

Atmosphere

Or a Haunting in a Kilburn Studio

By Elliott O'Donnell

"Do you know, O'Donnell," my friend George Niall suddenly remarked, after he had been puffing away at his briar for some minutes in silence, "what I should be more particular about than anything else when taking a house?"

"Drains!" I responded with alacrity.

"Well, yes; drains, of course," he said, "but that is not what I meant; I was thinking of something else, that is, to my mind, equally important."

"Ghosts!"

"Well, no; not exactly ghosts!"

"What then?" I ejaculated, handing Niall an ash tray, for he has the most woeful habit of scattering his ashes broadcast.

"Atmosphere!" he said solemnly.

"Atmosphere," I repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Why this," he said. "When you think, and think forcibly enough, your thoughts, far from being lost, impress themselves on the ether and are retained by it, in much the same way as sound is retained by wax. Now, when certain vibrations occur in the air these thoughts are set in motion—or set going, as the music is set going in a gramophone, and, if anyone happens to be present, they must be more or less affected by them. You have often heard people say they don't like the atmosphere of a place. Well, they don't like it because they are susceptible to the hidden thoughts there, the thoughts that the ether holds and, in the conditions I have named, gives out."

"So that it is always safer to take a new house," I commented.

"Generally," Niall responded, "but much depends on the site. A house, for example built on the crest of a hill would not be as likely to have a heavily thought-impregnated atmosphere as a house in a wood or a hollow, because in the former case the atmosphere must to some extent be affected by the freshness of the air, due to continual breezes and currents of wind; whereas in the latter, saving for vibrations, the atmosphere would remain to a certain extent undisturbed.

"I don't know whether you have noticed that there are infinitely more cases of hauntings and crime in low lying localities and thickly wooded districts than on plains and mountains. In the provinces, for example, Bristol, Bath, and Clevedon, all very low lying districts, are full of haunted flats and houses; whilst Clifton, one part of which lies low and the other part of which is very wooded, not only possesses many haunted houses, but is one of the most suicidal towns in England. A fact which cannot be said to be altogether due to the suspension bridge. Then, when we come to London, there is Kilburn."

"Oh, don't mention Kilburn," I said. "I haven't got over the night I spent at No.— Mortimer Road, yet. It is the most haunted district in London."

Niall laughed. "That is so," he said. "There is no air there, the soil is clay, and the atmosphere is crammed as full as it can hold with stale thoughts—some of them deuced bad ones, too. Let me give an instance. You have heard me speak of Linton Wise-man, haven't you? Well, he is landed in a very awkward predicament, that may well lead to tragedy, and all through taking a studio in Kilburn with, what, I think, I may rightly term, a thought-haunted atmosphere. Would you like to hear about it?"

I nodded.

“All right,” he said, “but it is conditionally that, if you ever publish the case, you give fictitious names and are very careful not to let out it was I who told you.”

I promised, and this is the gist of what he narrated. Linton Wiseman, a black and white artist, of more than average ability, had been searching high and low for a studio, when at last he heard of one in a rather mean and dingy row of houses within a couple of minutes' walk of Kilburn Station. It was not at all the sort of studio he wanted, but as there seemed little likelihood that he would get a better one, he took it, and, in due course, “moved in.” Well, one afternoon, after an unusually hard grind in order to complete within a specified time a design for the jacket of a book by an author cousin, he pulled up his chair in front of the fire and determined to enjoy a short smoke and a few minutes' quiet reflection before lighting up and recommencing work. Owing to an unlucky financial speculation, which threatened to delay his marriage—he was engaged to a very charming and well-known film actress—he felt considerably worried, and his thoughts unconsciously reverted to his only near relative, an elderly and very rich bachelor uncle, with regard to whom he entertained great expectations. As he leaned back in his chair and puffed steadily away at his pipe, he kept on wondering why he had not heard from this uncle. He had written to him several times but had had no reply. Could it be that he was ill? He surely could not have offended him in any way. He must write again on the morrow, and, if he did not get any answer, he would go down to Torquay and pay him surprise visit.

