

The Phantom Teeth of Knightsbridge

By Elliot O'Donnell

There is a flat in Knightsbridge, not a hundred yards from the tube station, that in pre-War days, and up to the time of the present unprecedented rush on London, was frequently "to let," and, for this reason, was said to be haunted. There are a variety of stories told in connection with the hauntings, but the following, which has never appeared in print before, will, I fancy, come nearest to the truth.

Some years ago an elderly gentleman named Brent, being very hard pressed for ready money, went to a pawnbroker, to whom he had been recommended, in Holborn, and, after transacting business with him in a manner that seemed to give mutual satisfaction, entered into a little friendly conversation.

"Your life," he said, "always strikes me as a very interesting one. I imagine many of the articles around you have strange and sad histories."

"You are right," the pawnbroker replied, "some of them have very strange and sad histories."

"Nothing in the way of ghosts, I suppose"—Brent laughed—"It's a subject I'm specially interested in, and I've often wondered if people in your vocation ever have any experiences with the supernatural. The lives of your customers must be so full of tragedy, and their thoughts, as they stand here asking you to take something they value more, perhaps, than anything else in the world and which only the direst poverty would induce them to part with, must be agonizing and heart-rending in the extreme—enough to haunt you and your shop for ever."

"That is so," the pawnbroker said, "but it wouldn't do for us to brood over it. If we did we should do no business. One of the queerest things, I think, that ever happened to me was in connection with a set of artificial teeth, and if you're interested in ghosts you might like to hear about it."

"I should," Brent said; "is it a long story?"

"Too long to tell you now," the man replied, "but if you care to come to the restaurant over the way I could tell it you there in the dinner hour."

To this proposal Brent cheerfully agreed; and later on in the day the two men met as arranged.

They had finished their meal and were enjoying a cup of coffee and a smoke when the pawnbroker began his narrative.

"About ten years ago," he began, "a lady, very much veiled, came to the shop and asked me to buy a crowd of things—rings, a watch, tie-pins—all gentleman's—and a set of false teeth, of which two in the upper plate were missing and several loose.

I read in your advertisement,' she said by way of apology, 'that you bought artificial teeth and as these belonged to my husband w-ho is dead, and will consequently have no further use for them, I thought I might as well sell them. The plate is gold, is it not?'

" 'Partly, madam,' I said, eyeing her rather closely, for there was a something in her voice that arrested my attention—I am very susceptible to voices and this one struck me as quite the hardest and least sympathetic I had ever heard. If ever a woman cared little or nothing for her husband, I thought, it is this woman. 'What price do you want for them?'

“ ‘What will you give?’ she demanded.

“I told her and, after much haggling, she finally accepted my offer and departed with her money. I put the teeth safely away till I could dispose of them to a dentist who was in the habit of buying such articles from me, and in the hurry and scurry of the day’s work—for in this business something new and unlooked for is constantly happening—the incident, for the time being, passed out of my mind.

“That night, however, when I went to bed—I live on the premises—that woman’s voice came back to me. I kept on hearing it—a curiously hard voice, as metallic and inflexible as steel, and I wondered if the face beneath that heavy impenetrable veil was in keeping with it. When, finally, I did go to sleep, I awoke shrieking out in agony that I had swallowed one of my teeth. Indeed, I had to put my fingers in my mouth and feel my jaws several times before I could assure myself it was only a dream and that I was not choking to death. Never was a dream more realistic, and when I again went to sleep, I went through it all for the second time. I merely thought, of course, that it was nightmare, and, on getting up in the morning, dismissed it from my mind; nor did I give another thought to it, till that night, when I again had the same dream and awoke in a paroxysm of terror, gurgling and gasping, and tearing frantically at my throat.

“I now conceived a violent antipathy towards the teeth and, determining to get rid of them as soon as possible, I took them round that evening to my friend the dentist.

“He examined them closely and then remarked:

“ ‘Have you been trying to take them off the plate?’

“ ‘No,’ I replied.

“ ‘Well, someone has,’ he said. ‘See, here are the marks of a pair of pincers or some other instrument. They have had very rough handling.’

“He took them, however, and some weeks later, when I again had occasion to go to his house, he informed me that he was being constantly disturbed by the most abominable nightmare, laughingly declaring that he attributed it to the presence in the house of the teeth I had sold him.

I continually wake up at night,’ he said, ‘imagining I have swallowed several, and the sensation is so realistic—for I can positively feel them go down my throat—that it takes me some minutes to assure myself it is only a dream. I never experienced anything of the sort before I bought those teeth from you the last time you were here, so that I cannot help thinking that they are the cause of my trouble. Happily, I have a patient who requires a new plate, so I shall fit the unfortunate teeth to it and soon be rid of them.’

