

# Miscellaneous Hauntings

By Elliott O'Donnell

One is so accustomed to hearing of, and reading about, ghosts in old country houses and West End mansions, that one can hardly realise the possibility of ghosts in meaner places. I would like, therefore, to remind my readers that superphysical phenomena are not the monopoly of the rich, any more than the investigation of them is the monopoly of the Psychological Research Society, or graduates from the Universities; and that there are just as many—probably more—cases of hauntings in the poorer parts of London than there are in the West End.

In Peckham Rye there is a shop that has a very queer form of haunting, indeed. Entering it one evening in August, just when the shadows were beginning to fall upon the pavements and the hush, resulting from the departure of the children to bed, was beginning to be felt, I found the proprietor in the act of administering brandy to a woman, who was half sitting, half lying on the floor in a semi-faint.

“Hulloa, Mr D—” I exclaimed. “What’s the matter?”

“The lady’s received a bit of a shock, that’s all,” he said, “but she’s coming to all right.”

He told me, as soon as she had left the shop, that when he was cutting her some rashers of bacon she shrieked out, thinking that he had cut off one of his fingers, and fainted.

“Of course,” he said, “you’ll say it was only an hallucination—optical illusion, or whatever else you may choose to call it, and I shall tell her it was that the next time she comes in, but there’s something very strange about this place, all the same. Look here—only mind you don’t go writing about it in any of your articles—often, about the same time in the evening, and about the same time of year, customers declare they see the same thing happen. They see one of my fingers come right off, when I’m cutting them a piece of bacon—it’s never cheese, corned beef, or anything else—but always bacon. And it gets on my nerves to such an extent that occasionally I think that I really am chopping off one of my fingers and holler out to the missis.”

“Well, why don’t you get your wife or someone else to serve the bacon,” I suggested. “Perhaps it wouldn’t happen then.”

But it did, and next time I visited the shop he told me all about it.

“I’m leaving this place,” he said, “and it’s partly through you. Do you recollect advising me to get someone else to serve the bacon?”

I nodded.

“Well,” he went on, “I turned that job over to my sister-in-law, who was in this line of business down Brixton way before she came to live with us. The first night she took it on nothing happened, but the second she brought my wife into the shop in a panic, by suddenly screaming out: ‘Oh, my finger, I’ve cut it off.’ Thinking it was the same old game I was beginning to laugh and treat the matter as a joke, when my wife running up to the counter, where Sissy had been serving, turned round to me, pale as ashes, and said:

“‘Go for a doctor, quick—’ and damned if a finger wasn’t really lying on the counter.”

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There is also a house in the Keunington Park Road, where the haunting is of a rather unusual nature. It is one of those black, funereal-looking houses not very far from where the road begins.

A friend of mine, a journalist, who often sat up half the night writing, took a room there. Well, the night of his arrival, being very tired, and having nothing very urgent on hand, he decided to go to bed early—at least early for him. There was no gas, only candles, and he had blown out one and was preparing to blow out the other when, a thought striking him, he looked under the bed. It was swarming with cockroaches. That decided him. If there was one thing in the world he loathed and dreaded, it was black beetles; so, climbing on to the table and seating himself with his legs crossed, he resolved to remain in that position till morning.

For some time he steadily averted his gaze from the bed, but at last compelled to look in that direction by a kind of magnetic attraction, his attention was at once drawn to the pillow, which seemed to have assumed a very extraordinary shape. Thinking there must be something wrong with his sight—that he had, perhaps, over-strained his eyes—he tried to rest them by looking at nothing in particular, but again coming under the powerful influence which had previously forced him to gaze at the bed, he now looked towards it, and saw that the pillow was no longer a pillow, but a face. There was the nose, thick and slightly crooked; there, the ears, big and set low down and far back on the head; and there the eyes, and the mouth; and it was the last that fascinated my friend most. The lips were so life-like—so absolutely real—coarse, sensual lips, such as one sees on so many faces—and the jaws were so wide open, just as if the person were in the act either of snoring or yawning. It was a common, almost repulsively common face, and yet my friend kept on staring at it.

