

# The Trunk

*A Strange Case of Haunting in Sydenham*

By Elliott O'Donnell

The other day I went to a matinée at “The St. James’s.” I am fond of French Revolutionary plays, and *The Aristocrat* appealed to me, not only by reason of its picturesqueness, which is happily unimpaired by any slavish adherence to historical accuracy, but also, and mostly, perhaps, by reason of its pretty and unimpeachable sentiment. The abandoned woman—a type so many of our modern dramatists consider cannot be dispensed with—apparently did not figure in this play at all.

On this particular afternoon one of the principals happened to be away, but as the part was played to perfection by my young and charming compatriot, Miss Nina Oldfield, instead of being disappointed, I only experienced an additional pleasure. I was leaning back in my seat during the interval, thinking of Danton, Desmoulins, Marat, and other of the romantic figures of that period, when someone touched me on the shoulder and whispered, “Ghost man.”

Not recognising the voice, I turned round sharply. It was John Boulton, late dramatic critic of the *Arctus*, now a staff captain, home on leave from Egypt.

“I’ve just heard of a case that will interest you,” he said. “It bears out two of your theories, namely, that all animals and insects have spirits, and that spirits of all kinds, when freed from the material body, can assume dimensions far exceeding—in height especially—the dimensions of the material body that they once inhabited. But come on to my Club as soon as this show is over, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

I accepted Boulton’s invitation, and subsequently listened to the following:

“Some friends of friends of mine, the Parminters, recently took a small house in Sydenham. Now Sydenham is not in the hey-day of its popularity. Scores of the bigger houses are to let, and the smaller ones—the majority at least—have not even that air of genteel respectability which characterises houses of the same size in some of the less remote suburbs. Of course the train service is responsible for much—even to think of a twenty-five minutes’ journey into Town by train, when one can go any distance on tube in next to no time, is both intolerable and demoralising. But the decay of the Palace—the Palace that twenty years ago all London flocked to see—is in itself sufficient to have generated that all-pervading atmosphere of sadness that seems to have permeated people and houses, alike, with its spirit of abandonment and desolation. However, as a set-off against the many disadvantages of Sydenham, including its high rates and dull, unattractive shops, there is its wonderful air—the purest, so many doctors say, in England. And, after all, what is of more consequence than pure air which means health? At least, so the Parminters argued when they gave up the idea of living right in Town and bought this little two-storeyed villa close to the Crystal Palace Station.

“It had stood empty for years and was in a sad state of dilapidation; but the owner, being on the verge of bankruptcy, had no money to lay out on it.

I will let you have it for a very low figure,’ he had said to them, ‘ provided you take it as it stands.’

“The sum named was £120, and this the Parminters considered, in spite of there being a pretty stiff ground rent, a bargain price. Consequently, they closed with the offer, had the house renovated, and eventually moved in. On the day after their arrival Mrs. Parminter made a discovery. Stowed away in the loft was a long, weather-worn, bolster-shaped, brown wooden trunk, bearing on it two steamship company’s labels, one marked Suez and the other London.

“There was no address on it—no name. The Parminters made inquiries of the builder who had done the repairs and of the late owner of the house, and neither could give them any clue as to the person to whom it belonged. The landlord declared that he had gone through all the rooms, including the loft, immediately before giving up the keys to Mrs. Parminter, and that he could swear that when he did so there was nothing in the house at all, no trunk of any description; whilst the builder declared that both he and his men, when doing the repairs, had seen the trunk in the loft and had concluded that it belonged to the Parminters.

“ ‘Well, as nobody seems to want it, we had better keep it,’ Mrs. Parminter remarked. ‘I wonder what it contains! It would be a pity to force the lock, we must get a key to fit it.’

“As no one happened to be going out just then, the trunk was pushed on one side, and the Parminters, having many other things to occupy their minds, did not give it another thought. Tired out with all the worry and work of ‘moving in,’ they went to bed early that night, in the room immediately beneath the loft, and fell asleep almost as soon as they had lain down. Parminter had the digestion of an ox and, never over-taxing his brain, slept, as a rule, right through the night. On this occasion, however, he awoke with a violent start to hear a strange, scraping sound on the floor overhead.

“It was just as if someone was drawing the rough edge of a stone backwards and forwards on the floor.

“This went on for some seconds; then it abruptly ceased, and the stairs, leading from the landing outside the Parminters’ room to the loft, gave a series of loud creaks. Of course stairs often creak, and one excuses their conduct on the ground of natural causes. The wood, we say, cannot expand or contract, when certain changes in the temperature take place, without making some little noise, and vibration due to the passing by of some heavy vehicle must be accompanied by some slight sound. But why, I ask, do we not hear creaks in the daytime, when the traffic is more constant and changes in the temperature quite as marked? Parminter was not an imaginative man; on the contrary, he was practical to a degree. He had a hearty contempt for anything in the nature of superstition, and regarded all so-called psychists either as charlatans or lunatics. Yet, when he listened to this creaking, he was bound to admit that there was something about it that bothered and perplexed him. He got up and opened the door. There was no moon, but, on the staircase, there was a long streak of leadish blue light, that moved as Parminter stared at it, and slowly began to descend. The stairs creaked under it and, though he could see nothing beyond the light, he could hear the most peculiar rattling, scraping sound, as if some metal-clad body was in course of transit. The thing, whatever it was, at last arrived on the landing, where it remained stationary. A feeling of unutterable horror and repulsion now came over Parminter, and, springing back into the room, he shut and locked the door. The noise awoke his wife, and they both stood by the door and listened, as the creaking and rattling was renewed and the thing crossed the landing and descended the stairs into the

hall. Presently there came a savage snarl, which ended in a shrill whine, that was almost human in the intensity of its agony and terror, and after that, silence.

