

The Door That Would Never Keep Shut

Being a Case of a Haunting near Whiteheads Grove, S.W.

By Elliot O'Donnell

In a narrow, squalid street, not far from Whiteheads Grove, stands a little house with a room, the door of which, once upon a time, would never keep shut.

You might lock it, and put what you liked against it, but after a while you would find it open. Carpenters were called in and all sorts of expert opinion given, but the door still kept up its antics, and, in the end, it was generally recognised that the reason of its strange behaviour must be sought for in something outside the physical and quite apart from the natural.

I believe many versions of the cause are in circulation, but the following is, I think, the most authentic.

One wet August afternoon, a good many years ago, there arrived at this little house, near Whiteheads Grove, a poor, deformed, dwarfish creature named Anna Mikovitch. Whether a Pole, Russian, Bulgarian or Serbian, no one knew, and no one cared. She was foreign, that sufficed; and the fact that she was alone, and very poor and ugly, at once made her an object of derision and scorn. She occupied a room in the semi-basement, for which, it was said, she only paid three shillings and sixpence a week, but as it was notoriously damp, and had no blind to the window, whilst its furniture consisted of a broken-down bed, a three-legged chair, and a Tate's sugar cube box (in lieu of a table), it was, probably, extremely dear at the price. Mikovitch took it, of course, for the simple reason that she could not afford anything better, and an army of grubby faced children, climbing on and peeping over the railings, watched her settling in. Not being used to such publicity, however, for the discomfort of having no blind was a new experience, she asked the landlady if she would kindly give her a curtain or something that she might use to shield her from the gaze of passers by; but her request only elicited a volume of abuse, and, being told that people who could only afford to pay three and sixpence a week for their lodging should be more modest in their demands, she did not dare to expostulate. Besides, she could not give notice to leave, because she had nowhere else to go, so, meekly swallowing the insult, she retired to her room, and, after no little difficulty, succeeded in fastening a piece of brown paper across the window.

The children in the street seeing her do this, and angry at being balked of the amusement they derived from spying on her movements and tormenting her with their rude remarks, now began to boo and hiss; and the landlady, in a fit of fury at having her house made the object of so much attention, then burst into Anna's room, and, tearing down the piece of paper, told her at the same time that if she put any more such rubbish up, making the room look like a dust bin, she would turn her out.

Anna, too terrified to utter any remonstrance, sank on to the bed crying, and the landlady stamped out of the room amid the loud cheering and clapping of the army of guttersnipes.

The only peace Anna now had was when the children were at school. She could then walk about her miserable dungeon without being incessantly watched and having her every movement commented upon and imitated. Poor Anna, her life was a hell, but her

case was only one out of many; there are hundreds of others like her—elderly and infirm people, men and women of decent upbringing and education, who are compelled, through poverty, to live among the lower stratum of the working classes, whose hopelessly spoilt and ill-disciplined children are the most shocking disgrace to any so-called civilized country.

The sights I have myself witnessed in such localities as Red Lion Street, Gipsy Hill, West Norwood, South Lambeth, and elsewhere in and around London, would be surely hard to beat in any part of the world; and, to those who doubt, I have only to say: “Go and see for yourself. Go and dwell among the very poor, and, if you have any eyes in your head, you will find enough verification of what I say.” The children of this class in London to-day—particularly the boys—for cruelty to the old of their own species, and to animals, for savageness, utter lack of manners and lack of general all-round morality, are unequalled, and this, despite the much-vaunted County Council School education, and the night classes, which, if they have any effect at all upon these young devils’ characters, can only tend to make them worse.

The whole system of education in England is rotten to the core. In training the young the brain only is taken into consideration, the character is left to take care of itself. So long as the boy is clever, so long as he succeeds at his lessons, passes a high standard, and takes scholarships and degrees, and is, in a word, in a position to make money, that is all that those responsible for his education require of him. No one teaches him kindness, or gentleness, or humanity, because these are qualities that, under our present system, do not encourage money-making, but tend rather to retard it. Besides, how can we possibly impart to others what we do not possess ourselves. If character—that is to say, really good character—character that is thoroughly humane and charitable—were suddenly made the basis upon which our Cabinet Ministers, our pedagogues, and preachers should hold office, how many of those holding such offices to-day could be re-elected? Very few, if any.

