

Death Warnings and Family Ghosts

By Elliott O'Donnell

Candles are very subject to psychic influences. Many years ago, when I was a boy, I was sitting in a room with some very dear friends of mine, when one of them, suddenly turning livid, pointed at the candle, and with eyes starting out of their sockets, screamed, "A winding-sheet! A winding-sheet! See! it is pointing at me!" We were all so frightened by the suddenness of her action, that for some seconds no one spoke, but all sat transfixed with horror, gazing at the candle. "it must be my brother Tom," she continued, "or Jack. Can't you see it?" Then, one after another, we all examined the candle and discovered that what she said was quite true—there was an unmistakable winding-sheet in the wax, and it emphatically pointed in her direction. Nor were her surmisings in vain, for the next morning she received a telegram to say her brother Tom had died suddenly. I am sceptical with regard to some manifestations, but I certainly do believe in this one, and I often regard my candle anxiously, fearing that I may see a winding-sheet in it.

To have three candles lighted at the same time is also an omen of death, and as I have known it to be fulfilled in several cases within my own experience, I cannot help regarding it as one of the most certain.

I am sometimes informed of the advent of the occult in a very startling manner—my candle burns blue. It has done this when I have been sitting alone in my study, at night, writing. I have been busily engaged penning descriptions of the ghosts I and others have seen, when I have been startled by the fact that my paper, originally white, has suddenly become the colour of the sky, and on looking hastily up to discover a reason, have been in no small measure shocked to see my candle burning a bright blue. An occult manifestation of sorts has invariably followed. I am often warned of the near advent of the occult in this same manner when I am investigating in a haunted house—the flame of the candle burns blue before the appearance of the ghost. It is, by the way, an error to think that different types of phantasms can only appear in certain colours—colours that are peculiar to them. I have seen the same phenomenon manifest itself in half a dozen different colours, and blue is as often adopted by the higher types of spirits as by the lower, and is, in fact, common to both. I have little patience with occultists who draw hard and fast lines, and, ignoring everybody else's experiences, presume to diagnose within the narrow limits of their own. No one can as yet say anything for certain with regard to the superphysical, and the statements of the most humble psychic investigator, provided he has had actual experience, and is genuine, are just as worthy of attention as those of the most eminent exponents of theosophy or spiritualism, or of any learned member of the Psychical Research Societies. The occult does not reveal itself to the rich in preference to the poor, and, for manifestation, is not more partial to the Professor of Physics and Law than to the Professor of Nothing—other than keen interest and common sense.

Corpse-candles

In Wales there are corpse-candles. According to the account of the Rev. Mr Davis in a work by T. Charley entitled *The Invisible World*, corpse-candles are so called because their light resembles a material candle-light, and might be mistaken for the same, saving that when anyone approaches them they vanish, and presently reappear. If the corpse-candle be small, pale, or

bluish, it denotes the death of an infant; if it be big, the death of an adult is foretold; and if there are two, three, or more candle-lights, varying in size, then the deaths are predicted of a corresponding number of infants and adults. "Of late," the Rev. Mr Davis goes on to say (I quote him *ad verbum*), my sexton's wife, an aged, understanding woman, saw from her bed a little bluish candle upon her table: within two or three days after comes a fellow in, inquiring for her husband, and, taking something from under his cloak, clapt it down directly upon the table end where she had seen the candle; and what was it but a dead-born child? Another time, the same woman saw such another candle upon the other end of the same table: within a few days later, a weak child, by myself newly christened, was brought into the sexton's house, where presently he died; and when the sexton's wife, who was then abroad, came home, she found the women shrouding the child on that other end of the table where she had seen the candle. On a time, myself and a huntsman coming from our school in England, and being three or four hours benighted ere we could reach home, saw such a light, which, coming from a house we well knew, held its course (but not directly) in the highway to church: shortly after, the eldest son in that house died, and steered the same course. . . . About thirty-four or thirty-five years since, one Jane Wyatt, my wife's sister, being nurse to Baronet Rud's three eldest children, and (the lady being deceased) the lady of the house going late into a chamber where the maid-servants lay, saw there no less than five of these lights together. It happened awhile after, the chamber being newly plastered, and a great grate of coal-fire therein kindled to hasten the drying up of the plastering, that five of the maid-servants went there to bed as they were wont; but in the morning they were all dead, being suffocated in their sleep with the steam of the newly tempered lime and coal. This was at Llangathen in Carmarthen."

