

The Two Ghost Houses of Red Lion Square

By Elliot O'Donnell

They stand, these two houses in Red Lion Square, in the same row, almost next door to each other. Their exteriors are practically identical, and when you enter the one, were it not for a few slight differences and variations in the way of furniture and fittings, you might well think you were entering the other. This, I admit, is not in itself a very extraordinary circumstance, but at the same time it does seem rather odd that, when one ascends the staircase at dusk or in the stilly hours of the night of either of these two houses, one feels the same peculiar something in the atmosphere. What this something is I cannot say: I have only experienced it in houses that are haunted, and even there not always, but in some cases only periodically, or at certain specific times of the day and night. In these two houses in Red Lion Square it is most marked, and far too subtle and enigmatical to admit of analysis; it can, perhaps, only be described as "the taint of the Unknown." There are certain shadows, too, on the staircases of these two houses that closely resemble one another, and for which I have tried in vain to find material counterparts.

They seem, indeed, to be generated by that something in the atmosphere to which I have referred, and to be apparent, only, when it is apparent.

In both houses, too, other phenomena occur, namely, strange creaks, and footsteps and also sounds of a more harrowing description, and these phenomena seem to be indissolubly connected with that same queer something, that I have just now designated "the taint of the Unknown."

My wife and I stayed for some time at No. 001. To be precise, we were there for several months during the hurry and scurry of 1915, when, owing to prospective air raids, house accommodation in Holborn might be had, comparatively speaking, for a mere song.

Most of the rooms being used as offices only the two top floors and the basement of No. 001 were occupied at night; so that, from six o'clock in the evening till nine in the morning, we had the premises pretty well to ourselves, and for some weeks, at least, were not disturbed by any suggestion of ghosts. I began to suspect the house was haunted, when, returning to it one evening after dusk, I clambered up the steep flight of uncarpeted stairs, and suddenly became aware of that enigmatical something in the atmosphere.

It was there hovering around me on every stair; it dodged my feet persistently to my room; and that night, when I lay in bed with my door slightly open, I could hear creakings—creakings that, beginning in the distance and getting nearer and nearer, were as if somebody or something was stealing surreptitiously up the staircase and across the landing, up, up, up, till they reached the floor I was on. I peeped furtively out, but there was nothing to be seen—only moonlight and shadows. One evening, some days later, as I was in my bedroom dressing to go out, I heard footsteps slowly ascending the staircase from the lower part of the house. They came steadily up and conveyed with them the impression that they were those of a very old and rather decrepid man. Wondering who it could be, as my wife and I were, with the exception of the caretakers, the only occupants of the building, I hurriedly slipped on my things and listened.

Up and up the steps came, till they reached the foot of the stairs on the landing immediately beneath mine, when, after a brief pause, they began to go down again. I ran out of my room and peered down. The rays of a setting summer sun, pouring through a skylight, flooded the whole house with a subdued yellow glow, and had there been anyone on the stairs, I must have seen them; but there was no one. Yet the steps continued, slow, heavy and deliberate, down, down,

down. I followed them, until I crept close behind them, and down we went together, stair by stair, the known and the Unknown, until we arrived on the ground floor. The steps then went on right up to the front door, where they abruptly ceased, and with their cessation, that same strange enigmatical something in the atmosphere, that had been very apparent during the descent, ceased, too. As my father-in-law was seriously ill at the time, I had fears lest the steps, which bore a very strange likeness to his, might be meant for a prognostication of his death, but as time went on and he neither grew better nor worse—indeed, he survived the incident a little over two years—I concluded that my apprehensions were groundless and that some other spirit agency must be at work. It was then that my wife had an experience, which still further convinced me that the house was actually haunted. I can best describe the experience in my wife's own words:

“One evening, as I was going down stairs, I heard a curious scuffling noise taking place on the landing just behind me, as if two people were engaged in a deadly wrestle. Knowing that I was absolutely alone in the upper part of the house, my husband having gone out some time previously, I was greatly disturbed and alarmed, and, hurrying on, had descended another flight of stairs, when something seemed to fall with a heavy thud close at my heels on the landing below the one upon which I had heard the scuffle.. This came as a climax and, without venturing to look round, I flew down the remainder of the stairs into the hall, and called to the caretaker who lived in the basement.

