

# The Chair

*The Case of a Haunted House in Red Lion Square*

By Elliott O'Donnell

I am not a psychometrist—at least not to any great extent. I cannot pick up a small object—say an old ring or coin—and straightway tell you its history, describing all the people and incidents with which it has been associated. Yet, occasionally, odd things are revealed to me through some strange ornament or piece of furniture.

The other day I went to see a friend, who was staying in a flat near Sloane Square, and I was much impressed by a chair that stood on the hearthrug near the fire. Now I am not a connoisseur of chairs; I cannot always ascribe dates to them. I can, of course, tell whether they are oak or mahogany, Chippendale or Sheraton, but that is about all. It was not, however, the make or the shape of the chair that attracted me, it was the impression I had that something very uncanny was seated on it. My friend, noticing that I looked at it very intently, said “I will tell you something very interesting about that chair. It came from a haunted house in Red Lion Square. I bought it at a sale there, and several people who have sat in it since have had very curious experiences. I won't tell you them till after you've tried it. Sit in it.”

“That wouldn't be any good,” I answered; “you know I can't psychometrise, especially to order. May I take it home with me for a few nights?”

My friend smilingly assented.

The chair was put in a taxi, and in less than half an hour was safely lodged in my chambers. I was living alone just then, for my wife had been suddenly called away to the country, to the bedside of an aged and ailing relative. I say alone, but I had company—a lady tabby that, apparently abandoned by her lover, persisted in showering her attentions upon me. For hours at a time she would perch on the writing-table in my bedroom, whilst I was at work, and fix me amorously with her big green eyes.

The moment, however, this most eccentric of feline beauties perceived the chair, she sprang off her pedestal and dived under the bed; and from that hour to this I have never seen her. The chair did not frighten me, but it brought a new, and I cannot say altogether pleasant, atmosphere into the place. When I was in bed and the gas was out, I could swear the chair moved, that it shifted nearer and nearer the window—always the window, as if it was most anxious to make its escape and slide back to its old home. And again there were times when, barred from this avenue of escape, it rocked. Yes, I could distinctly hear it rock backwards and forwards on the parquet floor with ever increasing rapidity and violence, as though blind with fury at being balked. And then, again, it groaned, groaned in the deepest and most hopeless misery—misery that the eternally damned alone can know and suffer. Certain now that there was something there that badly needed human consolation, I addressed the chair, and, failing to get any verbal answer from it, I tried a code of raps. That failing, I sat in it for several hours two successive nights, and experimented in automatic writing. The result was nil. Resolving to give it another trial, but this time without a planchette, I chose a Friday night when the moon was in the crescent, and placing the chair on one side the hearth, facing the window, I threw myself back in it and closed my eyes. For some minutes I was still vividly conscious of the old

surroundings: the flickering fire flames—seen through my closed lids; the old grandfather clock on the landing outside solemnly ticking; the eternal whistling and hooting of the taxis as they whizzed along in the street beneath.

Then by degrees, quite imperceptibly, I lost cognizance of all these things; and, intuitively, I began to feel the presence of something strange and wholly novel in the room. I felt it steal forth from a piece of dark and ancient tapestry my wife had hung on the wall. It was merely a shadow, an undefined shadow, a shadow such as the moon, when very low in the heavens, might possibly fashion from the figure of a man; but yet it was not a man, nor a woman, nor anything with which I was in any way familiar. For a moment it stood still, watching me from its vague, formless, indefinite eyes. Then it made a forward movement, stood still again, and yet once again advanced.

Coming up behind my chair, it bent low over me, and placing its long, cool spirit hands over my eyelids, imparted to me a steadily increasing sense of numbness. All thought was gradually annihilated; it was succeeded by a blank, just such a blank as suddenly comes to one when in the hands of the anæsthetist. Now, up to this evening, I had presumed, as nearly everybody does presume, that, in the case of mental blanks, every particle of consciousness is lost, totally arrested, and held, for the time being, in complete subjection. But on this occasion—at the very moment memory reasserted itself—I had recollections of some great metempsychosis, some stupendous change in my entire constitution, a change that affected all that we term mind, and spirit, and soul.