His candle at length burnt low, but without getting off the table, he lit the only other candle he had, and again concentrated his attention on the face.

The traffic outside had now practically ceased, and, in place of the continual jingle, jingle of the hansoms, the clatter of horses' hoofs, and the rattle of the trains and carts, a tremendous silence supervened. My friend heeded it not, all his faculties, his ideas, his thoughts were centered on the spot where the pillow should have been and the face lay.

Of course it was a face—he knew the type well. It belonged to a fat, lumbering, pot-bellied kind of creature, who spent all his time in the public house; and, as if to clinch the matter and assure him that no further proof was needed, he suddenly smelt beer.

Now there is no mistaking the smell of beer, especially if it is stale. To my friend, who was practically a teetotaller it was one of the most offensive smells imaginable, and as it came to him in whiffs from the bed, he screwed up his nose and uttered an expression of the greatest disgust. Then something drew his eyes to the valance—a huge, black thing with long, sprawled-out legs and wavy antennæ was slowly crawling up it. Another, almost immediately afterwards, followed suit, and yet another, until at last the whole valance swarmed with them, and my friend could hear, very distinctly, the ticking of their legs each time they moved. Never, had he undergone such torments; his whole skin itched, his spine felt as if it was being subjected to a shower bath. Right to the top of the valance the beetles crept, now on to the counterpane, now the sheet, now the face, and now the mouth. Yes, it was for the mouth one and all aimed. My friend then forced his gaze away from the bed and directed it to the floor—the floor that lay between him and the doorway—here and there he thought he saw something move, but there was no comparison between the path to the door and the floor near the bed.

Placing his rent for the week on the table, together with a hastily scribbled note explaining his conduct, he cautiously descended from his perch, and, snatching up his portmanteau, made a bolt for the front door.

Some weeks later, a brother journalist asked him if he could recommend any rooms on the south-east side of the river, “but not in Kennington Park Road.”

“Why not there?” my friend inquired.

“Because of an experience I once had,” was the reply, “and which I have never forgotten. Do you believe in ghosts, and are you fond of beetles?”

“What!” my friend exclaimed, “so you’ve been to that house, too!”

They then compared notes and it not only turned out the brother journalist had had a precisely similar experience; but that he had terminated his sojourn in the house in exactly the same manner.

“The landlady must be getting used to midnight fittings by this time,” he observed, “and I only hope everyone has not been so scrupulous with regard payment as you and I. That woman is an old ‘devil. Do you know what happened there? I found out about it from the doctor who was called in to see the body, and, of course, what he told me explains that ghastly pillow face.

“Some years ago, the landlady’s husband came back so drunk that he could not get into bed, and, instead of having him lifted up and placed out of reach of those infernal cockroaches, she let him lie on the ground by the side of the bed all night. You know how fond beetles are of beer; well, they smelt his breath, and when his good spouse came to have a look at him in the morning, she found him just where she had left him—choked!”

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Soho—so rumour asserts—is full of ghosts. Everyone knows the story of the phantom blackbird that for generations haunted a house in Dean Street, but the case of the flat over a shop in Greek Street, quite close to Shaftesbury Avenue, is, perhaps, new to most of my readers.

I can only quote from hearsay. According to my informant, shortly before the War, a medical student took rooms at No.— Greek Street, and, after being in them for a week, angrily demanded of the landlady one morning what she meant by putting him to sleep in damp sheets. The landlady declared indignantly she had done no such thing, but the student persisted that she had, and said he would give notice, if it occurred again. That evening, on his return from the hospital, the landlady asked him to come with her to his bedroom and feel the sheets so as to satisfy himself they were thoroughly dry.

“I have had them in front of the kitchen fire all the afternoon,” she said.

