

The Cough

A Case of Haunting in Regency Square, Brighton

By Elliott O'Donnell

I know a man called Harrison. So, in all probability, do you; so, in all probability, do most people. But it is not everyone, I imagine, that knows a Harrison who delights in the Christian name of Pelamon, and it is not everyone that knows a Pelamon Harrison who indulges in psychical research. Now some people think that no one unless he be a member of the Psychical Research Society can know anything of ghosts. That is a fallacy. I have met many people who, although they have had considerable experience in haunted houses, have never set a foot in Hanover Square; and, vice versa, I have met many people who, although they have been members of the Psychical Research Society, have assured me they have never seen a ghost. Pelamon Harrison belongs to the former category. He is by vocation a gentleman undertaker, and he lives in Sussex. Some years ago, after the publication of my novel *For Satan's Sake*, which was very severely criticised in certain of the religious denominational papers, Pelamon Harrison, championing my cause, wrote me rather an interesting letter. I went to see him, and ever since then he has not only supplied me with detailed information of all the hauntings he has come across, but he has at times sent me accounts of his own experiences. This is one of them.

Pelamon was seated in his office one day reading Poe, when the telephone at his elbow started ringing.

"Hullo!" said Pelamon. "Who's there?"

"Only me—Phoebe Hunt," was the reply. (Phoebe Hunt was Pelamon Harrison's housekeeper.)

"Anything the matter?" Pelamon asked anxiously. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing," Mrs. Hunt replied, "only a rather queer-looking gentleman has just called and seemed most anxious to see you. He says he has been told about you by Mr. Elliot O'Donnell, and he wants you to go at once to a house in Regency Square, Brighton, No. —. He says it is very badly haunted."

"What's his name?" Pelamon demanded.

"Nimkin," Mrs. Hunt answered, and she very carefully spelt the name—"N I M K I N."

"I'll think it over," Pelamon said, "and if I'm not home by seven o'clock, don't expect me till the morning." He then rang off, and thinking it was time he did some work, he took up his account book.

Try as he would, however, he could not keep his mind from wandering. Something kept whispering in his ear "Nimkin," and something kept telling him that his presence was urgently needed in Regency Square.

At last, unable to stand it any longer, he threw down his pen and, picking up his hat and coat, hurried off to the railway station.

At seven o'clock that evening he stood on the pavement immediately in front of No. — Regency Square. All the blinds were down, and this circumstance, combined with an atmosphere of silence and desolation, told him that the house was no longer inhabited. Somewhat perplexed, he asked the servant next door if she could tell him where Mr. Nimkin lived.

“Not in Heaven,” the girl replied tartly. “He did live in No. — till his wife died, but after that he went to live on the other side of the town. He died himself a few days ago, and I believe his funeral took place this afternoon.”

“And No. — where his wife died is now empty,” Pelamon observed.

“Yes, it’s been empty ever since,” she replied, and, sinking her voice to a whisper, “folks say it’s haunted. I can’t altogether bring myself to believe in ghosts—but I’ve heard noises,” and she laughed uneasily.

“Had he any children?” Pelamon asked.

“No,” the girl answered, “and he has left the money he hoarded—he was the meanest of old sticks—to the hospital for consumptives.”

“A worthy cause,” Pelamon commented.

The girl nodded. “His wife was a consumptive,” she went on. “I remember her well—a pretty, fair-haired creature with a lovely skin, and”—here she shuddered—“a shocking cough.” Then, thrusting her head close to Pelamon, and fixing him with a frightened glance, she whispered, “It was the cough that killed her!”

Pelamon stared at her in astonishment. “Why, of course,” he said. “It’s the cough that kills all consumptives. I’ve buried scores of them.”

The girl shook her head. “You don’t understand,” she said, “but I daren’t tell you any more; and, after all, it’s only what we thought. Anyhow, he’s dead now, and a good job too. Did you want to see him?”

“Oh, it was nothing very particular,” Pelamon replied. “Who has the keys of the house?”

The girl’s jaws dropped and her eyes grew as big as turtle’s eggs.

“The keys!” she exclaimed. “Mercy on us, you don’t intend going there?”

“That’s my business,” Pelamon replied haughtily; and then, not wishing to offend her, he added: “I heard the place was to be let, and as I want a house in this particular locality, I thought I would call and look at it, that’s all! I am not a burglar!”

The girl giggled. “A burglar!” she said. “Oh no, you’re not sharp enough for that. Besides, the house is empty.”

“What!” Pelamon exclaimed. “Has all the furniture been taken away?”