It is small wonder, therefore, the State itself being corrupt, that nothing whatever is done in our Schools to urge on moral reform, by which alone it is possible to make a people happy and content, and it is, perhaps, small blame to the children—the children, more sinned against than sinning—of the most vicious and abandoned classes, that they are still—in these days of so-called civilisation—past masters in the art of cruelty and every kind of devilry. My own unfortunate country, Ireland, although she may well blush for shame at some of the outrages perpetrated by certain of her misguided patriots, has reason to congratulate herself that the offspring of her working classes cannot be accused of anything like the same degree of cruelty as that known to be practised by the children of this great metropolis of London, and the children of the great cities and villages throughout the English provinces.

And now to revert to Anna Mikovitch. For her the days passed wearily enough. Imagine her, you who live in the lap of luxury, or, if in somewhat less than that, still have plenty of friends all around you and plenty to amuse yourself with; you who, when you feel tired, can retire to the privacy of your bedroom and there enjoy a nice, undisturbed nap. You, I say, who enjoy all this, just switch on your imagination for a moment and depict Anna. Anna, the poor, forlorn little foreigner, spending all her days and nights in that bare, comfortless room, reeking with damp and swarming with black beetles; with no one to talk to, and nothing to look out upon, saving that dank and foul area, reeking

with the stink of the dust bin and all the foul refuse thrown into it by passers by. Get this picture—which is no romance but an actual happening—well into your mind, and then you will realise, perhaps, for the first time in your life, what may be the lot of those who are just as sensitive as yourself and less, far less fortunately, placed.

But to return again to Anna. How she dreaded the hour when School came out! The very moment the clock of a neighbouring church struck twelve, out rushed the children into the street, screaming, shouting, and fighting, and getting in the way of everyone and everything. Barging into pedestrians, and making horses pull up so suddenly that the wretched animals often sat on their haunches, away scrambled this mob of grimy-faced young hooligans, some making for home, whilst others aimed for the area railings where Anna lived, to see what the “hump-backed furriner,” as they called her, was doing. Then her martyrdom began. In her old shabby and faded black cotton dress, there she sat crouching on the floor of her room, vainly trying to escape observation; and there they all stood, pressed against the railings—those dirty, cruel-eyed tatterdemalions, mostly boys—jeering and leering at her; now throwing missiles at the window, now making cat calls and shrill whistles, just to see her jump, whereupon they would rock their sides with laughter. Can you wonder then that she counted every second to their meal time and to the hour for school to re-commence; can you wonder that, when they had gone tearing off with, perhaps, a final shot at her window, or a chorus of yells, she fell on her knees and uttered a prayer of the most heartfelt gratitude for even the most temporary of respites.

Now it so happened that one evening, after Anna Mikovitch had been having a particularly bad time of it with the children and her head ached so much that she hardly knew how to bear the pain, she stole out into the area to try the effects of what she was pleased to term a little fresh air.

As she was standing gazing up into the sky, still faintly aglow with the dying efforts of a more than usually gorgeous summer sunset, and wondering how much longer it would be before she would be free to leave her wretched little earthly body and wander whithersoever she pleased, she was suddenly reminded of her material surroundings by the sound of a faint mew, and, glancing in the direction whence the noise came, she perceived a small and very unlovely tabby cat peering down at her from the pavement. She called to it softly, and~I down the steps very slowly it came. She then perceived that it was dragging its limbs wearily, as if it had come a long distance, and, as she bent down, it looked up into her face, and she seemed to catch in its big green eyes a reflection of her own misery. Like herself, this strange, unkempt and travel-stained pussy was ugly, and forlorn, and homeless. There was, indeed, much in common between them. Anna thought for a moment, what should she do? Supposing she gave this wanderer a home, what would her landlady say? And how could she feed it, when it was just as much as she could do to feed herself.

The cat mewed again, and this time so piteously that Anna, throwing discretion to the winds, picked it up and carried it into her room. That night she went supperless to bed, and Marie Elizabeth, as she named the tabby, enjoyed the first good meal she had had for probably weeks.

The next day all the street knew the little hunchback had a companion, and in the play hours hordes of children clambered on to the area railings to criticise the new arrival.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Anna said humbly to the landlady. “It seems a very clean animal and I’ll see that it keeps quiet and does not in any way annoy you.

“Humph,” the landlady snapped, “I don’t like cats, and that’s the honest truth, but, if you promise to look after it, I won’t object, just for this once. But mind-you, if she be after having any kittens, you’ll have to get rid of ‘em, for I won’t have the house swarming with cats—that’s strite.”

“I don’t think she will,” Anna said, trembling, “at least I will keep her to herself as much as possible.”