So wrote the Rev. Mr Davis, and in an old number of *Frazer's Journal* I came across the following account of death-tokens, which, although not exactly corpse-candles, might certainly be classed in the same category. It ran thus:

"In a wild and retired district in North Wales, the following occurrence took place, to the great astonishment of the mountaineers. We can vouch for the truth of the statement, as many of our own teutu, or clan, were witnesses of the facts. On a dark evening a few weeks ago, some persons, with whom we are well acquainted, were returning to Barmouth on the south or opposite side of the river. As they approached the ferry house at Penthryn, which is directly opposite Barmouth, they observed a light near the house, which they conjectured to be produced by a bonfire, and greatly puzzled they were to discover the reason why it should have been lighted. As they came nearer, however, it vanished; and when they inquired at the house respecting it, they were surprised to learn that not only had the people there displayed no light, but they had not even seen one; nor could they perceive any signs of it on the sands. On reaching Barmouth, the circumstance was mentioned, and the fact corroborated by some of the people there, who had also plainly and distinctly seen the light. It was settled, therefore, by some of the old fishermen that this was a death-token; and, sure enough, the man who kept the ferry at that time was drowned at high water a few nights afterwards, on the very spot where the light was seen. He was landing from the boat, when he fell into the water, and so perished. The same winter the Barmouth people, as well as the inhabitants of the opposite bank, were struck by the appearance of a number of small lights, which were seen dancing in the air at a place called Borthwyn, about half a mile from the town. A great number of people came out to see these lights; and after awhile they all but one disappeared, and this one proceeded slowly towards the water's edge to a little bay where some boats were moored. The men in a sloop which was anchored near the spot saw the light advancing, they saw it also hover for a few seconds over one

particular boat, and then totally disappear. Two or three days afterwards, the man to whom that particular boat belonged was drowned in the river, while he was sailing about Barmouth harbour in that very boat.”

As the corpse-candle is obviously a phantasm whose invariable custom is to foretell death, it must, I think, be classified with that species of elementals which I have named—for want of a more appropriate title—CLANOGRIAN. CLANOGRIANS embrace every kind of national and family ghost, such as The White Owl of the Arundels, the Drummer of the Airlies, and the Banshee of the O’Neills and O’Donnells.

With regard to the origin of corpse-candles, as of all other clanogrians, one can only speculate. The powers that govern the superphysical world have much in their close keeping that they absolutely refuse to disclose to mortal man. Presuming, however, that corpse-candles and all sorts of family ghosts are analogous, I should say that the former are spirits which have attached themselves to certain localities, either owing to some great crime or crimes having been committed there in the past, or because at some still more remote period the inhabitants of those parts—the Milesians and Nemedhians, the early ancestors of the Irish, dabbled in sorcery.

Fire-coffins

Who has not seen all manner of pictures in the fire? Who has not seen, or fancied he has seen, a fire-coffin? A fire-coffin is a bit of red-hot coal that pops mysteriously out of the grate in the rude shape of a coffin, and is prophetic of death, not necessarily the death of the beholder, but of someone known to him.

The Death-watch

Though this omen in a room is undoubtedly due to the presence in the woodwork of the wall of a minute beetle of the timber-boring genus ANOBIUM, it is a strange fact that its ticking should only be heard before the death of someone, who, if not living in the house, is connected with someone who does live in it. From this fact, one is led to suppose that this minute beetle has an intuitive knowledge of impending death, as is the case with certain people and also certain animals.

The noise is said to be produced by the beetle raising itself upon its hind legs (see *Popular Errors explained*, by John Timbs), with the body somewhat inclined, and beating its head with great force and agility upon the plane of position; and its strokes are so powerful as to be heard from some little distance. It usually taps from six to twelve times in succession, then pauses, and then recommences. It is an error to suppose it only ticks in the spring, for I know those who have heard its ticking at other, and indeed, at all times in the year.

