

Hauntings in Other Parks and Commons

By Elliott O'Donnell

Though the Green Park, or, more correctly speaking, St James's Park, cannot be said to have quite such bitter and tragic associations as Hyde Park, it nevertheless has its ghosts. To picture it in the days when almost every one of its trees at night gave shelter to some poor, starving and often dying outcast, one has to go back at least some fifteen or twenty years. It was then, after dusk, a very pitiable place indeed, and one which witnessed all kinds of grim and harrowing happenings.

Late one night in September, either of the year 1900 or 1901, I was, I remember, crossing the Green Park from the direction of Hyde Park Corner, when I heard, in the distance, the very faint sound of a violin. Wondering who on earth could be playing out there at such an unearthly hour, I struck off in the direction whence I thought the sounds proceeded, and eventually decided that they came from a cluster of trees surmounting a kind of knoll.

I was aiming for the spot, when I met a policeman.

"It's a curious time for street music," I remarked, "who's the musician?"

"No one," was the reply. "If you were to search high and low and all night you'd find no one—it's a ghost. You may laugh, but s'welp me if it isn't a fact. Some years ago, before I came to this beat, an old fiddler—so it is said—came in here one night and went to sleep under those trees. I suppose there were just as queer customers to be found in the Park then as there are now, for on awaking and looking for his beloved violin, the old fellow found it was gone—stolen. He was dreadfully upset of course—which isn't to be wondered at, seeing it was his one means of making a livelihood, and came running up to the policeman on duty here to tell him; but the thief was far enough off by that time, and was never caught. For three or four days the old man, without touching a morsel of food, hung around here, stopping everyone he saw and asking them if they had seen anyone with a addle. At last, worn to a shadow, he went and hanged himself with his braces on one of those trees.

"The night after his death, so I was told, the policeman he had spoken to heard music coming from the knoll, went to see who it was, and there, sitting under the very tree on which his body had been found hanging, was the fiddler, fiddling away as if his very life depended on it.

"It sounds a tall story, and this, I admit, is the only occasion I know of upon which the ghost has been seen; but he's been heard often enough, especially at this time of year and when the wind is blowing from the south-west."

My informant must have been transferred very shortly after the above incident to another beat for I have never seen him again nor heard the fiddling although I have wandered past those trees at night, times without number.

One evening in the depths of winter, when during a thaw and after a heavy downfall of rain, the ground was deep in slush and mud, I was accosted as I was crossing the Green Park, by an elderly man with a soft hat, jammed down over his eyes, and a thick beard, who stepped out from under a tree and asked me the time. I told him, and, as he thanked me, he heaved a deep sigh, and once again sought cover of the trees.

The same thing happening the following evening, in the same place and about the same hour, I mentioned the incident to one of the keepers and asked him if he knew anything about the man.

“I should think I do know something about the man,” he said. “He always comes in here, on the same three successive nights every year, and waits for his wife.”

“His wife?” I ejaculated.

“Yes,” the keeper replied, “his wife, or rather what he believes to be his wife. He is a public house keeper somewhere down Peckham way and about ten years ago his wife, to whom he was very much attached, ran off with another man. He took it to heart very much, and some say it affected him to such an extent that for a time, at least, he went off his head; any way his business all went to pot, and he was reduced in the end to street hawking. Then his wife turned up. It seems the other fellow had got tired of her and thrown her over; but, when she saw the state of poverty her husband was living in, she left him again, and, apparently, went on the streets. Then his luck suddenly changed. He was left enough money to recommence business, and, after he had opened a public house in Hammersmith, he immediately set to work to find his wife. At last he succeeded in discovering her address and, in reply to a letter from him imploring her to return, she wrote asking him to meet her one evening here, in this Park, where they could talk matters over. When he came he found her sitting under a tree dead—poisoned—but whether she had taken her own life or had been murdered there was no evidence to show, and so an open verdict was returned.

“The husband, however, could not tear himself away from the tree against which she had leaned. He paced to and fro and around it all night, and the following morning he declared he had seen the spirit of his dead wife and had walked up and down with her for more than an hour. He came again that night and the next; and every year since then, on the anniversary of her death and the two following nights he has come into the Park and tramped up and down the path where you met him for about an hour.

“I have sometimes stood quite close to him and he has passed me by as if he had never seen me, talking aloud to his invisible partner, and with his arm extended as if he were holding her round the waist.

“You might say, of course, that he is mad and that he imagines it all; and so I thought till last night, when I examined the snow after he had gone. I then found footprints alongside his, and altered my opinion. They were the footprints of a woman who was wearing boots with very high heels—in fact they were, without doubt the footprints of his wife.”