Accompanying her to the room the student did as she wished.

“Now,” she cried, “are you satisfied?”

“Yes, they’re dry enough now,” the student replied, “but I can assure you last night they were sopping.”

He didn’t go to bed that night till late, but he had hardly got in between the sheets, when he was out of them again—they were wringing wet. In the morning, however, when he felt them with the intention of showing them to the landlady they were absolutely dry.

Much mystified he gave notice to leave, when the landlady at once offered to put him in another room, and, on being asked several times what difference that would make, she at length reluctantly admitted that other lodgers who had occupied that apartment had complained of the same thing and told her the bed was haunted.

“I always put it down to their imagination,” she said, “but now since you are so positive, maybe, there is something in it after all. There’s a room on the landing just above this that’s empty and you can move into it to-day.”

The student, however, had had quite enough of the house and, adhering to his resolution, he left that evening.

Talking of medical students reminds me of Wimpole Street. There is a house there, invariably occupied by doctors, that has long borne a reputation for being haunted. According to an account published in a magazine some twenty or thirty years ago the phenomena that occurred there were chiefly auditory. The cracking and swishing of a whip was periodically heard in one of the rooms, as if somebody was being mercilessly chastised, whilst sounds of a desperate scuffle—a scuffle that ended in a significant thud—were from time to time experienced by those sleeping on a certain landing. All sorts of theories have been advanced in explanation, none more feasible, perhaps, than that the hauntings are the re-enactings of certain gross acts of cruelty to a poor servant maid who once lived—and died—on the premises.

During the war I had rather a weird experience looking for a ghost in Wigmore Street. A flat there was reputed to be haunted by a blue light that moved from room to room, and by the figure of a man that was seen almost every night and at about the same time, as the lights appeared, standing motionless at the foot of one of the staircases.

Well, one night, having arranged to meet several people there to do an all-night sitting, I had only just started from a Club in Regent Street, when the maroons went off, and very shortly afterwards the only too familiar sound of the guns was heard.

Everyone, of course, was taking cover, but as I considered myself bound to keep my appointment, I jumped into a 'bus, which took me as far as Oxford Circus, and I subsequently enjoyed the somewhat novel sensation of finding myself the only pedestrian in Wigmore Street. A perfect pandemonium was now going on in the air, every now and then bits of shrapnel were falling on the pavement and roadway (unpleasantly reminding me that I had nothing on my head but a soft felt hat), and all was pitch dark, saving for a glimmer of red light from a lamp post, just sufficient to enable one to read the very ominous words—"Take Cover."

I do not think—outside ghost land—any scene effect could have been much weirder. I confess I did not walk all the way—at times I ran—and when I reached my friend's house I rapped with no ordinary vigour. No one but the owner of the flat and her companion were there, my friends—the friends to meet whom I had strained every fibre and muscle in my body—did not turn up.

We sat—we did everything we could to encourage the ghost to appear—but it refused to be drawn.

"No doubt," as the lady of the flat facetiously remarked, "the firing has scared it and, following the example of all wise citizens, it has taken cover."

In Harley Street there are two houses that I know of haunted; and I daresay there are many others—at least there ought to be—for though it is true that the doctors who live there have sometimes effected a cure, God knows how many others of their patients their superior medical knowledge may not have destroyed. I shrewdly suspect, too, that in this street, many a poor doggie has been barbarously tortured in the private operating theatres of those most infamous of all so-called scientists—the "highly qualified" vivisectionists.

One, indeed, of the houses to which I have referred is haunted by the phantom of a dog—a spaniel that is often heard howling and screaming as if in terrible agony in one of the top rooms; and in the other house, which witnessed a very dreadful and sordid crime some forty or fifty years ago, the haunting takes the form of a barrel, which is occasionally seen standing in a passage in the basement and heard, in the dead of night, descending the kitchen stairs with a series of appalling bumps and thuds.