Owls

Owls have always been deemed psychic, and they figure ominously in the folk-lore of many countries. I myself can testify to the fact that they are often the harbinger of death, as I have on several occasions been present when the screeching of an owl, just outside the window, has occurred almost coincident with the death of someone, nearly related either to myself or to one of my companions. That owls have the faculty of “scenting the approach of death” is to my mind no mere idle superstition, for we constantly read about them hovering around gibbets, and they

have not infrequently been known to consummate Heaven's wrath by plucking out the eyes of the still living murderers and feeding on their brains. That they also have tastes in common with the least desirable of the occult world may be gathered from the fact that they show a distinct preference for the haunts of vagrarians, barrowvians, and other kinds of elementals; and even the worthy Isaiah goes so far as to couple them with satyrs.

Occasionally, too, as in the case of the Arundels of Wardour, where a white owl is seen before the death of one of the family, they perform the function of clanogrians.

Ravens

A close rival of the owl in psychic significance is the raven, the subtle, cunning, ghostly raven that taps on window-panes and croaks dismally before a death or illness. I love ravens—they have the greatest fascination for me. Years ago I had a raven, but, alas! only for a time, a very short time. It came to me one gloomy night, when the wind was blowing and the rain falling in cataracts. I was at the time—and as usual—writing ghost tales. Thought I to myself, this raven is just what I want; I will make a great friend of it, it shall sit at my table while I write and inspire me with its eyes—its esoteric eyes and mystic voice. I let it in, gave it food and shelter, and we settled down together, the raven and I, both revellers in the occult, both lovers of solitude. But it proved to be a worthless bird, a shallow, empty-minded, shameless bird, and all I gleaned from it was—idleness. It made me listless and restless; it filled me with cravings, not for work, but for nature, for the dark open air of night-time, for the vast loneliness of mountains, the deep secluded valleys, the rushing, foaming flow of streams, and for woods—ah! how I love the woods!—woods full of stalwart oaks and silvery beeches, full of silent, moon-kissed glades, nymphs, syrens, and pixies. Ah! how I longed for all these, and more besides—for anything and everything that appertained neither to man nor his works. Then I said good-bye to the raven, and, taking it with me to the top of a high hill, let it go. Croaking, croaking, croaking it flew away, without giving me as much as one farewell glance.

Mermaids

Who would not, if they could, believe in mermaids? Surely all save those who have no sense of the beautiful—of poetry, flowers, painting, music, romance; all save those who have never built fairy castles in the air nor seen fairy palaces in the fire; all save those whose minds, steeped in money-making, are both sordid and stunted. That mermaids did exist, and more or less in legendary form, I think quite probable, for I feel sure there was a time in the earth's history when man was in much closer touch with the superphysical than he is at present. They may, I think, be classified with pixies, nymphs, and sylphs, and other pleasant types of elementals that ceased to fraternise with man when he became more plentiful and forsook the simple mode of living for the artificial.

Pixies, nymphs, sylphs, and other similar kinds of fairies are all harmless and benevolent elementals, and I believe they were all fond of visiting this earth, but that they seldom visit it now, only appearing at rare intervals to a highly favoured few.

The Wandering Jew

No story fascinated me more when I was a boy than that of Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. How vividly I saw him—in my mental vision—with his hooked nose, and wild, dark eyes, gleaming with hatred, cruelty, and terror, spit out his curses at Christ and frantically bid him begone! And Christ! How plainly I saw Him, too, bathed in the sweat of agony, stumbling, staggering, reeling, and tottering beneath the cross he had to carry! And then the climax—the calm, biting, damning climax. “Tarry thou till I come!” How distinctly I heard Christ utter those words, and with what relief I watched the pallor of sickly fear and superstition steal into the Jew’s eyes and overspread his cheeks! And he is said to be living now! Periodically he turns up in some portion or other of the globe, causing a great sensation. And many are the people who claim to have met him—the man whom no prison can detain, no fetters hold; who can reel off the history of the last nineteen hundred odd years with the most minute fluency, and with an intimate knowledge of men and things long since dead and forgotten. Ahasuerus, still, always, ever Ahasuerus—no matter whether we call him Joseph, Cartaphilus, or Salathiel, his fine name and guilty life stick to him—he can get rid of neither. For all time he is, and must be, Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew—the Jew Christ damned.

