture. For example, I once heard of a case of "possession" by a non-prophetic phantasm in connection with a chest—an antique oak chest which, I believe, claimed to be a native of Limerick. After experiencing many vicissitudes in its career, the chest fell into the hands of a Mrs MacNeill, who bought it at a rather exorbitant price from a second-hand dealer in Cork.

The chest, placed in the dining-room of its new home, was the recipient of much premature adulation. The awakening came one afternoon soon after its arrival, when Mrs MacNeill was alone in the dining-room at twilight. She had spent a very tiring morning shopping in Tralee, her nearest market-town, and consequently fell asleep in an arm-chair in front of the fire, directly after luncheon. She awoke with a sensation of extreme chilliness, and thinking the window could not have been shut properly, she got up to close it, when her attention was attracted by something

white protruding from under the lid of the chest. She went up to inspect it, but she recoiled in horror. It was a long finger, with a very protuberant knuckle-bone, but no sign of a nail. She was so shocked that for some seconds she could only stand staring at it, mute and helpless; but the sound of approaching carriage-wheels breaking the spell, she rushed to the fireplace and pulled the bell vigorously. As she did so, there came a loud chuckle from the chest, and all the walls of the room seemed to shake with laughter.

Of course everyone laughed when Mrs MacNeill related what had happened. The chest was minutely examined, and as it was found to contain nothing but some mats that had been stored away in it the previous day, the finger was forthwith declared to have been an optical illusion, and Mrs MacNeill was, for the time being, ridiculed into believing it was so herself. For the next two or three days nothing occurred; nothing, in fact, until one night when Mrs MacNeill and her daughters heard the queerest of noises downstairs, proceeding apparently from the dining-room—heavy, flopping footsteps, bumps as if a body was being dragged backwards and forwards across the floor, crashes as if all the crockery in the house had been piled in a mass on the floor, loud peals of malevolent laughter, and then—silence.

The following night, the disturbances being repeated, Mrs MacNeill summoned up courage to go downstairs and peep into the room. The noises were still going on when she arrived at the door, but, the moment she opened it, they ceased and there was nothing to be seen. A day or two afterwards, when she was again alone in the dining-room and the evening shadows were beginning to make their appearance, she glanced anxiously at the chest, and—there was the finger. Losing her self-possession at once, and yielding to a paroxysm of the wildest, the most ungovernable terror, she opened her mouth to shriek. Not a sound came; the cry that had been generated in her lungs died away ere it reached her larynx, and she relapsed into a kind of cataleptic condition, in which all her faculties were acutely alert but her limbs and organs of speech palsied.

She expected every instant that the chest-lid would fly open and that the baleful thing lurking within would spring upon her. The torture she suffered from such anticipations was little short of hell, and was rendered all the more maddening by occasional quiverings of the lid, which brought all her expectations to a climax. Now, now at any rate, she assured herself, the moment had come when the acme of horror would be bounced upon her and she would either die or go mad. But no; her agonies were again and again borne anew, and her prognostications unfulfilled. At last the creakings abruptly ceased—nothing was to be heard save the shaking of the trees, the distant yelping of a dog, and the far-away footfall of one of the servants. Having somewhat recovered from the shock, Mrs MacNeill was busy speculating as to the appearance of the hidden horror, when she heard a breathing, the subtle, stealthy breathing of the secreted pouncer. Again she was spellbound. The evening advanced, and from every nook and cranny of the room, from behind chairs, sofa, sideboard, and table, from window-sill and curtains, stole the shadows, all sorts of curious shadows, that brought with them an atmosphere of the barren, wind-swept cliffs and dark, deserted mountains, an atmosphere that added fresh terrors to Mrs MacNeill's already more than distraught mind.