“ ‘Puck! Mrs. Parminter ejaculated, her teeth chattering. ‘What can have happened to him?’

“ ‘God knows,’ Parminter replied. ‘I’m not going to see.’

“They stood there shivering in their night clothes, until, from the absolute stillness of the house, they concluded that the thing had gone; then they lighted candles and, slipping into their dressing-gowns, descended the stairs. Puck was crouching on the mat by the drawing-room door, in an attitude he often assumed when well scolded. They called him by his name. He did not answer. Then they bent over him and patted his head. Still he did not stir, and when they came to examine him more closely they discovered he was dead.

“Determined to get to the bottom of the mystery, Parminter, the following night, sprinkled the stairs all over with flour and sand. The same thing happened. First of all the scraping immediately overhead, then the creaking and rattling on the stairs, then the pause, and then the slow and stealthy descent, accompanied by the same combination of noises, into the hall. When all was still again, they examined the flour and sand. There were no imprints on it of any kind, and apparently it had not been touched, for it bore no sign whatever of anything having passed over it. “Still Parminter would not acknowledge the possibility of the superphysical. ‘The noises we’ve heard,’ he remarked, ‘are simply the result of some curious acoustic property, not uncommon, perhaps, if we only knew it, in houses of this description. And what I saw on the stairs is, of course, merely the effect of some trick of the light which anyone who understands natural science could easily explain.’

“ ‘Well, all I can say is that I should like to have the whole thing explained, and to know what these natural causes that you’re so fond of talking about really are,’ rejoined Mrs. Parminter.

“ ‘So should I,’ Parminter replied. ‘But I can’t explain it, because I’m not a scientist.’

“ ‘Well, get one,’ was the reply. ‘Get Professor Keipler.’

Professor Keipler was the only scientist the Parminters knew. He was a German, and at that time happened to be living in Penge. At Parminter’s request he came over to Sydenham and accepted an invitation to stay the night. Parminter showed him the loft, and the Professor made a very careful examination of it, pulling up one or two boards and peering into all the cracks and crevices. He tested the walls and stairs too, and admitted that he could discern nothing there that could account for some, at least, of the noises the Parminters described. When bedtime came, instead of retiring to rest, Parminter lowered all the lights, and they all three sat on the landing and waited.

“Precisely at the same time as on the previous night they heard the scraping sound in the loft, then the gentle opening of a door, then a rattling of metal; and then—Parminter caught the Professor by the arm—a long, luminous something came into view. Instead, however, of descending the stairs, it mounted the wall and suddenly shot down towards them like a streak of lightning.

“Mrs. Parminter screamed, Parminter tightened his hold of the Professor, and the next thing they knew was that they were all three rolling on the floor with something huge and scaly crawling over them. It conveyed the impression that it was some gigantic, venomous, and indescribably hideous insect, furnished with many long and dreadful legs, and they shrank from its touch just as they would have shrunk from the touch of an

enormous spider, black-beetle, or other creature to which they had a special aversion. The Professor had brought with him a very powerful electric torch. In the first panic it had slipped from his grasp and rolled away into the darkness, but his fingers eventually coming into contact with it, he pressed the button. In an instant the landing was flooded with light, and the thing of horror had gone. Parminter then lit the incandescent gas, and they all three went downstairs into the dining-room and had brandies and soda.

“ ‘Well, how do you account for it?’ Parminter said to the Professor. ‘What do you think it was?’

“ ‘Nothing that I can explain by any known physical law,’ the Professor replied. ‘I never believed in the possibility of the superphysical before, but I am convinced of it now. What struck me most about that thing, even more than its extraordinary property of completely vanishing under the influence of light, was its malignancy. Didn’t you feel how intensely antagonistic it was to us?’

Yes,’ Parminter said. ‘I did.’

“ ‘Well,’ the Professor went on, ‘such antagonism, such concentrated spleen and venom and bloodthirstiness—I felt the thing wanted to crush, tear, mangle, lacerate, poison me—could only originate in Hell—in a world altogether distinct from ours, where cruelty and maliciousness attain dimensions entirely beyond the scope of the physical. My advice to you is to quit the house with all haste, lest something really evil befall you.’

“Having only just moved in, and spent a lot of money on the place, the Parminters naturally did not feel inclined to carry out this advice.

“ ‘If the place is haunted,’ they argued, ‘we can surely get rid of the ghost by exorcism or some other device.’

“They consulted several of their friends, and were finally persuaded to call in a priest—an Anglican, from a parish in the East’ End, that Mrs. Parminter used to visit when they lived in town.