“All but the blinds,” the girl nodded. “There was a sale here the day after Mrs. Nimkin was buried, and at it crowds of people; some of the furniture fetched an enormous price. I did hear that the house was sold too, but I’ll ask the missus to make sure.”

She ran upstairs, and returned in a few minutes.

“Yes,” she said, “the house is sold, and the new people are coming in soon.”

“Then that settles the matter,” Pelamon said, and, thanking her in his usual terse and precise way, he withdrew.

He took a brief turn on the sea front, thinking all the time of Regency Square and the mysterious individual who had interviewed Mrs. Hunt, and who must be, he thought, related to the Nimkin who had been buried that afternoon. At nine o’clock he was once again in the square. Entering the garden of No. —, he crept round to the back of the house and, finding the catch of one of the windows undone, he raised the sash and climbed in.

He had an electric torch with him, and consequently he was able to find his way about. Pelamon is very susceptible to the influence of the superphysical, and is probably far more of a psychic than the majority of those who earn their living as professional mediums. He told me afterwards that he knew No. — was haunted the moment he set his

foot inside it. He could detect the presence of the superphysical both in the atmosphere and also in the shadows. Frequently in the death chambers which he had attended he had seen a certain type of shadow on the floor by the bed; and it was this same queer kind of shadow, he said, that now crept out from the wall to meet him. But it was not the only phenomenon. From just where the shadow lay, there came a cough, a nervous, worrying cough, a regular hack, hack, hack, and when Pelamon moved, the cough and the shadow moved too. He went all over the house, into every room; and the cough and the shadow followed him. Hack, hack, hack, he could not get rid of it. At first it merely irritated him; but after a while he grew angry, infuriated, maddened.

“Damn you!” he yelled. “Stop it! Stop that vile, infernal hacking. Damn you! Curse you! STOP it!”

But the coughing went on, and in a hideous fit of rage, Pelamon flew at the shadow, jumped on it, stamped on it, and drawing out his clasp knife, knelt down and deliberately stabbed it. Still it went on, untiringly, ceaselessly, significantly, hack, hack, hack. Pelamon was still on the floor cutting, stabbing, blaspheming, when a taxi suddenly drew up outside the house, and the next moment the front-door bell gave a loud brrr. Pelamon waited till it had rung twice; then he answered it. A chauffeur stood on the doorstep.

“You’ve come to the wrong house,” Pelamon said to him. “No taxi is wanted here.”

“This is No. —, ain’t it?” the man ejaculated.

“Yes,” Pelamon replied. “It is No. —, but that doesn’t simplify matters. Who sent for you?”

“A gentleman as lives on t’other side of the town,” the chauffeur replied. “He called out to me as I was passing his house. ‘Do you want a job?’ he says. ‘Will you drive to No. — Regency Square and fetch a lady and gentleman? You’ll find them there waiting for you. The gent’s name is Harrison’ (Pellijohn Harrison, I think he said, but I couldn’t quite catch it). ‘Never mind the lady’s. Bring ’em both here.’”

“That’s very extraordinary,” Pelamon exclaimed, “for that’s my name, without a doubt. But I don’t know who the gentleman could have been, and there’s no lady here.”

“Maybe there ain’t no lady in the house now, the chauffeur said dryly, “because she’s just got in the taxi. But she was there a second or two ago. You do like your bit of fun, don’t yer?”

Pelamon, in a great state of bewilderment, was about to say something, when from the direction of the taxi came the cough, hack, hack, hack. He knew it too well.

“There you are,” the chauffeur said, with a leer. “You must admit she’s in there right enough, and waiting till you’re ready to join her.”

Possessed with the feeling that he must see the thing through, Pelamon hesitated no longer. He got into the taxi. The coughing went on, but he could see no lady.

They drove right through the town, and at last stopped outside a small villa facing a church or chapel. Concluding this must be their destination, Pelamon got out and, bidding the chauffeur wait, rang the front-door bell. There was no response. He looked at the windows; there was not a vestige of light anywhere and the blinds were all tightly drawn. He rang again, and rapped as well, and was about to do so a third time, when a window in the next house was raised and a voice called out: “There’s no one there. There’s been a funeral to-day and the house is empty.”

“Whose funeral was it?” Pelamon asked eagerly.

“Mr. Nimkin’s,” was the reply; “he died last Tuesday.”

“Why, what are you a-talking about?” the chauffeur called out, descending from his perch and joining Pelamon on the doorstep. “Nimkin! Why, that was the name of the bloke as was here less than an hour ago and told me to fetch this gentleman. No one in the house indeed, why, he’s in it, and the lady that came along with this gentleman here, she’s in it too. Listen to her coughing,” and, as he spoke, from the other side of the closed door came the familiar sounds, hack, hack, hack.