

# A Strange Experience

*An Oxford Story. Told by an Undergraduate*

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

*I have had special permission from the Head Master of Magdalen College, Oxford, to reproduce the following story from the Oxford Magazine, in which it originally appeared. The editor added a note to the effect that he was in a position to vouch for the entire accuracy of it.*

Last Christmas vacation had well begun. We two were almost alone in college, enjoying the strange quiet which comes over Oxford when the bustle of term time is over.

Our rooms were in an outlying part of the college, in an annexe built some two centuries back, and approached from the quadrangle through a tortuous passage very puzzling to the stranger. The building almost abutted on the east end of the chapel, and we sometimes thought that it must cover the site of the graveyard of the old monastery out of the wreck of which the college had risen. There were three storeys in the block; two sets of rooms on each storey. The “oaks” of the top rooms were sported. The owners perhaps had been glad enough to escape from their garrets in the roof. My friend’s room was on the ground floor and mine just above it. The other rooms were empty.

We were reading hard, grateful for our escape from the busy round of distracting engagements. Perhaps, if anything, we were getting torpid in the almost unbroken peace. It was the *Ethics* that we were reading—a work which does not keenly stir the imagination. In fine, the last thing in our minds was the mystery of the undiscovered country, and as we were neither of us specially credulous, the spirits might have chosen more profitable victims.

One night, about eleven, as I was reading by the fire, I was startled by two sharp, loud raps on the inside of the door of an unfurnished room opening into the larger one in which I was sitting. Now I had been in the rooms some terms, and knew them at most hours of the night and day. Rats there were certainly, but their scramble was familiar. There had never been a noise like these raps before.

Perhaps I had imagined them. At any rate I would wait until I heard them again. So I turned my thoughts back to Aristotle, and merged my own identity in that of the anonymuncles whose views the philosopher summarizes only to explode.

Rap! rap! on the door again. No mistake this time, certainly. And there was, I thought, a little asperity in the sound. Up I jumped, with my lamp, and hurried across the room, and threw open the door which had been so strangely knocked at.

The room was empty. The window-sash had been nailed down and the ventilating pane was shut. No way of escape anywhere, for the only access was through the door I had just opened.

This was the first obtrusive manifestation that had troubled me. I must admit that, long before, when I first went into the rooms, I had noticed that more people passed my door and went up the staircase than ever came down again. But this grew so common that it had ceased to concern me any more than the fowls in the yard below or the carts in the street beyond it.

Next day I had forgotten the unexplained noises of the previous night, and if the intention of the visitant, ghostly or otherwise, had been to excite me, the attempt had been unsuccessful.

However, that afternoon I chanced to go out on business about half-past four, leaving my lamp lighted on a little table by the side of my armchair in front of the fire, so that my seat, on to which a strong light was thrown by the shade, almost faced any one who came in from the staircase. I returned to college at five, ran up the stairs and flung open my door. To my surprise. I saw an old-looking man sitting in my chair. I was convinced that he was there, but had no time to form any distinct idea of his dress or countenance, as in a moment he had faded out of his place and I found myself standing in the doorway, with the room empty before me.

This was something new. The spiritual inhabitants of the college had never shown themselves before, in living memory. Here, clearly, was a region for the Psychical Society to investigate, so I went downstairs to my friend, who was reading below, and told him of my hallucination.

As he listened to the account, he had the expression of a man who is hearing a striking corroboration of an idea hitherto scouted as ridiculous.

“Do you know,” he said, when I had told my story, “this very morning I came suddenly out of my bedroom, about eleven o’clock” (his bedroom door, which opened into his sitting-room, faced the fire, the door of the outer passage being in the nearest left-hand corner of the room), “and saw what I took to be a woman in a long, dark dress, kneeling down with her back to me, on the right-hand side of the fire. She vanished instantaneously—as you say, ‘faded into the air’—but I am certain I saw her. Yet I decided not to tell you, lest you should laugh at my imagination. But now one’s first impulse is to connect the two apparitions.”

However, nothing further was seen by either of us, though we both were eager to witness more, or at least to discover some plausible explanation. Nothing threw light on the difficulty. We had neither of us experienced that form of self-deception previously, and neither since that time has seen anything of a like nature. We can only shrug our shoulders and let the story pass into the dim limbo of the Unexplained.

NOTE.—John Cottisford, Vice-Chancellor of the University, had often to perform a painful duty in the arrest of Lutheran members. In 1527 Thomas Garret was arrested by the proctors and imprisoned in Cottisford’s rooms, but his friends stole into college while Cottisford was in chapel and helped him to escape. His ghost was supposed to haunt the Gateway Tower of Lincoln College.—J. M.