“The Parminters did not tell me exactly what Father S— did (I believe there is a special form of exorcism practised in the Church), but anyhow he could not proceed; his nerves, so he himself admitted, went all to bits, and directly the long streak of light began to crawl towards him he turned tail and fled.

“Another clerical friend whom the Parminters called in to exorcise the ghost did, I believe, complete the service; but it had no effect—the thing mounted the wail, just as it had done before, and darting downwards put the exorciser to instant flight. The Parminters next resolved to try a West End occultist. It was an expensive proceeding; but terms were at length agreed upon, and the following night the renowned psychic arrived to lay the ghost. When it was time for it to appear, this exorciser insisted upon the Parminters retiring to their room, whilst he himself remained outside on the landing alone.

“They heard him repeat a lot of gibberish, as Parminter afterwards described it to me; and then he rapped at their door and told them they need not worry any more as he had seen the ghost, the spirit of a monk, and given it the consolation it needed.

“ ‘But why did the monk crawl and make such a queer rattling noise? Mrs. Parminter inquired.

“ ‘Because just before he died he lost the use of his limbs,’ was the reply. ‘Spirits, you know, always come back in the state they were in immediately prior to their death. The rattling was due to the fact that he wore armour; so many of the old monks combined two professions, that of soldier and priest.’

“ ‘But how about the speed with which the thing darted at us,’ Parminter said, ‘and the feeling we all had that it possessed innumerable legs? That doesn’t look much like a disabled monk, does it?’

“ ‘He didn’t appear like that to me,’ the occultist replied. ‘In all probability you had that impression because your psychic faculties are not sufficiently developed. At present you see spirits all out of focus, as it were—not in their true perspective. If you went through a proper course of training at some psychic college, you would see them just as I do.’

“ ‘Possibly,’ Parminter said, ‘but how about the gas? I see you had it full on all the time.’

“ ‘That would make no difference in my case, the occultist replied, ‘because to anyone of my advanced learning ghosts can materialise in the light just as well as in the dark.’

“ ‘Then you feel certain the hauntings have now ceased?’ Mrs. Parminter observed.

“ ‘That is what the monk told me,’ was the reply; ‘and now, if you will kindly pay me my fee, I will go.’

“Parminter gave him a cheque, and he went. An hour later, when the Parminters were in bed and the house was still and dark, they heard the scraping on the floor overhead, and the thing came down. This time neither of them stirred, and the thing, as before, passed their room and descended into the hall.

“The following morning Mrs. Parminter received a letter from her sister, Mrs. Fellowes, asking her if she could put up the two children, Flo and Maisie, their maid, and herself for a week. It was extremely inconvenient just then for Mrs. Parminter to have visitors, and had it been anyone else she would have refused; but she was devoted to this particular sister, and at once wrote back bidding her come.

“The house was rather oddly constructed. On the top story were three rooms, two quite a decent size, but the third barely big enough for a bed, and having two doors, one of which opened on to the landing and the other into the loft. The loft was very large, but so dark and badly ventilated that it could not possibly be used for sleeping purposes. Every room in the house being required, Mrs. Fellowes’ nursemaid, Lily, was put to sleep in the room adjoining the loft, whilst Flo and Maisie occupied one of the two larger rooms, and the Parminters’ cook and housemaid the other. For the first two nights after the arrival of the visitors there were no disturbances, although Lily complained that she had never slept worse in her life. On the third day of their stay the children were invited out to tea, and their mother accompanied them. When they returned they inquired for Lily, and being told that she had been in her room all the afternoon, they ran upstairs to see if anything was the matter with her.

“Maisie knocked, and receiving no reply, opened the door and peeped in.

“Lily was lying on the bed, and on the top of her, its long antennæ waving over her face, was an enormous scaly thing with a hideous jointed body and hundreds of poisonous-looking black legs. Its appearance was so terrific, so unmistakably evil and savage, that Maisie was petrified, and stood staring at it, unable to move or utter a sound.

“Flo, wondering what had happened, peeped over her sister’s shoulders, and was equally shocked. Just then someone came running upstairs, making a great noise, and the thing slowly vanished. The children then recovered the use of their tongue, and shrieked for help.

“Parminter, happening to enter the house at that moment, ran to the assistance of the children, and in a few moments the whole household was on the top landing. Lily was

unconscious, and for days she was so ill that the doctor held out very little hope of her recovery. In the end, however, she pulled round, but both her throat and heart were permanently affected. Soon after this event the Parminters resold the house, as they felt they could not remain in it any longer. They had stored a good many things in the loft, and, on removing them, they came across the trunk.

“ ‘Why, we never opened it,’ Mrs. Parminter cried, trying in vain to lift up the lid.

“ ‘No; we were going to get a key, and then forgot all about it,’ Parminter replied. ‘ But we’ll soon remedy that. I’ll send for a locksmith at once.’

“He did so, and the man, at last finding a key that fitted, opened the box.

It was not quite empty; on the bottom of it, stuck firmly down with two big hatpins, its long legs spread out on either side of it like a hideous fringe, was a black Indian centipede.”