

The Empty Leash

A Case of Haunting in St. John's Wood

By Elliott O'Donnell

I have so often been accused of writing too exclusively about the horrid types of spirit, such as earth-bound murderers, suicides, and elements, that I am more than pleased to be able to present to my readers a case of a different kind. Until quite recently Barcombe House, St. John's Wood, was haunted by the ghost of a very lovely little girl, who, it is believed, died of a broken heart because a dog to which she was very much attached had to be destroyed. I obtained particulars as to the hauntings from a Mr. John Tyley, whose verbatim account I will endeavour, as nearly as possible, to reproduce.

"Guy Darnton is a very intimate friend of mine. Some people call us inseparables, and I suppose we are—though at times, I believe, no two men could so thoroughly hate one another. Indeed, to such an extremity has this spirit of execration and dislike been carried that I have on occasions actually accused him of being my very worst—my most cruel, and certainly my most subtly destructive— enemy. But even then, even at the moment when my abhorrence of him has been most acute, I have always accorded him—reluctantly, I admit—one great redeeming quality—his affection for and kindness to Ghoul.

"Ghoul was an Irish terrier, just an ordinary-looking Irish terrier, with all the pugnacious and—as some unkind critics would add—quarrelsome characteristics of his race. He hated fops, those Little brown Pekinese and King Charles horrors that ladies scent and comb, and stuff to bursting-point with every imaginable dainty; and whenever he saw one mincing its way along the street, he would always block its path and try to bite it.

"Yet he was an idealist. It's all nonsense to say that animals have no appreciation of beauty. Ghoul had. He was fond of biscuits truly; but he liked other things more, far more than food. I have known him stand in front of a rose bush and gaze at it with an expression which no one but the most unkind and prejudiced sceptic could possibly misinterpret for anything but sheer, solid admiration; and I used to notice that whenever he was introduced to several ladies, he always wagged his tail hardest at the prettiest of them. But most of all Ghoul admired pretty children—dainty little girls with fluffy yellow curls and big, smiling eyes. He adored them, and he hated with equal fervour all children who were in any way physically ill-favoured. I have known him bark furiously at a boy who squinted, and snarl at and refuse to go near a girl who had a blotchy, yellow complexion and a cavernous, frog-shaped mouth.

"But I am speaking as if Ghoul were my property. He was not—at least, not in the legal sense. Darnton paid for his licence—and housed and fed him—and so had every apparent right to call himself Ghoul's master.

In spite of this, however, I knew intuitively that Ghoul regarded me as his actual master, and I believe the explanation of this circumstance lay in the superphysical. I am psychic, and I am convinced that the unknown is nearer, far nearer to me than it is to most people. Now dogs, at least most dogs, have the faculty of second sight, of clairvoyance and clairaudience, very acutely developed—you have only to be in a

haunted house with them to see it; and there is nothing they stand in awe of more—or for which they have a more profound respect—than the superphysical. Now Ghoul was no exception. He saw around me what I only felt; and he recognised that I was the magnet. He respected me as one true psychic respects another.

“One day we were out together. Darnton had gone to the dentist, and Ghoul, tired of his own company, resolved to pay me a visit. He wandered in at the wicket gate of my garden just as I was about to set off for a morning constitutional. I greeted him somewhat boisterously, for Ghoul, when extra solemn, always excited my risibility, and, after a brief skirmish with him on behalf of my cat, an extraordinarily ugly Tom, for whom Ghoul cherished the most inveterate hatred, we set off together. It was pure accident that led me into the Adelaide Road. I was half-way along it, thinking of nothing in particular, when someone whistled behind me, and I turned round. As a rule, one may see a few pedestrians—one or two at least—at all times of the day in the Adelaide Road, but oddly enough no one was in sight just at that moment, and I could see no traces of Ghoul. I called him, and getting no reply, walked back a little distance. At last I discovered him. He was in the front garden of Barcombe House, sitting in the centre of a grass plot, his eyes fixed on space, but with such an expression of absorbing interest that I was absolutely astounded. Thinking something, perhaps, was hiding in the bushes, I threw stones and made a great shooing; but nothing came out, and Ghoul still maintained his position. The look in his face did not suggest anything antagonistic, it was indicative rather of something very pleasing to him—something idealistic—something he adored.

“I shouted ‘Ghoul!’ He did not take the slightest notice, and when I caught him by the scruff of the neck, he dug his paws in the ground and whined piteously. Then I grew alarmed. He must either have hurt himself or have gone mad. I examined him carefully, and nothing appearing to be the matter with him, I lifted him up, and, despite his frantic struggles, carried him out of the garden.