The room was now full of occult possibilities, drawn from all quarters, and doubtless attracted thither by the chest, which acted as a physical magnet. It grew late; still no one came to her rescue; and still more shadows, and more, and more, and more, until the room was full of them. She actually saw them gliding towards the house, in shoals, across the moon-kissed lawn and carriage-drive. Shadows of all sorts—some, unmistakable phantasms of the dead, with skinless faces and glassy eyes, their bodies either wrapped in shrouds covered with the black slime of

bogs or dripping with water; some, whole and link and bony; some with an arm or leg missing; some with no limbs or body, only heads—shrunken, bloodless heads with wide-open, staring eyes—yellow, ichorous eyes—gleaming, devilish eyes. Elementals of all sorts—some, tall and thin, with rotund heads and meaningless features; some, with rectangular, fleshy heads; some, with animal heads. On they came in countless legions, on, on, and on, one after another, each vying with the other in ghastly horridness.

The series of terrific shocks Mrs MacNeill experienced during the advance of this long and seemingly interminable procession of every conceivable ghoulish abortion, at length wore her out. The pulsations of her naturally strong heart temporarily failed, and, as her pent-up feelings found vent in one gasping scream for help, she fell insensible to the ground.

That very night the chest was ruthlessly cremated, and Mrs MacNeill's dining-room ceased to be a meeting-place for spooks.

Whenever I see an old chest now, I always view it with suspicion—especially if it should happen to be a bog-oak chest. The fact is, the latter is more likely than not to be “possessed” by elementals, which need scarcely be a matter of surprise when one remembers that bogs—particularly Irish bogs—have been haunted, from time immemorial, by the most uncouth and fantastic type of spirits.

But mummies, mummies even more often than clocks and chests, are “possessed” by denizens of the occult world. Of course, everyone has heard of the “unlucky” mummy, the painted case of which, only, is in the Oriental department of the British Museum, and the story connected with it is so well known that it would be superfluous to expatiate on it here. I will therefore pass on to instances of other mummies “possessed” in a more or less similar manner.

During one of my sojourns in Paris, I met a Frenchman who, he informed me, had just returned from the East. I asked him if he had brought back any curios, such as vases, funeral urns, weapons, or amulets. “Yes, lots,” he replied, “two cases full. But no mummies! Mon Dieu! No mummies! You ask me why? Ah! Therein hangs a tale. If you will have patience, I will tell it you.”

The following is the gist of his narrative:—

“Some seasons ago I travelled up the Nile as far as Assiut, and when there, managed to pay a brief visit to the grand ruins of Thebes. Among the various treasures I brought away with me, of no great archæological value, was a mummy. I found it lying in an enormous lidless sarcophagus, close to a mutilated statue of Anubis. On my return to Assiut, I had the mummy placed in my tent, and thought no more of it till something awoke me with a startling suddenness in the night. Then, obeying a peculiar impulse, I turned over on my side and looked in the direction of my treasure.

“The nights in the Soudan at this time of year are brilliant; one can even see to read, and every object in the desert is almost as clearly visible as by day. But I was quite startled by the whiteness of the glow that rested on the mummy, the face of which was immediately opposite mine. The remains—those of Met-Om-Karema, lady of the College of the god Amen-ra—were swathed in bandages, some of which had worn away in parts or become loose; and the figure, plainly discernible, was that of a shapely woman with elegant bust, well-formed limbs, rounded arms and small hands. The thumbs were slender, and the fingers, each of which were separately bandaged, long and tapering. The neck was full, the cranium rather long, the nose aquiline, the chin firm. Imitation eyes, brows, and lips were painted on the wrappings, and the effect thus produced, and in the phosphorescent glare of the moonbeams, was very weird. I was quite alone in the tent, the only other European, who had accompanied me to Assiut, having stayed in the

town by preference, and my servants being encamped at some hundred or so yards from me on the ground.