I struggled earnestly and desperately to recall the exact nature and process of that change, which I now believe underlies all so-called blanks, and I achieved this much: I recalled travel—a mad, rushing plunge or descent into something—something quite different from anything I had known before—a descent into some plane, or sphere, or condition, wholly and completely apart from the physical, and what is generally understood and classified as the mental plane, sphere, or condition. In my efforts to recollect, I have arrived at that same pitch since; but whenever I have been on the verge of getting beyond it, of forcing back a minute recollection of how that metempsychosis was enacted, of all the stages in it, there has been a lapse—my memory has dimmed. Yet brief and slight as these remembrances have been, they have assured me of one great truth, namely—that the state of blank never actually exists. Some part of us—the part that alone retains consciousness—is extracted and borne far away from the actual material body, but on its return, on its reunion with the physical—with our gross and carnal, earthly self—all memory of this delicate and finely poised consciousness is at once swallowed up and obliterated. If such were not the case, if everything were indeed a blank, and the spiritual as well as the material part of us were suspended during what we term unconsciousness, we should be forced to the conclusion that the soul has no separate existence, that it cannot survive the body, and that the immortality of man, the infinite perpetuation of our identity, in which we have so fondly believed, is but a chimera. I am, however, certain—I could, if need be, swear to it—that even in the deepest slumber, in the wildest delirium, in the most seemingly omnipotent and annihilating blank, all is not lost, something remains, and that something is the psychic and spiritual consciousness, the very thing that constitutes what we term soul. In the first stage, then, of my cognizance of thought, again I struggled with memory, and the struggle overcoming me, I gradually lapsed into the mere consciousness of existence without thought. How long this condition lasted I cannot say, but with startling abruptness thought returned, and I

became madly anxious to ascertain my present state—how it differed from my former—and my whereabouts. I was conscious of sound and light and motion, but conscious of them merely from the point of observation, as things quite outside myself—things that in no way sensibly affected me. What particularly impressed me was the silence—the passivity—of what, I believed, constituted my body. I could detect no heart movement, no pulsation whatever. I seemed to be there—to have a very familiar form—but to be nothing more than form—to have no tangibility. So far my eyes had seen; but, purposely, I had not allowed myself to discriminate objects. I was intuitively certain my power of vision had become supernatural; and I dreaded to employ it for fear I should see too much — too acutely. I had a stupendous sense of impending horror. At length, however, I was impelled by an irresistible fascination to look. I did so, and in an instant became the spectator of a drama. Before me, seated at a grimy wooden table, were two men, clad in the fascinating garb of the latter part of the eighteenth century—long coat, befrilled vest, knee breeches, and peruke. Two mugs of ale were placed in front of them, and the one man kept on sipping, while the other, seldom touching the ale, took long and vigorous puffs at a pipe. The room had a very low ceiling, blackened with smoke, and traversed by enormous oaken beams; a chimney corner, in which sat an old man, munching something out of a very dirty-looking bag, and, at the same time, taking occasional pinches of snuff; and a couch, stowed away in one corner, and piled several feet high with a variety of books, papers, cushions, and wearing apparel.

The general atmosphere of the place suggested an inn or tavern. It was with the two men in the foreground, however, that something told me I was most concerned. They appeared to be about the same age and of the same class; but there all similarity ended. The one was tall and thin, with dark, deep-set, and very restless eyes—and oddly noticeable hands. They were large and sinewy, with peculiarly long fingers and protruding knuckles. His companion was small and shrivelled, with watery blue eyes and a particularly weak mouth.

“Strange we should meet like this, John,” the shorter of the two remarked, taking a big gulp of ale. “Ten years since we last saw one another, and that was in Bristol. Do you recollect the occasion?”

“Do I recollect it?” the other responded. “Can I ever forget it? You had just come from her. She had accepted you. Money, of course. I had nothing to offer her but love. Love! What’s the good of love without prospects?”

“It was a fair fight, John.”

“Fair fight, Wilfred!” John replied. “You may call it fair, if you like, but I don’t. What chance had I when you pointed to your bank-book and said, ‘If I die I can settle all that on her’? I could promise nothing. I hadn’t a cent in the world beyond my weekly pay. Thirty shillings. And how pleased you were with yourself when you came to see me that last evening in Bristol. Do you remember what you said? ‘It’s the fortune of war, my boy. You’ll soon get over it. Work.’ As if I didn’t work! But I took your advice, though I hated you for it; and I left Bristol. After what had happened I loathed the place. An uncle of mine offered me a clerkship in his office in Holborn, and I stuck so hard to my job that I eventually became a partner.”