“In response to my summons she came up, and, declaring she had heard nothing, assured me that no one was in the house but our two selves and that I must have been mistaken. However, although I persisted in what I had said, she showed no inclination to explore the premises with me, so I waited in the hall till my husband returned, and, when I had told him all about it, we went upstairs together, and, searching in every available spot, were eventually convinced that no one was in hiding.

“There was, indeed, nothing apparently that could in any way account for the noises, saving the supernatural, and, consequently, it was to the supernatural that we were forced to attribute them.”

Afterwards my wife and I mentioned our experiences to the lady who had occupied our rooms before us, and learned that she and her maid had frequently heard noises on the staircase—thuds, scuffles, and footsteps, that usually occurred either at dusk or in the still hours of the night. Such corroboration was, of course, intensely interesting, and the sequel, which I will now relate, was just as satisfactory.

After we had left our ghostly quarters, the Duke of—, who has accompanied me on several of my expeditions to haunted houses, and was very anxious to go to another, asked me to interview the present occupants of No.— Red Lion Square, and, if possible, to gain their permission to do an all-night sitting there. Accordingly, I went to the house and found that the rooms were tenanted by two ladies, whom I will designate the Misses B—. Having no alternative but to come to the point at once, I told them that I had reason to believe the house was haunted, and that I was hoping very much that they would have no objection to the Duke of — and myself doing an all-night sitting on one of the staircases, on the chance of experiencing some of the phenomena. To my intense relief, and somewhat to my surprise, for they were not over cordial, they evinced no annoyance, but, on the contrary, showed considerable interest, and, as soon as I finished explaining the purpose of my visit, informed me that they, too, had heard all sorts of queer noises in the house, and had, moreover, obtained, what, in their opinion, was a definite proof that the place was haunted. They said that one evening after dinner, when, some friends having dropped in, they were all sitting round the fire talking, they suddenly heard the same peculiar and heavy footsteps they had so often heard in the night, ascending the staircase. They instantly ceased their

conversation and listened, and when the steps, reaching the door of their room, began to retreat, one of their number, a very young man, got up and went outside to look. After a few minutes he returned and told them that he had seen a very old man in the act of descending the staircase, and had asked him who he was and what he wanted, whereupon the old man had replied: "Oh, it's all right," and continued his descent. The youth had then followed him right down to the front door, through which the old man seemed to pass, although it was locked and bolted on the inside.

I asked them if the youth, who, they said, was very much upset, had noticed anything peculiar about the old man, and they said from what they could gather that he had not; and that, apart from extreme age and a certain difficulty in walking, the old man had appeared to be quite ordinary and natural. This was all the information I could extract from them, and, after obtaining their permission to hold an all-night sitting on the top landing, I came away. Two days later, to my great annoyance, I received a letter from one of the Misses B—, to say that, after weighing the matter over very carefully, she and her sister had come to the conclusion that it would not be advisable for them to have us there, as, if the landlord got to know of it, he might come down on them for circulating the rumour that the house was haunted. This was extremely disappointing. However, happening to remember that, while we had been living at No. 001, the caretaker had mentioned to my wife that No. 003 was said to be haunted, to No. 003 I next bent my steps. Part of the premises were used for business purposes, and certain of the rooms were let out for concert parties and lectures; and it was ostensibly to see the latter that I asked permission to go upstairs. As I ascended the staircase I experienced the same sensations as at No. 001.

Here, too, was that strange enigmatical something in the atmosphere, and a suggestion of the same bizarre and wholly inexplicable shadows. I very cautiously sounded the girl, who was showing me over the premises as to whether she had heard that one or two houses in the square were haunted, and she told me that she certainly had heard rumours to that effect, adding, upon my assuring her that I was trustworthy, that, although she had been a strong sceptic with regard to ghosts all her life, a few days after her arrival there, she was fully convinced that they existed.