He was not naturally commercially minded; as a matter of fact, like most artists, he had no craving for money; but he had his fiancée's welfare at heart, and the sum he was expecting would not only insure her against poverty, the risk of which she would undoubtedly incur were he to marry her now—for poverty, as is well known, must be reckoned with by all, or mostly all, who depend upon their art for a living—but it would enable him to keep her, if not in luxury, in comparative comfort. It was, then, most essential that he should keep in with his uncle, and solve the mystery of the latter's long silence with all expediency. He puffed leisurely on, however, still thinking of his uncle, and still brooding over affairs in general, until the heat from the fire making him sleepy, he put down his pipe, and, resting his head against the back of the chair, gradually began to doze off. Suddenly he sat bolt upright and listened. A knock! And at the door of his studio, too! Who the deuce could it be? His charwoman must surely have gone by now and no one could have gained admittance without ringing the front door bell.

He called out, “Come in,” and to his great amazement the door then opened and a young lady dressed in the very latest of fashions—a dark blue tailor-made costume, the skirt very short and the coat lavishly trimmed with braid and buttons, and wearing patent leather shoes, the heels of which were of more than average height—came into the room smiling. He could see that she was smiling, because, at the moment of her entry, the fire had suddenly broken into flame, and focussed on her face. It was a face, too, that having once been seen would not be forgotten in a hurry. It was handsome rather than pretty—the nose being slightly curved, the chin somewhat pronounced and the eyebrows very marked. But it was the eyes—the eyes chiefly—that arrested Linton's attention. They were of a china blue, and had in their depths a curious glitter that he had never seen in eyes before, and which he could not—though he tried his utmost to do so—analyse. They had, moreover, a peculiarly disquieting effect, and he could not make up his mind whether he liked them or not, although he was by no means insensible to their beauty. He was so absorbed in gazing at them, that he quite forgot to speak, and it was she who eventually began the conversation.

“How lucky I am to find you in,” she said, “and, for a wonder, not at work.”

“Find me in and not at work,” Linton stammered, looking at the hand she held out and noticing how the rings on it and her nails, which were very long and slightly curved at the tips, sparkled as the fire flames caught them. “Why, however did you manage to enter without—”

“Ringing,” the lady laughed. “Oh, that was very easy. I’ll tell you how some day. I’ve come to fetch you.”

“Fetch me!” Linton gasped, rubbing his eyes to make sure he was not still dreaming.

“Yes, fetch you,” the lady mimicked. “Come, make haste. Put on your hat and coat, the car’s waiting for us at the door.”

To Linton’s astonishment he now found himself obeying this strange woman. Instead of asking her who she was and bidding her begone, he seemed to have succumbed to the extraordinary fascination of her eyes and to have been completely magnetised by them.

“All right,” he said, walking to the peg behind the door and taking his coat down. “I’ll come, but where are we going?”

“Why home of course,” the woman replied laughing. “As if you didn’t know that. Some one wants to see you and wouldn’t give me any peace, till I promised I would take out the car and fetch you. It’s too bad of you not to be on the ’phone.”

“Well, I hope I shall be soon,” Linton said lamely, putting on his hat, “in fact, as soon as I can afford it.”

“Afford it,” the woman repeated, laughing again. “Why you know you’re making heaps of money with your painting. Always selling. But make haste, what a slow coach you are.”

At the door of the house a private motor was in waiting, and into this Linton unhesitatingly followed his fair companion.