“Then you’re a rich man, John?”

“Comfortable, but not rich, Wilfred.”

“And you’ve forgiven me? Got over that little love affair, eh? Well, well. Matrimony is not all bliss, John. At least that was my experience. Poor Jenny! But of course I have not told you. I’m much to be pitied, John.”

“She’s dead!”

“She is,” Wilfred said, filling his mug with ale and raising it to his lips, “and I’m a lonely widower. But how did you know?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” John replied. “I get my information through channels that are barred to men like you.”

“Witchcraft, I suppose,” Wilfred said, with a sneer. “But why this mystery? Someone in Bristol city wrote to you.”

“No, they didn’t,” John answered. “I know no one in Bristol city now. Your first suggestion was nearer the truth. Your wife, Wilfred, often comes to see me. I know all about the way in which you treated her.”

“The way in which I treated her!” Wilfred cried, starting upright in his chair, his face flushing angrily. “God’s truth, man, what do you mean by such a statement?”

“I mean exactly what I say,” John answered. “For the first two years you treated her tolerably well. Then someone else caught your fancy. Jenny was neglected, despised, and on one occasion actually beaten.”

“It’s a lie!” Wilfred gasped, springing to his feet, as if to leave the table.

“No, it’s not,” John retorted, “and you know it. Come, sit down, man, and go on drinking. Love never was in your line, drink is. Besides, as you say, she’s dead, and what’s the use of quarrelling over a corpse, even though she were beautiful as—as——” He didn’t finish his sentence, but leaning forward thrust Wilfred back into his chair.

For some seconds the two men sat and looked at a one another—Wilfred sullen, frightened, and resentful; John imperturbable save for the perpetual restless movement of his eyes, and an occasional peculiar twitching of his upper lip and hands.

“A rum,” John said at length, “or a gin? Or both?”

“Rum.”

“Very good, let it be rum.” He called the waiter, and a rum was served.

“You’re not drinking to-day, John,” Wilfred remarked, taking a long pull at the rum and looking more amiable.

“No, I’m quite off spirits,” John replied—“at least, spirits of that kind.”

“Spirits of that kind! “Wilfred sniggered. “Why, whatever other kind of spirits are there? What a mysterious fellow you are, John.”

“Am I?” John laughed. “Perhaps I’ve reason to be. I live in a big house, all alone, in Red Lion Square.”

“New houses, aren’t they?” Wilfred commented. “And big rents?”

John nodded, the same nod answering apparently both questions.

“But you haven’t told me yet,” Wilfred went on, how you knew Jenny was dead.”

“I’ve seen her,” John said very quietly. “She comes to me regularly.”

“Seen her? Comes to you regularly? You must be mad, John—mad or hoaxing. How can you see her, and why should she come to you?”

John shrugged his shoulders.

“I told you you wouldn’t believe me,” he replied. “No one does. Yet I can swear to you it’s true she appeared to me last night and told me you would be here this afternoon. That is how I happened to meet you.”

“You overwork yourself, John,” Wilfred said, taking another long pull at the rum. “Too much work is just as harmful to one’s temperament and chances in life as too little. Moderation, my boy, moderation, I say. That’s always been my keynote. I should like to see this house of yours.”

“You shall,” John said, “and the spirits. Not hers—I don’t think you will see hers—but the rum and brandy. I’ve excellent brands of both—smuggled over from abroad last week.”

“And yet you don’t drink!”

“No, I got them in entirely for your benefit. Come. We will go to my house. It’s more comfortable than here. A big fire, nice easy chairs, tobacco, and bottles—bottles with plenty in them.”

“And you’ve forgiven me, John?”

“Forgiven you!” John replied, rising from the table and putting on his hat. “Forgiven you! Do you think I should ask you round to my house, to drink the best vintage London can offer you, if I hadn’t? Come. Come along at once.”

Wilfred rose with some difficulty from his seat, and the two men went out into the street. The scene then changed, and I found myself in a big, gloomy house, following them up a long flight of wooden stairs.