“The moment I set him down he raced back. Then I grew determined. A taxi was hailed, and Ghoul, driven off in it, speedily found himself a close prisoner in Darnton’s exceedingly unromantic study.

“That afternoon I revisited Barcombe House alone. The premises were to let, and, judging by their neglected and dilapidated appearance, had been so for some considerable time. Both front and back garden were overgrown with a wild profusion of convulvulus, thistles, and other weeds and an air of desolation, common to all abandoned houses, hung about the place. All the same, I could detect nothing unpleasant.

“I was unmistakably aware of some superphysical influence; but that influence, unlike the majority of those I had hitherto experienced, was decidedly attractive.

“It seemed to affect everything—the ruddy rays of sunlight that, falling aslant the paths, turned them into scintillating gold; the buttercups and dandelions more glorious yellow than I had ever remembered seeing them; the air—charged to overflowing with the rich, entrancing perfume of an abnormally generous summer’s choicest flowers. All nature here seemed stimulated, cheered and glorified, and the longer I lingered the longer I wished to linger. At the far end of the garden was an arbour overgrown with jasmine and sweet honeysuckle, and on its moss-covered seat I espied a monstrous Teddy bear adorned with a piece of faded and mildewy pink ribbon. The sight filled me with a strange melancholy. The poor Teddy bear, once held so lovingly in the tight embrace of two little infantile arms, was now abandoned to the mercies of spiders and wood-lice, and

the pitiless spoliation of decay. How long had it been left, and where was its owner? I looked at the sunshine, and, in the beams that gilded everything around me, I felt an answer to my queries. Most haunted places scare me, but it was otherwise here; and I was so fascinated, so eager to probe the mystery to its core, that I left the garden and, crossing a tiny stone yard, approached the back of the house. The premises were quite easy of access, as the catch of one of the windows was broken, and the shutter of the coal-house had come off its hinges. One has always supposed that the basement of any house that has stood empty for a long time must become cold and musty, but here I could detect neither cold nor mustiness. Even in the darkest recesses the sun made its influence felt, and its beams warmed and illuminated walls and flagstones alike. I now entered a large and lofty apartment, with a daintily tiled floor, spotlessly clean ceiling, artistically coloured walls, and scrupulously clean dresser. Here again the devastating hand of decay was nowhere to be seen, and indeed I thought I had never been in such a pleasant kitchen.

“I intended waiting there only until I had consumed a sandwich, but when I rose to go, something held me back, and I tarried on and on, until the evening set in and dark and strangely formed shadows began to dim the walls and floor.

“As I was mounting the stairs to explore the upper premises a gentle gust of wind blew in my face and filled my nostrils with the most delightful odour of ‘cherry-pie.’ Intoxicated, I halted, and, leaning against the banisters, inhaled the perfume to the full extent of my lungs. Then I listened. The breeze rustling past me down the stairs rattled the window panes and jarred the doors, and seemed to disseminate, in its wake, new and even more perplexing shadows. Presently a door slammed, and I distinctly heard footsteps cross the hall and begin to ascend the stairs.

“It was now for the first time that terror laid hold of me, but the fascination of it was so compelling that I lowered my head over the balustrade to listen. I tried to reason the thing out. Why, I asked myself, should these footsteps alarm me? What was it that made them different from other footsteps? Surely there was no difference. And yet, if that were so, why was I certain that they were not the footsteps of any trespasser from outside? I debated earnestly, desperately, but could arrive at no other conclusion than that there was a difference, and that this difference did not lie in the sounds themselves, but in the sense of atmosphere they conveyed, an atmosphere that was peculiarly subtle and quite incompatible with the natural. At last I knew for certain that the sounds were superphysical, and yet such was my dread of the Unknown that I fought most frantically against my convictions.