During the drive, though he kept on assuring himself that every thing was real—the fascinating sensation of rapid movement as the motor glided easily and swiftly along, now down one street and now across another; the bright lights from the gas lamps that kept continually illuminating the interior of the vehicle; the dazzling shop windows; and the ceaseless roar of the traffic, as coming to the end of a side street they shot out into the great broad sweep of the Kilburn main thoroughfare—yet, nevertheless, he felt, at times, in a kind of daze. In a measure he could think and take in all that was happening, but he seemed no longer to have any power either of seasoning or remonstrating. Some power outside himself seemed to be forcing him to accept this extraordinary adventure in perfect good faith without comment and without misgiving. His companion every now and again laying her small white hand on his—not coquettishly, but simply as if they had long been friends and friends only—continued chatting gaily, and he found himself recognising and appreciating all this, not as some sudden revelation, but as something he had known all along, even before she had come to fetch him; and yet he could not even recall her name or recollect ever having seen her till that evening. On and on they went till at last they drew up before a corner house in a large and stately square, obviously in some very select and aristocratic neighbourhood. Here the lady, bidding Linton follow, sprang out of the car, and, running nimbly up the steps to the front door, inserted a latchkey in the lock, turned it deftly and entered the house. Linton entering at the same time at once sensed keenly the air of omnipotent silence that reigned everywhere; it was most pronounced. Each time his companion spoke, each time her heels struck the tiled flooring, there came that hollow, reverberating echo one never hears save in empty houses. Yet the place was furnished, and as far as he could see, furnished luxuriously. It was odd, very odd.

"I hope you will forgive me," the lady suddenly remarked as if divining his thoughts. "The house does seem a bit deserted, I know, but the servants wanted so badly to go to a wedding party to-night—cook's sister's—that I hadn't the heart to refuse them."

"So we're alone in the house," Linton said mechanically.

"Alone," the lady mimicked, her blue eyes suffusing with merriment. "Why, what a tone of voice. One would imagine you were thinking me some dangerous, designing madame and that you were terrified out of your life of scandal or blackmail. Instead of which you are—but we won't talk of it, it makes me appear so old. Now, come in here and wait, whilst I change. You won't mind dining alone with me, will you? He has not been very well today and I've kept him in bed."

She showed Linton into an ante-room as she spoke, and, after switching on the light, left him and ran upstairs. When she had gone Linton, feeling once more the sense of weariness due to an extra hard day's work, sank into a chair before the faintly glowing gas fire, and closed his eyes. It was true, he argued to himself, he loved adventure, anything in which there was a spice of danger and romance, but only when he was feeling fit and well, and able to cope with it, not when he was dog-tired and feeling anyhow. Besides, there was something in this escapade that did not flavour of the normal, something that struck a note of mystery quite out of his ken, and for that reason, perhaps, he was not at all sure if he altogether relished it. Who was she? Why had she brought him to that house? What had become of her? And how still everything was! Once a faint noise, a strange isolated noise that sounded almost like a cry of sudden pain or surprise, made him sit bolt upright and glance hurriedly at the door. But as it was not repeated, and the house still seemed wrapt in the same intense and overwhelming silence, leaned back again and soon forgot all about it. After waiting for what appeared to be an eternity, door of the room at length opened and the lady stood upon the threshold.

Though wholly devoted and loyal to his fiancée, Linton could not suppress his admiration. He had this stranger more than ordinarily good looking when he had seen her in her out-door attire, but now that she was elaborately dressed in one of Madame Verteuilli's latest creations, she appeared positively beautiful. So beautiful in fact, that he could only stand and gape at her.

"Why, Linton," she laughed, glancing at herself in the mirror over the mantleshef and re-adjusting one or two of her curls. "How you stare. Is there anything the matter with me? By the way did you a noise a few minutes ago?"

"I thought I did—I thought I fancied I heard some one cry out," Linton said.

"Well that was me," the lady observed. "That wretched cat of ours scratched me, see," and she held out one of her hands, on the back of which there was a long ugly looking red scratch. Linton shivered. Anything in the nature of blood always made him feel sick.

"What a brute," he said. "I hope you punished him well."

"I couldn't catch him," was the reply, "but he'll have to be destroyed, for he's always hurting somebody. He tried to bite cook only a day or two ago. But come on, we'll have supper now. I'll lead the way."