“Sound travels far in the desert, but the silence now was absolute, and although I listened attentively, I could not detect the slightest noise—man, beast, and insect were abnormally still. There was something in the air, too, that struck me as unusual; an odd, clammy coldness that reminded me at once of the catacombs in Paris. I had hardly, however, conceived the resemblance, when a sob—low, gentle, but very distinct—sent a thrill of terror through me. It was ridiculous, absurd! It could not be, and I fought against the idea as to whence the sound had proceeded, as something too utterly fantastic, too utterly impossible! I tried to occupy my mind with other thoughts—the fivolities of Cairo, the casinos of Nice; but all to no purpose; and soon on my eager, throbbing ear there again fell that sound, that low and gentle sob. My hair stood on end; this time there was no doubt, no possible manner of doubt—the mummy lived! I looked at it aghast. I strained my vision to detect any movement in its limbs, but none was perceptible. Yet the noise had come from it, it had breathed—breathed—and even as I hissed the word unconsciously through my clenched lips, the bosom of the mummy rose and fell.

“A frightful terror seized me. I tried to shriek to my servants; I could not ejaculate a syllable. I tried to close my eyelids, but they were held open as in a vice. Again there came a sob that was immediately succeeded by a sigh; and a tremor ran through the figure from head to foot. One of its hands then began to move, the fingers clutched the air convulsively, then grew rigid, then curled slowly into the palms, then suddenly straightened. The bandages concealing them from view then fell off, and to my agonised sight were disclosed objects that struck me as strangely familiar. There is something about fingers, a marked individuality, I never forget. No two persons’ hands are alike. And in these fingers, in their excessive whiteness, round knuckles, and blue veins, in their tapering formation and perfect filbert nails, I read a likeness whose prototype, struggle how I would, I could not recall. Gradually the hand moved upwards, and, reaching the throat, the fingers set to work, at once, to remove the wrappings. My terror was now sublime! I dare not imagine, I dare not for one instant think, what I should see! And there was no getting away from it; I could not stir an inch, not the fraction of an inch, and the ghastly revelation would take place within a yard of my face.

“One by one the bandages came off. A glimmer of skin, pallid as marble; the beginning of the nose, the whole nose; the upper lip, exquisitely, delicately cut; the teeth, white and even on the whole, but here and there a shining gold filling; the underlip, soft and gentle; a mouth I knew, but—God!—where? In my dreams, in the wild fantasies that had oft-times visited my pillow at night—in delirium, in reality, where? Mon Dieu! WHERE?

“The uncasing continued. The chin came next, a chin that was purely feminine, purely classical; then the upper part of the head—the hair long, black, luxuriant—the forehead low and white—the brows black, finely pencilled; and, last of all, the eyes!—and as they met my frenzied gaze and smiled, smiled right down into the depths of my livid soul, I recognised them—they were the eyes of my mother, my mother who had died in my boyhood! Seized with a madness that knew no bounds, I sprang to my feet. The figure rose and confronted me. I flung open my arms to embrace her, the woman of all women in the world I loved best, the only woman I had loved. Shrinking from my touch, she cowered against the side of the tent. I fell on my knees before her and kissed—what? Not the feet of my mother, but that of the long unburied dead. Sick with repulsion and fear I looked up, and there, bending over and peering into my eyes was the face, the fleshless, mouldering face of a foul and barely recognisable corpse! With a shriek of horror I rolled backwards, and, springing to my feet, prepared to fly. I glanced at the mummy. it

was lying on the ground, stiff and still, every bandage in its place; whilst standing over it, a look of fiendish glee in its light, doglike eyes, was the figure of Anubis, lurid and menacing.

“The voices of my servants, assuring me they were coming, broke the silence, and in an instant the apparition vanished.

“I had had enough of the tent, however, at least for that night, and, seeking refuge in the town, I whiled away the hours till morning with a fragrant cigar and novel. Directly I had breakfasted, I took the mummy back to Thebes and left it there. No, thank you, Mr O’Donnell, I collect many kinds of curios, but—no more mummies!”