This discussion of haunted houses in London must not be closed before some allusion has been made to a case in Piccadilly. Several writers have referred to a haunted flat over a shop not very

far from Dover Street, and from what they have said I am convinced that they have got hold of spurious facts.

I went with a barrister friend to the flat some eight or nine years ago, when it was temporarily untenanted, and although we could not obtain permission to spend the night there, we learned from very reliable sources that one of the rooms, which we saw, was haunted by a presence—thought to be that of a lady—that periodically visited whoever happened to be sleeping there, and, sitting on their bed, imparted to them so real a sensation of strangulation that they sometimes relapsed into a condition of unconsciousness. There is, apparently, no satisfactory explanation of the hauntings, but the most feasible theory that has been formulated, so far, is that the flat was once occupied by a lady, who, in a fit of temporary insanity, attempted to strangle, first her sister, and then herself. This—if it be true—would bear out the idea I formed long ago, that houses in which homicidal maniacs have lived and died have, at least, one superphysical phenomenon in common, namely, the sensation of choking or strangulation.

And now, having said all I intended to say with regard to haunted houses, I will conclude this volume with a reference to some of the hauntings connected with the London bridges. Considering the number of tragedies—murders, suicides and accidents—that are associated with the Thames, it is not in the least surprising that its banks are haunted. However, to get to know something of the ghosts that are periodically seen along the Embankment and on certain of the bridges, one has to spend nights out-of-doors and get in close touch with the vagrants who sleep under the arches, and with the older members of the River Police. It is they who can tell us of these ghosts—and they will tell one much, if one knows how to loosen their tongues and allay their suspicions.

A tramp once told me, that late one night, as he was leaning over Waterloo Bridge trying to sum up the courage to jump, and thus terminate his existence, a fashionably dressed youth passed him by, reeling slightly as if he were the worse for drink. The sight of a gold watch and chain on the youth's waistcoat inspiring my friend, the tramp, with an idea, he followed the young man, intent on robbing him. To his delight the youth soon came to a halt and lolled against the parapet of the bridge for support. Now was his chance. Stealing quietly up behind his victim he made a sudden grab at his watch; but, to his amazement, his hand closed on nothing solid at all, and he found himself in violent collision with the wall. There was no trace of his would-be victim anywhere; he had disappeared as completely as if the bridge had suddenly opened and let him through.

“That cured me of all desire to put an end to myself that night,” the tramp observed, “indeed, my one thought was to get off the bridge as quickly as possible, and to seek company—the company of some living human being like myself.”

A case of haunting on Westminster Bridge was experienced and related to me by a policeman. He was crossing the bridge from the direction of the Abbey about two o'clock one morning, when he heard someone running after him, and looking round, he found himself face to face with a well-dressed girl of the most singular beauty.

“Please come back—come back with me at once,” she pleaded. “Someone whom I have just left is in great trouble.”

As the policeman had to report himself to the sergeant almost directly, he hesitated, but the girl's eyes were fixed on his with an expression of such irresistible entreaty that he finally gave way and followed her. She led him off the bridge, and, as he turned the corner on to the Embankment, he saw a woman in the act of throwing herself into the river. After a short and desperate struggle he succeeded in preventing her, but, judge of his astonishment when, on

looking into her face, he found she was the exact counterpart of the girl who had fetched him, and, on turning to the latter for an explanation, he found she had vanished.

“Whatever has become of your daughter, or twin sister?” he cried, gazing eagerly around him in every direction.

“Become of whom?” the woman said.

“Why, your daughter or twin sister,” the policeman replied, “for the lady who brought me here is the living image of yourself.”

It was now the woman’s turn to look astonished.

“Why, what do you mean?” she exclaimed. “Are you mad? I have no daughter or twin sister—in fact, I have neither friends nor relatives—I am utterly alone. I can assure you I have seen no woman since I came out here, and without meaning any offence, I wish I hadn’t seen you.”