Crossing the hall they entered the dining-room, where a table was laid for two. It was a meal Linton never forgot. He rarely, if ever, removed his gaze from the woman—those china blue eyes, with their extraordinary glitter and long curling black lashes, fascinated him beyond measure, and, if he glanced away from them at all, it was to look at her slim delicate hands with their long pointed fingers and rosy, highly polished nails, and that dreadful scar, that showed so red and ominously against the smooth, white skin around it. He was so absorbed in gazing at her, that he paid little attention to what he ate, and, though generally speaking a teetotaller, he drank

heedlessly of whatever she passed to him. When the meal was at length over, she leaned forward and, looking at him with a sly, mischievous expression in her lovely eyes, said:

“I’ve a little surprise in store for you, Linton, would you like to see it?”

“Sure,” Linton replied.

“Then come along,” she said, and rising from her chair, she at once led the way, Linton following, and steadying himself with difficulty, as the wine, of which he had drunk far more than he realised at the time, had got into his head and made him a trifle dizzy. Crossing the hall and ascending the staircase, she paused for a moment outside a room on the first landing. “Do you mind waiting here for a minute,” she said, “while I go in and see that everything is all right.”

She then disappeared and Linton was once again left to himself. A strange foreshadowing of some impending event of a momentous but at the same time wholly unguessable nature now began to impress itself on his somewhat muddled and bewildered brain. He looked around him curiously. It was a big house, and the absolute stillness of it filled him with vague apprehensions. Did this woman live here all alone, and if not where were all the other people? A huge grandfather clock in a highly polished ebony frame, standing in a recess a few feet away from him, alone gave signs of life. As he listened to it—listened to its slow and ponderous tick, tick, tick—there seemed to be more than mere mechanism in its tones. It seemed to be saying something he could not fathom but which he felt intuitively had some deep and subtle meaning. It puzzled him just as much as that peculiar gleam and glitter in the woman’s china-blue eyes, and just as much as any of the incidents that had particularly impressed him in the night’s adventure. Behind it, as behind them, lay a something whose meaning and attitude towards him he could not for the life of him determine.

Otherwise, there was much in his surroundings that was perfectly natural and normal—the lights in the hall and on the landings, for instance, there was nothing in any way unusual or suggestive in them; whilst the scent of flowers, that was wafted every now and again to him from the conservatory, was unquestionably real and ordinary. He was still thinking of it all and eyeing the clock intently, when the door at his elbow opened and the woman bade him enter. As far as he could make out from the feeble, flickering flames of a fire, the room was very large and most luxuriously furnished. More he had not time to notice just then, for the woman came close to him, and, laying her hands on the lappets of his coat, whispered:

“There’s the surprise—in that chair by the fire. Go to it and see for yourself.” Her fair hair brushed against his cheeks as she spoke, and the scent of her breath intoxicated him. Carried away with the passion of the moment he pressed her close to him and smothered her in kisses. For some seconds she lay in his arms quite passively and then, with a sudden effort releasing herself, she patted him playfully on the cheeks, and slipped quickly out of the room, closing the door behind her.

“Look at the chair,” she cried, “be quick; why, how slow you are,” and Linton fancied he heard a click, as if she had locked him in. At that instant the fire gave a big spurt, and he saw, seated in front of it, with his back towards him, a figure, in what looked like a grey flannel dressing-gown. Judging by the bald head, the figure was that of a man who seemed to be reclining in rather a strange attitude, the legs stretched out at full length and the head resting so far back on the chair, which was very low, that almost the entire face was visible from behind; and as Linton looked at it, fancying there was something about it oddly familiar to him, the eyes seemed to blink and the mouth to grin. Yielding to a sudden fit of curiosity Linton went right up to the chair and peered into the face of the recumbent figure. What he saw, however, made him start back in horror. The man was his uncle, and the reason for his peculiarly helpless attitude was at once explained. He

was dead—his throat had been cut, or rather hacked, for the firelight showed quite a number of slashes, almost from ear to ear. For several seconds the shock of the discovery was so great that Linton was too stupified even to think, he could only stand rooted to the ground in a kind of trance; but his faculties at last reasserting themselves, he rushed to the door to summon assistance. It was locked, and, on his hammering at the panels and demanding to be let out, the woman who had brought him thither laughed.