“You had better,” the landlady retorted. “If you don’t, and I find hosts of other cats round the house at night, making a pestering noise so that no one can sleep, you’ll find someone has put your cat in the cistern.”

Again Anna promised; and, for the time being, the matter was allowed to rest. In the meanwhile the friendship between Anna Mikovitch and Marie Elizabeth steadily increased. Both were of the same sex and both, very obviously, had had more than their share of trouble. Anna, whose tongue had not had such opportunities for many a long day, found much to say to Marie Elizabeth, and, if one may so conclude from continual purrings and mewings, Marie Elizabeth was hardly less talkative than her companion. Side by side they sat together on the bed, and side by side in the cool of the evening, when their mutual enemies the children bad at last gone indoors, they took their walk up and down the street. No two comrades could have been more suited to each other; it was as if Nature had specially ordained that this old maid should be the friend—the bosom friend-of her female tabby.

For some days nothing occurred to disturb their newly found happiness, and they pursued the even tenour of their way in blissful ignorance of what was to follow. However, such an unusual state of affairs could not continue for long; it was bound to come to an end sooner, or later; and soon—very soon the blow fell.

Amongst Anna’s most bitter persecutors was a boy of about twelve called Pete Phillips. There was not much in his appearance to distinguish him from the other boys in the street, saving that he was, perhaps, a little more ruffianly, a little more savage, and, if possible, a little dirtier; but, unfortunately for Anna, he had taken a special dislike to her from the very first, and as he lived in the house immediately opposite, and his mother was particularly friendly with Anna’s landlady, he seems to have been in a peculiarly advantageous position for carrying on his persecutions.

The moment he was up in the morning he rushed into the street and threw things at her window, and he hung around the area in the evening, long after the other children had left, in order to prevent her retiring to rest.

Over and over again he declared that he would, one day, kill Marie Elizabeth, and it was the greatest terror of Anna’s life that, despite the almost superhuman vigilance which she exercised over her beloved one, he would eventually succeed in fulfilling his threat.

When the weather became excessively hot Anna, obsessed with the idea that Marie Elizabeth needed all the fresh air she could get, used to take her out for a brief walk during school hours in the morning, in addition to the customary constitutional late at night.

Now Pete Phillips got to know of this, and, instead of going to school one morning, he secreted himself in a doorway and waited there till Anna and Marie Elizabeth came out into the street, and then, when the unsuspecting Anna, who, as usual, was walking a few feet in advance of her companion, had passed, he sprang out and, pouncing on the cat, triumphantly carried it off.

Hearing her pet scream, Anna, of course, turned round and fled to the rescue. For once in her life her temper was thoroughly roused; she hit out with all the strength she could muster, and one of her blows, happening to land full on Pete's face, caused him to howl so loudly—though more, perhaps, with surprise (for, like most of the modern slum children, he was never chastised at home) than actual pain—that his mother, with all the other mothers in the street, at once appeared upon the scene, and seeing Anna half frightened out of her wits, but with Marie Elizabeth held safely in her arms, pursued her right up to the area steps, shouting and gesticulating wildly.

Hearing the uproar, Anna's landlady soon joined the throng now congregated in front of her house. Hot and flurried, and enraged at being disturbed, for she had been busily engaged at the wash tub, she stood on the front doorstep with bare arms and wet apron, and in heated tones asked what was the matter and why they were all making such a 'd d row.

"Why, it's like this, Mrs Parkin," a white-faced, shrewish-looking woman with a dirty grey shawl wrapped round her head, shouted, "that furriner hunchback of yours has been knocking Pete Phillips about something shameful. Struck 'im in the face and made 'is nose bleed, and all because he was playing with that ugly cat of hers. It ought to be drowned."

"And her, too," someone else cried out. "It's come to something when one's children can't play in the street without some beastly furriner flies into a passion and assaults them."

Mrs Phillips, who up to the present had been so engrossed in lavishing comfort and endearments upon Pete (Pete, by the way, was at least three inches taller than Anna Mikovitch and probably six or seven times as strong) that she hadn't found time to air her opinion, now began to make herself heard. With one arm round her precious offspring, hugging and fondling him, she pushed her way to the front, and, in a voice trembling with passion, cried out:

"You 'ear what they say, Mrs Parkin. That little rat of a furriner of yours has been 'alf killing my boy, and as sure as I stand 'ere I'll summons 'er for assault."

"I never did 'ear anything to equal it," Mrs Parkin replied at last, her eyes almost bulging out of her head with surprise and excitement. "And to think of all the kindness I have shown her. But there, you never can expect gratitude from them there furriners. It only serves me right for taking 'er in and letting her keep that 'ideous old tabby. But who would 'ave thought it!"

