

Occult Hooligans

By Elliott O'Donnell

Deducing from my own and other people's experiences, there exists a distinct type of occult phenomenon whose sole occupation is in boisterous orgies and in making manifestations purely for the sake of causing annoyance. To this phantasm the Germans have given the name POLTERGEIST, whilst in former of my works I have classified it as a Vagrarian Order of ELEMENTAL. It is this form of the superphysical, perhaps, that up to the present time has gained the greatest credence—it has been known in all ages and in all countries. Who, for example, has not heard of the famous Stockwell ghost that caused such a sensation in 1772, and of which Mrs Crowe gives a detailed account in her *Night Side of Nature*; or again, of "The Black Lion Lane, Bayswater Ghost," referred to many years ago in *The Morning Post*; or, of the "Epworth Ghost," that so unceasingly tormented the Wesley family; or, of the "Demon of Tedworth" that gave John Mompesson and his family no peace, and of countless other well-authenticated and recorded instances of this same type of occult phenomenon? The poltergeists in the above-mentioned cases were never seen, only felt and heard; but in what a disagreeable and often painful manner! The Demon of Tedworth, for example, awoke everyone at night by thumping on doors and imitating the beatings of a drum. It rattled bedsteads, scratched on the floor and wall as if possessing iron talons, groaned, and uttered loud cries of "A witch! A. witch!" Nor was it content with these auditory demonstrations, for it resorted to far more energetic methods of physical violence. Furniture was moved out of its place and upset; the children's shoes were taken off their feet and thrown over their heads; their hair was tweaked and their clothes pulled; one little boy was even hit on a sore place on his heel; the servants were lifted bodily out of their beds and let fall; whilst several members of the household were stripped of all they had on, forcibly held down, and pelted with shoes. Nor were the proceedings at Stockwell, Black Lion Lane, and Epworth, though rather more bizarre, any less violent.

To quote another instance of this kind of haunting, Professor Schuppart at Gressen, in Upper Hesse, was for six years persecuted by a poltergeist in the most unpleasant manner; stones were sent whizzing through closed rooms in all directions, breaking windows but hurting no one; his books were torn to pieces; the lamp by which he was reading was removed to a distant corner of the room, and his cheeks were slapped, and slapped so incessantly that he could get no sleep.

According to Mrs Crowe, there was a case of a similar nature at Mr Chave's, in Devonshire, in 1910, where affidavits were made before the magistrate attesting the facts, and large rewards offered for discovery; but in vain, the phenomena continued, and the spiritual agent was frequently seen in the form of some strange animal.

There seems to be little limit, short of grievous bodily injury—and even that limit has occasionally been overstepped—to poltergeist hooliganism. Last summer the Rev. Henry Hacon, M.A., of Searly Vicarage, North Kelsey Moor, very kindly sent me an original manuscript dealing with poltergeist disturbances of a very peculiar nature, at the old Syderstone Parsonage near Fakenham. I published the account *act verbum* in a work of mine that appeared the ensuing autumn, entitled *Ghostly Phenomena*, and the interest it created encourages me to refer to other cases dealing with the same kind of phenomena.

There is a parsonage in the South of England where not only noises have been heard, but articles have been mysteriously whisked away and not returned. A lady assures me that when a

gentleman, with whom she was intimately acquainted, was alone in one of the reception rooms one day, he placed some coins to the value, I believe, of fifteen shillings, on the table beside him, and chancing to have his attention directed to the fire, which had burned low, was surprised on looking again to discover the coins had gone; nor did he ever recover them. Other things, too, for the most part trivial, were also taken in the same incomprehensible manner, and apparently by the same mischievous unseen agency. It is true that one of the former inhabitants of the house had, during the latter portion of his life, been heavily in debt, and that his borrowing propensities may have accompanied him to the occult world; but though such an explanation is quite feasible, I am rather inclined to attribute the disappearances to the pranks of some mischievous vagrarian.

I have myself over and over again experienced a similar kind of thing. For example, in a certain house in Norwood, I remember losing in rapid succession two stylograph pens, a knife, and a sash. I remembered, in each case, laying the article on a table, then having my attention called away by some rather unusual sound in a far corner of the room, and then, on returning to the table, finding the article had vanished. There was no one else in the house, so that ordinary theft was out of the question. Yet where did these articles go, and of what use would they be to a poltergeist? On one occasion, only, I caught a glimpse of the miscreant. It was about eight o'clock on a warm evening in June, and I was sitting reading in my study. The room is slightly below the level of the road, and in summer, the trees outside, whilst acting as an effective screen against the sun's rays, east their shadows somewhat too thickly on the floor and walls, burying the angles in heavy gloom. In the daytime one rather welcomes this darkness; but in the afternoon it becomes a trifle oppressive, and at twilight one sometimes wishes it was not there. It is at twilight that the nature of the shadows usually undergoes a change, and there amalgamates, with them, that Something, that peculiar, indefinable Something that I can only associate with the superphysical. Here, in my library, I often watch it creep in with the fading of the sunlight, or, postponing its advent till Later—steal in through the window with the moonbeams, and I feel its presence just as assuredly and instinctively as I can feel and detect the presence of hostility in an audience or individual. I cannot describe how; I can only say I do, and that my discernment is seldom misleading. On the evening in question I was alone in the house. I had noticed, amid the shadows that lay in clusters on the floor and walls, this enigmatical Something. It was there most markedly; but I did not associate it with anything particularly terrifying or antagonistic. Perhaps that was because the book I was reading interested me most profoundly—it was a translation from Heine, and I am devoted to Heine. Let me quote an extract. It is from *Florentine Nights*, and runs: "But is it not folly to wish to sound the inner meaning of any phenomenon outside us, when we cannot even solve the enigma of our own souls? We hardly know even whether outside phenomena really exist! We are often unable to distinguish reality from mere dream-faces. Was it a shape of my fancy, or was it horrible reality that I heard and saw on that night? I know not. I only remember that, as the wildest thoughts were flowing through my heart, a singular sound came to my ear." I had got so far, absorbingly, spiritually interested, when I heard a laugh, a long, low chuckle, that seemed to come from the darkest and most remote corner of the room. A cold paroxysm froze my body, the book slid from my hands, and I sat upright in my chair, every faculty within me acutely alert and active. The laugh was repeated, this time from behind a writing-table in quite another part of the room. Something which sounded like a shower of tintacks then fell into the grate; after which there was a long pause, and then a terrific bump, as if some heavy body had fallen from a great height on to the floor immediately in front of me. I even heard the hissing and whizzing the body made in its descent as it cut its passage through the air. Again there came an interval of tranquillity broken only by the sounds of people in the road,