"I'm telling you the truth," she said, "because I've seen them—at least, I've seen one. I often meet it on this staircase—never anywhere else, and always about this time, or just when it is getting dusk. It is a girl about my own age without a hat, and wearing one of those flounced skirts with panniers that were the fashion about sixty years ago. She has very white cheeks and long, loose flowing dark hair, and she comes creeping down the staircase with a frightened, startled look in her big wide-open, blue eyes, and seems to be making for the front door, where she disappears. I always lose sight of her, when she is about half way across the hall. I shall never forget the first time I saw her. It was in the autumn, about five o'clock, and I was running upstairs to call one of the other assistants down to tea, when I saw what I at first took to be Daisy at the top of the staircase. She began to descend the moment I caught sight of her, and the yellow glow of the fading sun, falling full on her face, showed me it was not Daisy but someone quite different. Then I noticed how pale she was and what old-fashioned clothes she had on, and what little noise her feet made on the bare boards, and I went cold all over, and would have run away had I not found myself rooted to the spot, unable to move hand or foot. She came down, as if in a terrible hurry, and fearful of being heard; her eyes peering about in all directions, but never seeming to see me. She passed me so close that I could feel the long stray wisps of her hair flick my cheek, while her dress brushed against my feet; but, when I turned to look for her, she was nowhere to be seen—the hall was quite empty and all the doors, including the one leading into the street, were shut. I spoke to the manageress about it and she said: 'It must have been the ghost my predecessor said she had so often seen.' According to her—and I've heard others say

the same thing—a girl was found murdered on the staircase a good many years ago, and the crime—like many more—was never brought home to anyone, although suspicion rested on a certain young man, the son of a wealthy old leather merchant, who lived two doors from here. The young man was supposed to have been ‘walking out’ with the girl, and it was affirmed that he had been seen with her on the night of the murder, but, as he was able to produce an alibi, several people coming forward to swear that he was out of London all that week, he was discharged, and no one was subsequently arrested. They say the young man’s father was so upset to think that anyone should ever have suspected his son, that he committed suicide, and his ghost, too, haunts this house.”

“Why this house?” I queried.

“I don’t know,” my informant replied, “but that is what the manageress told me, and I believe she is right, because I have, on several occasions, heard the sound of footsteps, just like those of an old, decrepid man, ascending and descending the staircase, and sometimes going right up to the front door, but I have never seen anyone. Now, that is all I can tell you, but please don’t breathe a word about it to anyone, or I might lose my post. The manageress told me her predecessor had to leave on that account: she mentioned her experiences to someone and they spoke about them to the management, with the result that she was accused of spreading the rumour the house was haunted—and sacked; and I don’t want to share her fate.”

I promised, and forthwith abandoning all hope of a night’s investigation there—so forlorn did the chances seem of obtaining the necessary permission—I very reluctantly let the matter drop. All the same I was interested. Two houses, close to one another, and haunted by the same ghost! Why, I wondered, did that old man so persistently climb up and down the staircase, first in the one house, and then in the other? And why that scuffle and heavy thud at No. 001, and that white-faced, frightened, stealthily fleeing girl at No. 003? Was it possible that the murder referred to by the manageress had been committed at No. 001 and the body conveyed from thence to No. 003; could the old man, the father of the supposed murderer, have aided his son—if not in the actual murder—in removing the body? It was quite likely, of course, that the father would not hear of his son being married to this young girl, for the simple reason that she was not in the same station of life, and the youth, finding that he had so far committed himself that he must either marry her or remove her from his path altogether, had, with his father’s knowledge and approval, eventually adopted the latter course.

But, on the other hand, it is quite possible that the girl, having heard that her sweetheart was in love with someone else, had gone to his house to upbraid him and, consequently, had been killed by him in a fit of passion and without premeditation; in which case the father might still have helped him to remove the body to No. 003.

Or, on the other hand, very possibly the old man, determined at all costs, to prevent his son’s marriage with a poor girl, had with his own hands done the deed, after which remorse (and not injured pride) had led to his suicide, and subsequent perpetual hovering around the scenes of the crime? But these are only surmises, a hundred and one things might have happened, and, without getting any forwarder, one might go on speculating thus till Doomsday. However, one thing, at all events, seems certain and that is that the two houses Nos. 001 and 003 Red Lion Square possess at least one ghost in common, namely, the ghost of a very old man, and possess also, the one no less than the other, that most ghostly of all ghostly phenomena, grim, and creaking, and shadow haunted stairs.