Mrs Phillips exclaimed: "Don't think as 'ow any of us are blaming you. You can't be 'eld responsible for all that your lodgers does, but if ever I get 'old of that 'unchback or 'er cat I learn 'em a lesson, the two on 'em."

"Just you wait a moment," Mrs Parkin said, "and I'll go and 'ave it out with 'er now. I'll frighten 'er, see if I don't."

This resolve was greeted with loud applause and an excited rush was made to the railings to see what would happen.

Like a dozen tornadoes rolled into one, Mrs Parkin burst in upon poor terrified Anna Mikovitch, who was half sitting, half lying upon the bed with both arms convulsively wound round Marie Elizabeth.

"You little devil," Mrs Parkin shouted, pointing with a huge red fist, to which the soap suds were still clinging, at the window, "do you see that you've done. Drought all them

people here and made this 'ouse, which 'as always been respectable, the most talked of one in the whole street. What do you mean by assaulting Mrs Phillips' boy and nearly blinding 'im. 'Is mother talks of 'aving you up and making you appear at the next Assizes. A nice thing—that—for me and the other lodgers; and all because of that dratted cat. 'Ere, give it to me."

"No! No!" Anna shrieked, "leave it alone! Don't touch it."

"And it over at once," Mrs Parkin said fiercely. "If you don't I'll call in the Police. I'll not have such an animal in my 'ouse a minute longer. Now, come along, don't keep me standing 'ere all day."

"No! No!" Anna pleaded. "It's my cat. You've no right to take it from me."

"No right," Mrs Parkin thundered, her brows darkening, "no right. 'Ow dare you say such a thing, after nearly killing poor little Pete Phillips. No right! I'll learn you to say I've no right"; and, bending down, she seized hold of the cat with her giant hands, and, amidst the tumultuous applause of the spectators at the area railings, tore it out of Anna's arms, and giving the latter a savage push that sent her in a heap on the floor, she rushed triumphantly from the room.

The moment she was gone, Anna staggered up and, racing madly to the door, she turned the handle. It was locked.

"Let me out! Let me out!" she screamed, pounding frantically on the panels. But there was no response, only loud shouts of laughter, which turned into wild huzzas, as Mrs Parkin, holding Marie Elizabeth by the scruff of its neck, suddenly made her appearance in the area.

"'Ere," she shouted, "'ere's the little beast. You may take it and drown it, any one of you, for I'll not 'ave it another day in my 'ouse."

"Give it to Pete," someone cried, "and let him serve it as the furriner served 'im."

"Yes, let Pete 'ave it," came a chorus of voices. "Come along, Pete," Mrs Parkin cried, holding up Marie Elizabeth, and giving it a few playful thumps with her big fist by way of a preliminary, "'ere, take it and do what you like with it. It's yours. Where are you?"

But Pete was not forthcoming. In his excitement to get at the cat he had swallowed a lozenge whole, and, in his anxiety to dispose of it successfully, beads of perspiration, as well as tears, were streaming from his face.

"E's crying, the tender 'earted little chicken," Mrs Phillips explained, patting him on the head and all but smothering him against her exceedingly capacious bosom. "Why don't *you* drown the cat, Mrs Parkin. Get a pail of water and a sack. It's easy done, and a thing like that running loose, with a savage furriner always ready to 'alf kill you, if you merely looks at it, is a public danger."

"That's right," several other women echoed. "Kill it, Mrs Parkin."

More frenzied screams now issued from the room in which Anna was confined, and more frantic pummelling on the panels of the door, at which everyone was immensely tickled and laughed accordingly. It was so very droll to see that little white-faced hunch-back creature, whom they all despised and hated, dancing about on the floor and behaving as if the house was on fire or somebody was after her with a red-hot poker. "More like a monkey than a human being," as someone facetiously remarked.

What Mrs Parkin might have done, had not the unexpected happened, is difficult to say. She was in fact deliberating, when Marie Elizabeth, who had grown tired of being held up to the public view by her neck and half throttled, made a supreme effort and

succeeded in reaching Mrs Parkin's arm with her claws. This was the deciding factor. With a wild shriek of "the little devil has scratched me," Mrs Parkin, seizing poor Marie Elizabeth by the tail, whirled her round in the air, and with all the force she could command finally dashed her head-first upon a sharp edge of the stone steps. That done, she quietly wiped her hands, picked up the body, and dropped it in the ash bin. It was only, after all, the fate which befalls hundreds of other cats in the poorer parts of our big English cities every day in the week, and there wasn't a single face in that crowd of spectators, which, by this time, had swelled to a considerable number, that showed the least sign of pity or resentment. On the contrary, one and all cheered and warmly commended Mrs Parkin for what she had done.