“The steps had, by this time, so I calculated, reached the first landing, and I now noticed in them a cautiousness that I had not remarked before. What should I see? There was still time for flight, but whither could I go? Behind me were a row of half-open doors, through which the sun, sinking fast, shone its last rays. The effect—a sad one—forcibly reminded me of the end of all things—death; and the sadness of it harmonised well with an air of silent expectation that seemed suddenly to have filled the whole house. My fears grew. I was certain that the oncoming footsteps could only emanate from a phantom of the most startling and terrifying description, and I bitterly repented of my rashness in coming to the house alone. With a supreme effort, I averted my gaze and turned to seek refuge in one mad headlong plunge, should there be no other haven, through a window; but the power to do so was denied me. I was paralysed. The steps came nearer, and now, some distance below me, moving rapidly up the staircase, came

something bright. I watched it pass swiftly round one bend, and then another, and at the moment my suspense had reached its limit and I felt I was on the border-line of either death or insanity, it turned the last corner and shot fully into view. The reaction was then so great that I reeled back against the wall and burst out laughing. Instead of some distorted semblance of humanity, instead of some grotesque, semi-animal elemental, something too grim and devilish for the mind to conceive and survive, I saw—a child: a girl of about twelve, dressed in the most becoming frock of soft white satin, high in the waist, and from thence falling in folds to her feet. She had long bright golden hair hanging in loose curls on either side of her low white forehead; delicately pencilled eyebrows that were slightly knit, and wide open blue-grey eyes that were fixed on me with an expression of the gravest anxiety, mingled with a something enigmatical, something sorely puzzling and with which I seemed to be familiar. Again and again I have tried to diagnose it, and at times the solution has seemed very near; but it has always eluded me in the end, and the mystery is still as great and as poignant as ever. The child held a leash in one hand, whilst she stretched out the other confidently towards me.

“Always a worshipper of beauty, I was stooping down to kiss her little hand, when, to my consternation, she abruptly vanished, and I found myself standing there—alone.

“An intense sadness now seized me, and throwing myself on the floor I gave way to an attack of utter dejection. The vision I had just seen was in very deed the embodiment of all my boyhood’s dreams, and for the moment, but only for the moment, my old self, a little pensive boy adoring heart and soul a girl’s fair face, had lived again.

It was all too cruelly brief; for with the vision my old ego vanished too; and I felt—I knew it had been wrested from me and hurried to some far-off place where the like of my present self could not be admitted. I rose at length chilled and hopeless, and tearing myself away from the landing with a desperate effort, wandered home. I could not rest. An intense dissatisfaction with myself, with my whole mode of life, my surroundings, obsessed me. I longed to alter, to become something different, something unsophisticated, simple, even elementary. This change in me brought me into closer sympathy with Ghoul, who, as I have said, was strangely altered himself. He avoided Darnton with the most marked persistence, and was always hovering round my doorstep and lying on the lawn. At last one day I could stand it no longer. ‘Ghoul,’ I said, ‘the same yearning possesses us both. It’s the child—the child with the lovely eyes. We must see her. You and I are rivals, old fellow. But never mind! We’ll visit the house together and let her take her choice. Come along!’

“Ghoul’s joy on entering the garden of Barcombe House knew no bounds. He tore in at the gate, capered across the grass, barked, whined, wagged his tail furiously, and behaved like the veriest of lunatics. Gaining admittance into the house as easily as before, I quickly made my way to the third-floor landing, Ghoul darting up the stairs ahead of me. Without a moment’s pause he bolted into a room immediately in front of us, and springing on to the sill of a large casement window that was wide open, peered eagerly out, exhibiting, as he did so, the wildest manifestation of excitement. Following the direction of his eyes, I looked down into the garden, and there, gazing up at us, her curls shining gold in the hot summer sun, stood the little ghost. The moment she saw me, she smiled, and, moving forward with a peculiar gliding motion, entered the house. Once again a door slammed, and, once again, there came the patter of ascending footsteps. Ghoul ran to meet her. She stooped over him, patted his head and fastened the leash to his

collar, whilst I, merely a spectator, felt the bitterest pangs of jealousy. Then she looked up, and instantly the joy in her face was converted into pity—pity for me. Without a doubt Ghoul had triumphed.

“Still patting him on the head and urging him forward, she ran past me, and, mounting the window sill, glanced round at me with a mischievous smile. Even then I did not comprehend the full significance of her action. I merely stood and stared—stared as if I would never grow tired of staring, so fascinated was I by the piquante beauty of that superhuman little face. I was still staring when she put one foot through the open window; still staring when the other foot followed; still staring when she waved her hand gleefully at me and sprang out—out into the sunny brightness of the hot summer noon. I thought of Ghoul. He had sprung, too. Sprung barking and whining with a joy unequalled.

“I ran to look for him. He lay where he had fallen, his neck broken and his spirit fled.

“Darnton, of course, would not believe me. We had a stormy interview, and we have never spoken to one another since.

“The house—Barcombe House—is now let, and the occupants inform me that they have never once been troubled—at least not by ghosts.”