Attendant Spirits

I believe that, from the moment of our birth, most, if not all of us, have our attendant spirits, namely, a spirit sent by the higher occult powers that are in favour of man’s spiritual progress, whose function it is to guide us in the path of virtue and guard us from physical danger, and a spirit sent by the higher occult powers that are antagonistic to man’s spiritual progress, whose function it is to lead us into all sorts of mental, moral, and spiritual evil, and also to bring about our path some bodily harm. The former is a benevolent elemental, well known to the many, and termed by them “Our Guardian Angel”; the latter is a vice elemental, equally well known perhaps, to the many, and termed by them “Our Evil Genie.” The benevolent creative powers and the evil creative powers (in whose service respectively our attendant spirits are employed) are for ever contending for man’s superphysical body, and it is, perhaps, only in the proportion of our response to the influences of these attendant spirits, that we either evolve to a higher spiritual plane, or remain earth-bound. I, myself, having been through many vicissitudes, feel that I owe both my moral and physical preservation from danger entirely to the vigilance of my guardian attendant spirit. I was once travelling in the United States at the time of a great railway strike. The strikers held up my train at Crown Point, a few miles outside Chicago; and as I was forced to take to flight, and leave my baggage (which unfortunately contained all my ready money), I arrived in Chicago late at night without a cent on me. Beyond the clothes I had on, I had nothing; consequently, on my presenting myself at a hotel with the request for a night’s lodging, I was curtly refused. One hotel after another, one house after another, I tried, but always with the same result; having no luggage, and being unable to pay a deposit, no one would take me. The night advanced; the streets became rougher and rougher, for Chicago just then was teeming with the scum of the earth, ruffians of every description, who would cheerfully have cut any man’s throat simply for the sake of his clothes. All around me was a sea of swarthy faces with insolent, sinister eyes that flashed and glittered in the gaslight. I was pushed, jostled, and cursed, and the bare thought of having to spend a whole night amid such a foul, cut-throat horde filled me with dismay. Yet what could I do? Clearly nothing, until the morning, when I should be able to explain my position to the British Consul. The knowledge that in all the crises through which I

had hitherto passed, my guardian spirit had never deserted me, gave me hope, and I prayed devoutly that it would now come to my assistance and help me to get to some place of shelter.

Time passed, and as my prayers were not answered, I repeated them with increased vigour. Then, quite suddenly, a man stepped out from the dark entrance to a by-street, and, touching me lightly on the arm, said, "Is there anything amiss? I have been looking at you for some time, and a feeling has come over me that you need assistance. What is the matter?" I regarded the speaker earnestly, and, convinced that he was honest, told him my story, whereupon to my delight he at once said, "I think I can help you, for a friend of mine runs a small but thoroughly respectable hotel close to here, and, if you like to trust yourself to my guidance, I will take you there and explain your penniless condition." I accepted his offer; what he said proved to be correct; the hotel-keeper believed my story, and I passed the night in decency and comfort. In the morning the proprietor lent me the requisite amount of money for a cablegram to Europe. My bank in England cabled to a bank in Chicago, and the hotel-keeper generously made himself responsible for my identity; the draft was cashed, and I was once again able to proceed on my Journey. But what caused the man in the street to notice me? What prompted him to lend me his aid? Surely my guardian spirit. Again, when in Denver, in the Denver of old times, before it had grown into anything like the city it is now, I was seized with a severe attack of dysentery, and the owner of the hotel in which I was staying, believing it to be cholera, turned me, weak and faint as I was, into the street. I tried everywhere to get shelter; the ghastly pallor and emaciation of my countenance went against me—no one, not even by dint of bribing, for I was then well off, would take me in. At last, completely overcome by exhaustion, I sank down in the street, where, in all probability, I should have remained all night, had not a negro suddenly come up to me, and, with a sympathetic expression in his face, asked if he could help me. "I passed you some time ago," he said, "and noticed how ill you looked, but I did not like to speak to you for fear you might resent it, but I had not got far before I felt compelled to turn back. I tried to resist this impulse, but it was no good. What ails you?" I told him. For a moment or so he was silent, and then, his face brightening up, he exclaimed, "I think I can help you. Come along with me," and, helping me gently to my feet, he conducted me to his own house, not a very grand one, it is true, but scrupulously clean and well conducted, and I remained there until I was thoroughly sound and fit. The negro is not as a rule a creature of impulse, and here again I felt that I owed my preservation to the kindly interference of my guardian spirit.