the hurrying footsteps of a girl, the clattering of a man in hobnails, the quick, sharp tread of the lamplighter, and the scampering patter of a bevy of children. Then there came a series of knockings on the ceiling, and then the sound of something falling into a gaping abyss which I intuitively felt had surreptitiously opened at my feet.

For many seconds I listened to the reverberations of the object as it dashed against the sides of the unknown chasm; at length there was a splash, succeeded by hollow echoes. Shaking in every limb, I shrank back as far as I possibly could in my chair and clutched the arms. A draught, cold and dank, as if coming from an almost interminable distance, blew upwards and fanned my nostrils. Then there came the most appalling, the most blood-curdling chuckle, and I saw a hand—a lurid grey hand with long, knotted fingers and black, curved nails—feeling its way towards me, through the subtle darkness, like some enormous, unsavoury insect. Nearer, nearer, and nearer it drew, its fingers waving in the air, antennæ fashion. For a moment it paused, and then, with lightning rapidity, snatched the book from my knees and disappeared. Directly afterwards I heard the sound of a latchkey inserted in the front door, whilst the voice of my wife inquiring why the house was in darkness broke the superphysical spell. Obeying her summons, I ascended the staircase, and the first object that greeted my vision in the hall was the volume of Heine that had been so unceremoniously taken from me! Assuredly this was the doings of a poltergeist! A poltergeist that up to the present had confined its attentions to me, no one else in the house having either heard or seen it.

In my study there is a deep recess concealed in the winter-time by heavy curtains drawn across it; and often when I am writing something makes me look up, and a cold horror falls upon me as I perceive the curtains rustle, rustle as though they were laughing, laughing in conjunction with some hidden occult monstrosity; some grey—the bulk of the phantasms that come to me are grey—and glittering monstrosity who was enjoying a rich jest at my expense. Occasionally, to emphasise its presence, this poltergeist has scratched the wall, or thumped, or thrown an invisible missile over my head, or sighed, or groaned, or gurgled, and I have been frightened, horribly, ghastly frightened. Then something has happened—my wife has called out, or someone has rung a bell, or the postman has given one of his whole-hearted smashes with the knocker, and the poltergeist has “cleared off,” and I have not been disturbed by it again for the remainder of the evening.

I am not the only person whom poltergeists visit Judging from my correspondence and the accounts I see in the letters of various psychical research magazines, they patronise many people. Their *modus operandi*, covering a wide range, is always boisterous. Undoubtedly they have been badly brought up—their home influence and their educational training must have been sadly lacking in discipline. Or is it the reverse? Are their crude devices and mad, tomboyish pranks merely reactionary, and the only means they have of finding vent for their naturally high spirits? If so, I devoutly wish they would choose some locality other than my study for their playground. Yet they interest me, and although I quake horribly when they are present, I derive endless amusement at other times, in speculating on their *raison d'être*, and curious—perhaps complex—constitutions. I do not believe they have ever inhabited any earthly body, either human or animal. I think it likely that they may be survivals of early experiments in animal and vegetable life in this planet, prior to the selection of any definite types; spirits that have never been anything else but spirits, and which have, no doubt, often envied man his carnal body and the possibilities that have been permitted him of eventually reaching a higher spiritual plane. It is envy, perhaps, that has made them mischievous, and generated in them an insatiable thirst to torment and frighten man. Another probable explanation of them is, that they may be inhabitants

of one of the other planets that have the power granted, under certain conditions at present unknown to us, of making themselves seen and heard by certain dwellers on the earth; and it is, of course, possible that they are but one of many types of spirits inhabiting a superphysical sphere that encloses or infringes on our own. They may be only another form of life, a form that is neither carnal nor immortal, but which has to depend for its existence on a superphysical food. They may be born in a fashion that, apart from its peculiarity and extravagance, bears some resemblance to the generation of physical animal life; and they may die, too, as man dies, and their death may be but the passing from one stage to another, or it may be for eternity.

But enough of possibilities, of probable and improbable theories. For the present not only poltergeists but all other phantoms are seen as through a glass darkly, and, pending the discovery of some definite data, we do but flounder in a sea of wide, limitless, and infinite speculation.