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Hours afterwards, when all was still and quiet, and the serenely beautiful summer sky glowed and sparkled with myriads of scintillating stars, the diminutive figure of a woman, all bent and huddled, might have been seen ascending the area steps of a certain squalid and dilapidated house with a queer bulky looking brown paper parcel, which she carried, pressed tightly to her bosom. It was Anna Mikovitch with the mutilated remains of Marie Elizabeth. Whither she went or what became of her no one ever knew, but this much is certain—that as far as the squalid street in the neighbourhood of Whiteheads Grove was concerned—she passed out into the night—for ever.

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As soon as Mrs Parkin discovered that Anna Mikovitch had gone—and she was only too thankful she had, so she informed her neighbours—she put up the usual notice "apartment to let" in the window, and within a few days the room was once again occupied, the tenant this time being a young stableman employed by a firm of job masters near Sloane Square.

For the first few days of his sojourn nothing exceptional occurred, and it was not until he awoke one morning and found the door of his room, which he distinctly remembered shutting the night before, wide open, that his suspicions were aroused.

Thinking that someone must have come into rob him, he at once felt in his pockets, but his money was there all right, and nothing that belonged to him, as far as he could see, had been touched. Making a mental note of the incident and determining to prevent its re-occurrence, he hurried off to work, and thought no more of the matter, till he returned in the evening.

It was about ten o'clock, and he had taken off his boots and was beginning to divest himself of some of his other garments, when, feeling a sudden draught, he looked round and was somewhat astonished to see that the door was open.

"D— the thing," he said, "what's wrong with it. I could have sworn I shut it all right."

He then went to it, and, closing it carefully, placed a chair against it.

"There," he remarked, "that'll fix you. If I find you open in the morning I shall know it's no draught but someone a-spying on me."

He then blew out the light and, getting into bed, slept soundly till morning. The first thing he did when he awoke was to look at the door—it was wide open.

As soon as he had dressed and had had his breakfast, he sought Mrs Parkin and gave her a bit of his mind.

“Well” she said, “it ain’t me, and I can’t think as any of the lodgers upstairs would do it neither. The party as ’ad the room afore you never complained. Are you sure you shut it?”

“Certain.”

“And that you weren’t imagining it open and ’adn’t been drinking?”

“Positive,” was the somewhat resentful retort.

“Very well then,” Mrs Parkin replied, “there must be something wrong with the catch. I’ll get Mr Watkins, the carpenter from next door, to see to it.”

She was as good as her word; she got Mr Watkins, and, after a close inspection of the catch and much opening and shutting of the door, Mr Watkins expressed his opinion that there was absolutely nothing the matter with it.

That night the young stableman shut it and placed his box and a chair against it, and in the morning it was standing wide open again. Then he grew frightened and told Mrs Parkin there was something altogether too queer in it for his liking and he must leave.

With her next lodger, a navvy, it was the same. Whatever he placed against the door at night made no difference: on awakening, he invariably found it open. And other things happened, too. He used sometimes to wake with a start and feel something heavy moving about on the bed, like an animal. He would strike a light to see what it was, but there was never anything visible, but, immediately he blew out the candle, he would feel it on the bed again. One night, when he awoke, he heard something crawling across the floor towards him. It sounded like something crippled or wounded, and only able to drag itself along with great difficulty. It came gradually nearer and nearer, until it reached the side of the bed, when he heard it breathing heavily and panting, as if in the last stage of exhaustion; then it seemed to raise itself up and crawl on to the bed, when the navvy, rough and fearless fellow though he was in ordinary circumstances, was so overcome with terror that he hid his head under the bedclothes and lay sweating there, till the weight across his body suddenly ceased and he became conscious that the Thing—whatever it was—was no longer in the room. He spoke his mind pretty freely to Mrs Parkin in the morning, and that same day the notice of an apartment to let was once again in the window.

The rumour that the house was haunted, however, now began to spread. The navvy narrated his experiences to those of his mates who lodged closeby, and, as they, in their turn, told others, Mrs Parkin soon had so many spare rooms on her hands, that she was forced to give up the house and sell her furniture to pay the rent. Poor Anna Mikovitch and Marie Elizabeth were thus to some extent avenged.