Thrice I have been nearly drowned, and on both occasions saved as by a miracle, or, in other words, by my attendant guardian spirit. Once, when I was bathing alone in a Scotch loch and had swum out some considerable distance, I suddenly became exhausted, and realised with terror that it was quite impossible for me to regain the shore. I was making a last futile effort to strike out, when something came bobbing up against me. It was an oar! Whence it had come Heaven alone knew, for Heaven alone could have sent it. Leaning my chin lightly on it and propelling myself gently with my limbs, I had no difficulty in keeping afloat, and eventually reached the land in safety. The scene of my next miraculous rescue from drowning was a river. In diving into the water off a boat, I got my legs entangled in a thick undergrowth of weeds. Frantically struggling to get free and realising only too acutely the seriousness of my position, for my lungs were on the verge of bursting, I fervently solicited the succour of my guardian spirit, and had no sooner done so, than I fancied I felt soft hands press against my flesh, and the next moment my body had risen to the surface. No living person was within sight, so that my rescuer could only have been—as usual—my guardian spirit.

Several times I fancy I have seen her, white, luminous, and shadowy, but for all that suggestive of great beauty. Once, too, in the wilder moments of my youth, when I contemplated rash deeds, I heard her sigh, and the sigh, sinking down into the furthest recesses of my soul, drowned all my thoughts of rash deeds in a thousand reverberating echoes. I have been invariably warned by strangers against taking a false step that would unquestionably have led to the direst misfortune. I meet a stranger, and without the slightest hint from me, he touches upon the very matter uppermost in my mind, and, in a few earnest and never-to-be-forgotten words of admonition, deters me from my scheme. Whence come these strangers, to all appearance of flesh and blood like myself? Were they my guardian spirit in temporary material guise, or were they human beings that, like the hotel proprietor's friend in Chicago, and the negro, have been impelled by my guardian spirit to converse with me and by their friendly assistance save me? Many of the faces we see around us every day are, I believe, attendant spirits, and phantasms of every species, that have adopted physical form for some specific purpose.

Banshees

It has been suggested that banshees are guardian spirits and evil genii; but I do not think so, for whereas one or other of the two latter phantasms (sometimes both) are in constant attendance on man, banshees only visit certain families before a catastrophe about to happen in those families, or before the death of a member of those families. As to their origin, little can be said, for little is at present known. Some say their attachment to a family is due to some crime perpetrated by a member of that family in the far dim past, whilst others attribute it to the fact that certain classes and races in bygone times dabbled in sorcery, thus attracting the elementals, which have haunted them ever since. Others, again, claim that banshees are mere thought materialisations handed down from one generation to another. But although no one knows the origin and nature of a banshee, the statements of those who have actually experienced these hauntings should surely carry far more weight and command more attention than the statements of those who only speak from hearsay; for it is, after all, only the sensation of actual experience that can guide us in the study of this subject; and, perhaps, through our "sensations" alone, the key to it will one day be found. A phantasm produces an effect on us totally unlike any that can be produced by physical agency—at least such is my experience—hence, for those who have never come in contact with the unknown to pronounce any verdict on it, is to my mind both futile and absurd. Of one thing, at least, I am sure, namely, that banshees are no more thought materialisations than they are cats—neither are they in any way traceable to telepathy or suggestion; they are entirely due to objective spirit forms. I do not base this assertion on a knowledge gained from other people's experiences and surely the information thus gained cannot properly be termed knowledge—but from the sensations I myself, as a member of an old Irish clan, have experienced from the hauntings of the banshee—the banshee that down through the long links of my Celtic ancestry, through all vicissitudes, through all changes of fortune, has followed us, and will follow us, to the end of time. Because it is customary to speak of an Irish family ghost by its generic title, the banshee, it must not be supposed that every Irish family possessing a ghost is haunted by the same phantasm—the same banshee.