“When I saw him again some months afterwards, I asked him if he had heard anything of the patient ‘who was wearing the teeth, but, as he said he had not, I know nothing of their subsequent history.

“I was, however, so interested, that, when the lady from whom I had purchased the teeth came to my shop one day with some other articles, consisting chiefly of a gentleman’s jewellery, to dispose of, I left someone else in charge of the premises and followed her. Luck favoured me; I traced her to a flat in Knightsbridge and learned from the hall porter that she was a Mrs Arbuthnot, a widow, who, had recently lost her husband and was going away somewhere in the country, almost immediately. I asked the porter—very tactfully of course—if he knew how the husband had died, and was told that, having accidentally swallowed some of his false teeth, he had been obliged to undergo an operation and had died under it. The porter went on to inform me that Mr

Arbuthnot had always suffered very much from a weak heart, and that, on several occasions, the doctor had been hastily summoned to attend him.

“Now all this, added to the experiences of the dentist and myself, made me feel pretty certain that there was some peculiar mystery attached to those teeth, and I determined to try and follow the case up and learn a little more about Mrs Arbuthnot and her past history. I concluded from what the porter told me that he was on rather more than friendly terms with a girl named Raney, who was a maid in Mrs Arbuthnot’s employ, but that, as Mrs Arbuthnot hated, or pretended to hate all men, the affair had to be kept strictly secret. Money, however, will always work wonders, and a few discreet tips and the promise of more loosened Raney’s tongue, and I learned from her much that would otherwise never have been divulged.

“It seems that the married life of the Arbuthnots had been anything but happy. Mr Arbuthnot, a confirmed invalid and exceptionally irritable, though at the same time really kind hearted and exceedingly generous, was much older than his wife, who was a very strong, energetic woman, and, to quote Raney’s words, ‘one who was always wanting to be up and about and doing something.’ She obviously disliked waiting on her husband and plainly showed that being tied to a sick man was anything but congenial to her. Apparently, however, she bore it all with comparative patience, until she got in with the extreme Feminists, and these women, to quote Raney again, ‘hated men, and never lost an opportunity of abusing them to Madam.’

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“It seems that from the time Mrs Arbuthnot took up with these Feminists, she became an altered being; and nothing her husband ever said or did was right. If he asked her to hand him a book or get him a glass of water she would reply:

“ ‘You’re imposing on me; that’s because I’m a woman; you wouldn’t dare do it, if I were a man’; and was continually telling him he was a nuisance and deploring her misfortune in having to live with him.

“Whenever her Feminist friends came—which they did more and more often, it was always to discuss divorce, and if Mr Arbuthnot was in the room, he was either ignored altogether or very pointed remarks were made at him. Raney told me that on one occasion she could not help hearing the conversation between Mrs Arbuthnot and a lady visitor, as they were sitting by the dining-room fire smoking and talking, when she went in to lay the cloth for dinner. Mrs Arbuthnot was railing against certain of the penal laws, which she described as most unfair to women, and the visitor, after agreeing with everything Mrs Arbuthnot said, leaned back in her chair and, sending a wreath of smoke through her nose, exclaimed with a laugh:

“ ‘Anyhow, we do have one pull over the men, Constance—they are hanged for murder and we are not. The last woman executed in this country was Mrs Dyer, the baby farmer, in 1896, and there was such an outcry raised by members of our sex against the sentence that no other woman has ever been hanged in the British Isles since.

“ ‘Then one may kill with impunity,’ Mrs Arbuthnot remarked thoughtfully.

“ ‘Well, hardly that,’ her friend replied, laughing again, ‘you would, I suppose, if convicted~ get two or three years. Mrs Potterby, for doping her husband in Japan, got about ten, I believe; but that is some time ago.’

“ ‘I expect it is often done,’ Mrs Arbuthnot murmured.

“ ‘Rather,’ her friend exclaimed. ‘Why, I could tell you of half a dozen sudden deaths that have been put down to heart failure, or some other natural cause, that were attributable to nothing of the sort, the deceased person, in each case, having been quietly put out of the way. For instance, there is Mr—’ (here, Raney said, the visitor suddenly dropped her voice, so that she could not catch the name) ‘he was found with his neck broken at the foot of the stairs and the verdict was accidental death. Now I am quite sure it was no such thing. He was always getting drunk, the beast, and Coralie, yielding to the temptation at last, pushed him. She practically admitted it to me, afterwards.’

“ ‘And nothing came of it?’

“ ‘Of course not, how could there? There was no proof. Besides, look how strong public opinion would have been in her favour. A disgusting pig of a husband always swilling himself with whisky and wearing at her, and she tied for life to him. Why, it’s monstrous! Who could endure such a thing! Anyhow she didn’t, and that is only what men must expect, until we get the marriage reform bill passed.’