The moment I entered the house I became the victim of an anomalous species of fear. I saw nothing, but I instinctively knew that strange, indefinable presences were there, watching us with sphinx-like faces. I felt them, standing in the doorways, lurking in the angles of the hall and landings, and peering down at us from over the balustrades. I felt that they were merely critical at present, merely deliberating what attitude they should adopt towards us; and I felt that the whole atmosphere of the house was impregnated with a sense of the utmost mystery—a mystery soluble only to those belonging, in the truest sense, to the spirit world—Neutrarians—spirit entities generated solely from spirit essence and never incarcerated in any material body—spirits initiated into one and all of the idiosyncrasies of spirit land. The man John gave no outward signs of being in any way affected by these presences; but it was otherwise with Wilfred. The silence and darkness of the house unmistakably disturbed him, and as he panted up the staircase, following his long and lean host with none too steady a step, he cast continual looks of apprehension about him. First, I saw him peer over his shoulders, down the stairs behind him, as if he fancied something, to which he could apply no name, might be treading softly at his heels; then I watched his eyes wander nervously to the gloomy space overhead; and then, as if drawn by some extremely unwelcome magnet, to the great, white, sinewy hands of John. Arriving on the second floor, they crossed a broad landing and entered a spacious room, which was fitfully illuminated by a few dying embers in a large open grate. John produced a tinder box, lighted a trio of tall wax candles, and resuscitated the fire. He then left the room, reappearing in a few minutes with an armload of bottles.

“Make yourself comfortable, Wilfred,” he said. “Take that easy chair and pull it up in front of the fire. Rum or brandy?”

Wilfred, whose eyes glittered at the sight of the spirits, chose rum. “I’ll have a little brandy afterwards,” he said, “just to wash down the rum. Moderation is my password, John, everything in moderation,” and, helping himself to the rum, he laughed. John sat

opposite him, and I noticed, not without some emotion, that the chair he took was the exact counterpart of the one in which I had left my material ego.

“John,” Wilfred exclaimed after a while, “this house is most extraordinarily still. I—I don’t like such stillness—” He was more than half drunk. “Why do you live alone? Damned silly habit to live alone in a house like this.” Then he swallowed a big gulp of rum and leered.

“All habits are silly,” John replied. “All life is silly. Death alone is sensible. Death’s a fine thing.”

Then there was a pause; and a gust of wind, blowing up the staircase, set the door jarring and made the windows rattle.

“I don’t like that remark of yours, John,” Wilfred suddenly stuttered. “Death’s a fine thing?—Death’s the work of the devil. It’s the only thing I fear. And the—the wind. What’s that?”

From the hall below there came a gentle slam, the soft closing of a door.

John shrugged his shoulders and stirred the logs until they gave out a big blaze.

“It’s a noise,” he said. “This house is full of noises. Every house is full of noises, if only you take the trouble to listen for them.”

Another pause, and Wilfred helped himself to some brandy.

“Noises, like women,” he said, “want keeping in their places. They’ve no business wandering about on nights like this. Hark!”

The faintest sound possible broke the stillness of the house; but it suggested much. To me it was like a light, bounding footfall on the first flight of stairs, those nearest the hall.

After listening a moment John spoke. “It’s only Jenny,” he said; “at least, I fancy it’s only Jenny. But there are others. God alone knows whence they come or why. The house at times is full of them. So far I have only felt their presence—and heard. Pray to Heaven I may never see them—at least, not some. Do you hear that?”

There was a gentle rustling on the landing, a swishing, such as might have been caused by someone in a silk dress with a long train.

“It is—it’s Jenny!” John went on. “I told you—she comes every night.”

Wilfred made no reply, but the hand that held the glass shook so much that the brandy ran over and splashed on the floor.

There was again silence, then a creak, the faint but very unmistakable turning of a door handle.

Wilfred’s face blanched. He tried to look round, but dared not.

“I’m afraid too,” John murmured, his teeth slightly chattering. “I never can get over my initial terror when she first arrives. God! What horror I have known since I lived here.”

The latch of the door gave a click, the sort of click it always gives when the door springs open, and a current of icy air blew across the room and fanned the cheeks of both men. Wilfred attempted to speak, but his voice died away in his throat. He glanced at the window. It was closed with heavy wooden shutters.

“It’s no use,” John sighed, “there’s no escape that way. Make up your mind to face it—face HER. Ah!” He sank back as he spoke and closed his eyes.