In Ireland, as in other countries, family ghosts are varied and distinct, and consequently there are many and varying forms of the banshee. To a member of our clan, a single wail signifies the advent of the banshee, which, when materialised, is not beautiful to look upon. The banshee does not necessarily signify its advent by one wail—that of a clan allied to us walls three times.

Another banshee does not wail at all, but moans, and yet another heralds its approach with music. When materialised, to quote only a few instances, one banshee is in the form of a beautiful girl, another is in the form of a hideous prehistoric hag, and another in the form of a head—only a head with rough matted hair and malevolent, bestial eyes.

Scottish Ghosts

When it is remembered that the ancestors of the Highlanders, *i.e.*, the Picts and Scots, originally came from Ireland and are of Formosian and Milesian descent, it will be readily understood that their proud old clans—and rightly proud, for who but a grovelling money grubber would not sooner be descended from a warrior, elected chief, on account of his all-round prowess, than from some measly hireling whose instincts were all mercenary?—possess ghosts that are nearly allied to the banshee.

The Airlie family, whose headquarters are at Cortachy Castle, is haunted by the phantasm of a drummer that beats a tattoo before the death of one of the members of the clan. There is no question as to the genuineness of this haunting, its actuality is beyond dispute. All sorts of theories as to the origin of this ghostly drummer have been advanced by a prying, inquisitive public, but it is extremely doubtful if any of them approach the truth. Other families have pipers that pipe a dismal dirge, and skaters that are seen skating even when there is no ice, and always before a death or great calamity.

English Family Ghosts

There are a few old English families, too, families who, in all probability, can point to Celtic blood at some distant period in their history, that possess family ghosts. I have, for example, stayed in one house where, prior to a death, a boat is seen gliding noiselessly along a stream that flows through the grounds. The rower is invariably the person doomed to die. A friend of mine, who was very sceptical in such matters, was fishing in this stream late one evening when he suddenly saw a boat shoot round the bend. Much astonished—for he knew it could be no one from the house—he threw down his rod and watched. Nearer and nearer it came, but not a sound; the oars stirred and splashed the rippling, foaming water in absolute silence. Convinced now that what he beheld was nothing physical, my friend was greatly frightened, and, as the boat shot past him, he perceived in the rower his host's youngest son, who was then fighting in South Africa. He did not mention the incident to his friends, but he was scarcely surprised when, in the course of the next few days, a cablegram was received with the tidings that the material counterpart of his vision had been killed in action.

A white dove is the harbinger of death to the Arundels of Wardour; a white hare to an equally well-known family in Cornwall. Corby Castle in Cumberland has its "Radiant Boy"; whilst Mrs E. M. Ward has stated, in her reminiscences, that a certain room at Knebworth was once haunted by the phantasm of a boy with long yellow hair, called "The Yellow Boy," who never appeared to anyone in it, unless they were to die a violent death, the manner of which death he indicated by a series of ghastly pantomimics.

Other families, I am told, lay claim to phantom coaches, clocks, beds, ladies in white, and a variety of ghostly phenomena whose manifestations are always a sinister omen.

Welsh Ghosts

In addition to corpse-candles and blue lights, the Welsh, according to Mr Wirt Sykes, in his work, *British Goblins*, pp. 212—216, possess a species of ill-omened ghost that is not, however, restricted to any one family, but which visits promiscuously any house or village prior to a death. Sometimes it flaps its leathern wings against the window of the room containing the sick person, and in a broken, howling tone calls upon the latter to give up his life; whilst, at other times, according to Mr Dyer in his *Ghost World*, it actually materialises and appears in the form of an old crone with streaming hair and a coat of blue, when it is called the “Ellyllon,” and, like the banshee, presages death with a scream.

Again, when it is called the “Cyhyraeth,” and is never seen, it foretells the death of the insane, or those who have for a long time been ill, by moaning, groaning, and rattling shutters in the immediate vicinity of the doomed person.