* * *

It was shortly after this adventure that I discovered a seat in the Park that was well known to be haunted, and I made the discovery in this way.

I was sitting alone on the seat late one Sunday evening deliberating whether I should remain in the Park all night or not, when I distinctly felt someone sit down heavily beside me. I looked round but, although I could see no one, I very soon received the impression that someone or something was staring intently at me; indeed it seemed as if something very bizarre was leaning forward and peering right into my eyes.

I stood the sensation for some seconds but, at last, unable to endure it any longer, I yielded to a sudden panic and fled. That seat I discovered subsequently was invariably avoided by habitual frequenters of the Park, and a tramp, who had seen the ghost, told me it was that of an old man with very large mad-looking eyes, and that he was trying to cut his throat with a broken razor.

It must have been, I think, on account of its evil reputation that the seat one day disappeared; anyhow it went and I now pass the spot where it stood without even the slightest inclination to quicken my pace.

I received one of my worst scares, however, under a tree in this same Park. A fox terrier, that I was keeping for a friend, while he was away, accompanied me, and, as we were about to pass this particular tree, he suddenly gave a howl of terror and bolted. Wondering what on earth was the matter with him, I ran after him and found him lying on the grass shivering, nor would any amount of coaxing make him get up and go on with me. Finally, giving him up as hopeless, and desirous of getting at the bottom of the mystery, I went up to the tree, and, just as I got within a few feet of the trunk, something big seemed to drop on to the ground, close beside me, with a soft thud.

I have had many experiences with the extremely unpleasant side of the Unknown, but I do not think anything has ever affected me in quite the same way as this thing. I instinctively felt it was nothing in the least degree human, but that it resembled, rather, some very extraordinary and grotesque animal or insect, something that was frightfully repellant and malignant. I could feel it was trying to fascinate me, trying to reduce me to a state of utter helplessness, and it was only by dint of an almost superhuman effort that I managed to overcome its influence and tear myself away from the spot.

I narrated my experience to one of my tramp friends next day and pointed out the tree to him.

“So that’s it!” he remarked, looking at the tree critically. “Thought as much. My mates and I call it the pig tree. Listen! Two years ago a fellow called Palin and I slept under it. We lay down at about eleven—you wonder at my being able to tell the hour, but it’s surprising how you get to gauge the time after you’ve done a few years tramping on the road, it seems to come to you by instinct—and at about two something woke us with a kind of shock. I sat up and looked around. Nothing to be seen. Then I peered up at the branches overhead, and what I saw nearly made me jump out of my skin.

“Staring down at me were two eyes—pale eyes that seemed to have no actual colour, but to be wholly animated with spite and hate. The face they belonged to was a curious cross between that of a pig and that of a wolf. The mouth and snout were wolfish, the ears and general contour—piggish. It was quite hairless, and of a startling lurid white. As I looked up at it, too terrified to utter a sound, or move, it shot out an enormously long red tongue, curled at the end like the tongue of an ant-eater. And with its evil glittering eyes still fixed on mine, it suddenly began to descend. I then saw its body, which was quite nude, and like that of a very unshapely and repulsive woman. Catching hold of a branch with two huge hands it dropped to the ground with a soft thud—just such a noise as you described, and then stole towards me.

“I tell you, boss, it’s a long time since I prayed, but I made use of some kind of prayer then, and jerking myself away from the spot with an effort—just like you did—I made a bolt for it.

“An hour or so later I summed up the courage to steal back and see how Palin was getting on. He was there right enough—lying on the ground, just as I had left him, apparently still asleep. At first, I did not dare venture under the branches of the tree for fear of seeing that cursed thing again, but I halted a few feet away and called out to him. No reply. I called again. Still no reply. Then, growing anxious I went, in spite of my terror of the tree, right up to my mate and shook him by the shoulder. There was no response; his head simply fell limply, on one side—he was dead!”

“Dead!” I ejaculated.

“Yes, dead,” the tramp mimicked. “Dead—D-E-A-D. And there was no manner of doubt of what he had died. It was fright—and it was written only too clearly in his face. He always had had something wrong with his heart, and the shock of seeing that hellish thing bending over him had, of course, killed him. That was the last straw as far as I was concerned, and for the second time that night I bolted.