I looked at Wilfred. His vertebrae had totally collapsed; he sat all huddled up in his chair, his weak, watery eyes bulging with terror, and the brandy trickling down his chin on to his cravat. All this scene, I must tell you, was to me most vivid, most acutely vivid, although I was but a passive participator in it. The same feeling that had possessed me on

my entrance into the house was with me even in a greater measure now. I felt that pressing on the heels of this wind, this icy blast of air, were the things from the halls and landings, the distractingly enigmatical and everdeliberating things. I felt them come crowding into the room; felt them once again watching. Something now seemed to go wrong with the wicks of all three candles; they burned very low, and the feeble, flickering light they emitted was of a peculiar bluish white. While I was engaged in pondering over this phenomenon my eye caught a sudden movement in the room, and I saw what looked like a cylindrical pillar of mist sweep across the floor and halt behind John. It remained standing at the back of his chair for a second or so, and then, retracing its way across the floor, disappeared through the door, which, opening wide to meet it, closed again with a loud bang. John opened his eyes and reaching forward poured himself out some brandy.

"I told you I didn't drink spirits," he said, "but her visit to-night has made a difference. Come, Wilfred, pull yourself together. The ghosts—at least her ghost has gone; and as for the others, well, they don't count. Even you may get used to them in time. Come, come, be a man. For a sceptic, a confirmed sceptic, I never saw anyone so frightened."

Appealed to thus, Wilfred slowly straightened himself out, and peeping round furtively at the door, as if to make sure it really was shut, he helped himself to some more brandy. John leaned forward and regarded him earnestly. After some minutes Wilfred spoke.

"Those candles," he said, "why don't they burn properly? I have never seen candles behave in that fashion before. John, I don't like this house."

John laughed. "Matter of taste and habit," he said. "I didn't like it at first, but I like it now."

Another pause, and then John said suddenly, "More brandy, Wilfred?"

"No, I've had enough," Wilfred replied, "enough. John, I must be going home. See me to the door, John; the front door, I mean, John. See me to the door, there's a good fellow." he tried to rise, but John put out one hand and pushed him gently back into his seat.

"It's early yet," John said, "far too early to go home. Think what a long time it is since we last met. Ten whole years. To some people almost a lifetime. Are you tired of life, Wilfred?"

"Tired of life?" Wilfred echoed. "Tired of brandy, perhaps, but not of life. What a question to ask! Why?" And, again glancing furtively at the door he tried to rise.

Once more John put out his hand and thrust him back. "Not yet," he said; "the hour is far too early. What were we talking about? Being tired of life. Of course you are not. How foolish of me to ask you such a thing! You who are so rich, respected, admired, beloved. You are happy in spite of your sad bereavement. You are a man to be missed. With me it is otherwise. I long to go to the spirit land, for it is there only I have friends, really genuine, loving friends. I am not afraid to die. I want death. I yearn for it. Yearn for it, Wilfred."

"Spirits! Death! Always spirits and death in your company." Wilfred responded. "Let's talk of something else—something more cheerful. I want cheering, John. This house of yours is depressing—most horribly depressing. You say it is new?"

"Comparatively new," John replied, and he started fumbling in his vest pocket.

"Comparatively new," Wilfred repeated, his eyes watching John's fingers attentively,—  
"and it has ghosts. Why, I thought it was only old houses that were haunted."

John chuckled. "So people say," he replied, "and they tell me I am mad to think there are ghosts here. They say it is impossible. What is your opinion, Wilfred?"

"Why," Wilfred said, watching John's movements with increasing interest, "that's my opinion too. A house to be haunted must have a history. And this house has none, has it? John!" The last syllable was uttered in an altogether different tone. It was not the voice of a drunken man.

For a brief moment John hesitated, trembled. He seemed to be in the throes of some great mental strain, some acute psychological crisis. But he speedily overcame it, and drawing his hand out suddenly from his vest, he produced a huge, murderous-looking clasp knife.

"True!" he said, "true. So far this house has no history. No history whatever. But it will have one, Wilfred. It will." And baring the blade of his formidable weapon, he crouched low and crept forward.

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The next day I took the chair back to its owner. I had had enough of it—quite enough; and I told him my experiences.

"Odd!" he said, "very odd. The impressions you received when sitting in the chair are almost identical with those of the other people who have sat in it. I wonder if a murder did actually take place in that house? I shouldn't be at all surprised. There is an old stain on the floor of one of the rooms on the second landing, and they say that, despite the most vigorous washing, it still retains its colour—red, blood-red."