“You poor fool,” she jeered. “How do you like my surprise? You counted on your uncle’s money but you’ve been outwitted. It will all be mine now, for I made him settle it on me—every penny—when we married. I am now going to give you in charge.”

“In charge, you devil,” Linton shrieked. “What for?”

“That you’ll very soon know,” was the mocking reply. “There’s no escape. This door is locked and bolted, and the windows are barred. If you take the trouble to look at your clothes you will see I’ve arranged everything in a manner that does me the greatest credit. While you were kissing my lips and sniffing the wonderful perfume from my hair and clothes, I was covering you with certain tell-tale marks. Laugh! I could die with laughter. I’ve got rid of that old husband of mine and his poor fool of a nephew with one stroke. Why, it’s enough to make me the idol of the Feminist movement for ever. Now I’m going to summon the police.”

Linton then heard her go to the telephone, which was close to the door, and ring up the Gerald Road Police.

“I want the Inspector, a Sergeant, or whoever is in charge,” she said. “Quick, quick!” Then after a pause. “A murder has been committed at No. — Eaton Square. My husband has been killed by his nephew. I saw the murder take place, and I’ve locked the murderer in the room with his victim. He’s there now. Yes, number —. Send round at once for Heaven’s sake.” The woman then went downstairs, and Linton, completely overcome, sank on to the floor. He had dim recollections of ringing accompanied by loud raps, of a door opening, and the gruff voice of a man—then heavy, measured footsteps crossing the hall, and the tramp, tramp of what seemed to be a whole army of men ascending the stairs. Up they came, on to the landing, and then to the door. Linton heard the key click and the bolt shoot back, and then, as the handle turned and the door began to open, a feeling of deadly nausea overcame him and he lost consciousness.

He came to with a start, still hearing rapping, but when he opened his eyes and looked round, to his infinite astonishment, he was back in his studio, sitting in just the same position in front of the fire, as he had been when that demon of a woman paid her visit. Wondering who it could be this time, he called out very cheerily, “Come in,” and then it suddenly dawned on him that the rapping was not at the door of the studio ‘at all, but at the front door. Hearing it again and again he eventually went downstairs and found a messenger boy at the door with a note for him. Fully awake, he opened the note immediately and read as follows:—

“My Dear Nephew,—You will doubtless be wondering why you have not heard from me for so long, hut the truth is I have a confession to make. I’m married! My wife is a charming young American lady who oddly enough once lived where you are now. She is most anxious to make your acquaintance, so will you come and dine with us to-night at eight? Don’t disappoint.—Your affect. uncle, Robert.”

P.S.—You will see I have changed my quarters. My old rooms were all right for a bachelor but they would hardly do for a married couple.”

Linton glanced at the address, it was No.— Eaton Square. With a grim foreboding he hurried upstairs and dressed, and in good time arrived at his uncle's house.

The moment he entered, he was struck with the strange familiarity of the scene—it was the house he had visited not an hour before in his hideous, hellish dream. He remembered all the details most distinctly, and, as he crossed the hall to the drawing-room, he could hear that slow, ponderous tick, tick, tick, intermingled with which was a strange something, that strongly suggested to him that the clock was now laughing at him. His uncle, looking rather shame-faced, arose to greet him as he entered the drawing-room, and Linton glanced involuntarily at his throat, which was, however, perfectly sound and whole.

The conversation not unnaturally reverted to the marriage, and Linton, sick at heart, for he now saw his prospects demolished, was listening to a lengthy description of how his uncle had first met the divine object of his love, when the drawing-room door opened and in swept a lady, clad in the most wonderful of evening gowns.

“Ah! here she is—this is my wife,” Linton's uncle began. But Linton had no need to be told—for the woman that now faced him was the woman he had already seen in that house that evening—the woman with the china-blue eyes—the woman, if you like, of his nightmare.

“There now,” Niall concluded, “that is the story. I had it from Linton himself. He is, of course, placed in a dreadful dilemma through this dream—if dream it really were. Ought he to tell his uncle about it—to warn him in fact, or not? What would you suggest, O'Donnell?”

“It is a knotty point,” I replied, “and I should like to consider it.”