“Lord bless you, his was not an exceptional case. I’ve known dozens die of fright in one or other in the Parks at night, and it’s always a supernatural horror of some kind or another that does the trick. But that tree over there has a peculiar attraction for women; I’ve frequently seen them sitting under it and kind of worshipping it with their eyes. No, it never seems to harm them in the same way as it harms men, and I have my opinions on the subject. I believe that the thing I saw drop down—the thing that undoubtedly killed Palin—is a man hater. I believe it inspires all women who come in contact with it with a violent hatred of men; and I’ll tell you why. An old woman—“Molly” as we called her—was all right with me and my mates till she took to sleeping under that tree. Then all of a sudden she turned crusty with us, said she hated men, and finally tried to throttle Micky Smith, when he was taken ill with the cramp, and couldn’t defend himself. It was the same with Mrs Letts. She and her old man used to sleep under the bushes with the rest of us. And no one ever heard them have words, at least to any extent, till one night they slept out here alone, under that tree. The very next morning they had a fearful quarrel and she left him—left him for good.

I’ve watched the faces of women, too, while they have been sitting under these branches in the daytime, and I’ve invariably noticed them change. Their lips have tightened, while a cruel glitter has crept into their eyes whenever they have looked at a passing man or boy. You mark my words, boss, that pig-faced something that haunts that tree is no friend to you or me, or to any of our sex.”

But it is not only trees or seats in the Parks that are haunted: occasionally other objects, also, have their ghosts.

On Clapham Common, for example, some twenty or more years ago, there was a big stone lying in a hollow, that was known by the name of the Whistling Stone. I have never heard it whistle myself but I’ve met several people who say they have, and amongst them an old vagrant whose experience I will now narrate.

One foggy night, he told me, as he was wandering across the Common, looking for some likely spot to sleep in, he suddenly heard someone whistling a very plaintive air.

Thinking the whistler must be an outcast like himself, for it was extremely improbable that anyone else would be out there at such an hour and in such a fog, he promptly turned his steps in the direction of the sounds; but where they seemed loudest he could see no one—nothing but a big white stone—and as he leaned forward to listen he was positive the whistling came from it. I also concluded from what he said that he was so enamoured of the tune that from that time forth whenever he crossed the Common he always visited the stone on the chance of hearing the whistling again.

Another tramp—an old woman, locally known as blue-necked Sally, from some bluish-coloured scar on one side of her neck—told me that when she was sleeping on the Common one night she was awakened by the most beautiful whistling imaginable. She said it was soft and sweet, and yet, so sad and melancholy, that it made her cry; and I gathered from her somewhat garrulous description of the incident that, on applying her ear to a stone, near to which she was lying, and from which the music seemed to emanate, she was convinced that the mysterious sounds did in very truth issue from it. She said the whistling went on for some minutes and then

suddenly terminated; and that on the following night at about—as far as she could guess—the same hour, she again heard it.

I naturally sought sonic explanation of this not unpleasant phenomenon, but, although I made endless inquiries, I never heard of anything that I could definitely connect with it.

Some said an aged pedlar had been murdered there; others, that an old crossing sweeper, who used to sell whistles, made from the branches of the trees on the Common, had been found there, frozen to death; but I doubt if any reliance can be placed on such statements and when I last went to search for the stone, in the autumn of 1900, it had been moved.

An equally novel though much less attractive form of haunting occurs periodically, on Wimbledon Common. I was talking, one night, to the proprietor of a portable coffee stall, in the Mile End Road, when, in reply to a question as to whether he had ever seen a ghost, he said: “Well, not exactly what you would call a ghost, but something which certainly savours of the supernatural.”

He then related the following:—

“I was strolling across the Common one evening with my young lady when she suddenly said to me:

‘Let’s go over yonder and play ducks and drakes; I love that piece of water, it reminds me so of good old Ramsgate.’

“She pointed, as she spoke, to a pond sparkling in places with the setting rays of the sun, and as we walked towards it we both became conscious of a gradually increasing sense of sadness, and left off talking. A few minutes before and we should have scoffed at the idea of feeling lonely, but now the whole landscape seemed changed, and in everything around us we could detect the same spirit—a spirit of intense dreariness and isolation. The sense of solitude, in fact, was so supreme, that we might have been miles away from anywhere; on an American prairie or a South African desert.

“The temperature, too, that had so far been cool—so cool indeed that I had insisted upon my fiancée putting on her sports coat instead of carrying it—now became all at once so hot and stifling, that it might have been midday instead of evening; and this sudden heat was accompanied by a loud buzzing.

“It was then that I broke the silence that had fallen upon us. ‘Hulloa!’ I said. ‘What’s this! Flies! Odd time of day for flies to be buzzing about.’

“‘They’re bluebottles!’ my girl cried in tones of the greatest disgust. ‘The air is alive with them. One flew right into my face. Oh, come along. Let’s get away from here as quickly as possible. I hate flies; the filthy things.’

“She hit out furiously with her parasol, as she spoke, and I did the same with my stick. I never saw such swarms—flies of every description.

“‘Why,’ I ejaculated, ‘anyone would think we were near a slaughter house.’

“My girl, however, made no response—she was too much engrossed in driving the beastly things away from her face. At last we turned back and gave up all idea of ‘Ducks and Drakes.’

“Two or three nights later, when we cautiously approached the spot again, although the weather was much warmer, there was not the slightest sign of a bluebottle. However, neither of us thought of the matter again until one evening, just a year later, I reminded my girl of the incident, when we were again strolling across the Common in the region of the pond.

“‘Let’s see if they’re there again,’ she said. ‘It was so strange—that tremendous heat and seeing such swarms of flies, just that once. Come on.’

“Well, we went towards the pond and no sooner had we arrived within a certain distance of it, than we again felt all the same sensations—intense loneliness, terrific heat, and, on the top of that, swarms of flies—principally bluebottles.

“The next night, as before, everything was normal, and there was not even one bluebottle to be seen. I made a note of the date, and the next year, on the anniversary of the incident, I again walked in the direction of the pond.

“It was the same thing over again—loneliness, heat and flies; on the following and subsequent nights—nothing. I then became convinced the key to the mystery lay in the supernatural. Anxious to ascertain whether anyone else had had a similar experience there, I made endless inquiries, and, eventually alighted on a party of gypsies who told me that they too had seen the flies, and that they were convinced that the place was haunted. Fifty or sixty years ago, they said, one baking hot day in August, some of their people found the dead body of an old man, close to the pond, under circumstances that strongly suggested foul play; and they believed that ever since, on every anniversary, a terrific heat and flies—swarms of flies, buzzing and hovering around, just as they undoubtedly did when the gruesome discovery was made—haunted the spot where the body had lain.”

One more case of haunting in connection with London’s large open spaces before I pass on.

There is a glade on Hampstead Heath, where, according to certain people, who vouch for the accuracy of what they affirm, prognostications of future events may, on certain nights in the year, be experienced. The following is but one of the many instances of these hauntings that have been narrated to me.

Two ladies—sisters—were sitting on a bench in the glade one evening, when the elder, observing it was growing chilly, got up to go. She, then, very much alarmed the younger one by suddenly sitting down again, and crying out, as if in great pain

“Oh, that fool of a doctor, that silly fool, drat him! He’s given me the wrong medicine and I’m poisoned.”

“Anna!” shrieked the younger sister. “Whatever’s the matter? What medicine, and what doctor do you mean?”

“Why, Dr Smith, of course, you fool!” was the elder girl’s reply, though in a voice strangely unlike her own. “Dr Smith. He’s given me poison.” And putting both hands over her stomach, she rocked and writhed as if in the greatest agony.

The younger sister then sprang up and was on the verge of rushing off to summon assistance when something in the other’s face made her pause. It was gradually changing—the features and eyes were undergoing the most startling metamorphosis and becoming those of some one else. Too fascinated to wove or utter a sound, the younger sister simply stood and stared, while the Pekinese dog they had with them and which had been sitting on the bench between them, now leaped down and began to bark furiously.

Slowly, very slowly, the change went on, until the younger girl suddenly realised, with a thrill of terror, that the new face she was gazing at was that of her grandmother—a very cross-grained old lady, who had always been most unkind to both her and her sister.

The old-fashioned cap, the corkscrew curls, the innumerable lines and wrinkles all were there; the complexion only was different; it was whiter, and more waxen looking; and this peculiarity, quickly becoming more and more pronounced, reached a climax of ghastliness, when the jaws dropped, and the chin fell back, and every symptom of death set in; the illusion being heightened by the ominous croaking of a night bird as it flew overhead. The younger girl now thinking that

she was gazing at a corpse, fainted; and, on coming to, found herself lying on the ground, with her sister, who was now, once again herself, bending anxiously over her.

Two day later they received a telegram saying ~~he~~ grandmother was dead. She had taken some particularly virulent poison in mistake for the medicine ordered her by her physician, Dr Smith—who, by the way, neither Sister had ever heard of— and had died in the greatest agony, exactly twenty-four hours after the strange physiognomical metamorphosis here narrated had taken place.