“Raney did not hear any more of the conversation, as she had to leave the room at this juncture, but it all came back to her, she said, next morning, when, getting up rather earlier than usual—for somehow she hadn’t been able to sleep at all well—she surprised her mistress in the kitchen doing something to a set of false teeth. She had a pair of pincers in one hand and the teeth in the other, and, appearing not a little disconcerted on hearing someone enter, she hurriedly slipped the pincers and the teeth in her pocket.

“It was at breakfast that very morning, Raney declared, that Mr Arbuthnot swallowed two or three of his teeth; and, when the doctor arrived, Mrs Arbuthnot told him that although she had often warned her husband that his teeth were loose, he had persistently disregarded her warning and refused to have them seen to. But, Raney said, she did not explain what she had been doing that morning in the kitchen with the teeth and a pair of pincers.

“The night after the funeral was one that Raney, so she assured me, would never forget. She was sleeping in the dressing-room leading out of Mrs Arbuthnot’s bedroom (at her mistress’s request) and in the middle of the night was awakened by a loud scream. She immediately ran into Mrs Arbuthnot’s room to see what was the matter, and found her mistress sitting up in bed convulsed with terror and clutching at her throat.

“ ‘I’m choking,’ she gasped, ‘it’s a tooth. I’ve swallowed it and it’s sticking in my throat.’

“It seems that Raney, horribly frightened herself, didn’t quite know what to do, and was on the point of running downstairs to the hall porter, when Mrs Arbuthnot suddenly grew calm.

“ ‘It’s all right,’ she exclaimed, feeling her mouth.

‘It was only a dream, though a most realistic one at the time. I am sorry to have disturbed you, Raney. I expect I’m a little nervy, which isn’t to be wondered at after all I’ve been through. Goodnight,’ and she lay down again, bidding Raney retire to her bed.”

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“Why, she had exactly the same experience as you and the dentist,” Brent observed.

“Precisely the same, and according to Raney,” the pawnbroker replied, “she kept on having that dream night after night, always about the same time, till at last it so got on her

nerves that she became a complete wreck. She then decided to go into the country to live, and a few days before she intended leaving the flat she gave a farewell dinner party to her friends (all women, of course) at which a curious incident took place.

“Raney, who was helping to wait at table, saw it all, and this is what she said happened. When the sweets had been handed round, Mrs D—, the lady with whom Mrs Arbuthnot had been conversing on the night prior to Mr Arbuthnot’s death, suddenly turned very white and dropped her spoon and fork. Everyone looked at her in consternation.

“ ‘Whatever is the matter, Lucy!’ Mrs Arbuthnot exclaimed. ‘Are you ill? Will you have some brandy?’

“ ‘No, No!’ the lady replied, trying to force a smile.

“ ‘It’s nothing. I only fancied I saw a tooth on my plate, and for the moment I got rather a shock, as I wondered where it had come from. But I don’t see it now, so it could only have been my imagination.’

“ ‘A tooth!’ several of the guests cried. ‘Why, how funny!’

“ ‘How unpleasant!’ Mrs Arbuthnot exclaimed, quite casually, though she had, Raney noticed, turned deadly white. ‘You must have mistaken something else for a tooth—a piece of pastry, perhaps. If you won’t have brandy, have some wine.’

“She then adroitly turned the conversation and very cunningly prevented any further reference to the subject.

“However, when Mrs Arbuthnot went to bed some few hours later, Raney told me she kept the electric light full on in her room till the morning; and also, instead of leaving the flat on the date she had originally fixed, she hastily collected a few of her personal belongings and quitted that very day.

“Apparently, before she went, Mrs Arbuthnot paid Raney her wages and dismissed her; for the latter affirms that she has never since that morning either seen or heard anything of her.”

“Then you have now no clue to her whereabouts.” Brent remarked.

The pawnbroker shook the ashes from his pipe. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “I did manage to find out that she was living at one time in a house near Folkestone, but she only stayed in it for a very short period and then went abroad, where I hope she will go on dreaming of teeth for the rest of her natural life. It’s a comfort, anyhow, to know that if the law won’t touch women for doing away with their husbands, they can’t escape the penalties of the Unknown. I am glad to say there does seem to be a Force outside this world that is free from sex prejudices, a Force that can’t be intimidated or ‘got at,’ and that deals out punishment to women in the same measure as to men.”

“And the flat,” Brent queried, “is it still haunted?”

“Yes,” the pawnbroker replied, “at least so I conclude, for when I made inquiries of the hall porter the other day, he told me it was to let again.

“ ‘No one ever stays in it for long,’ he said, ‘and it’s the same tale over and over again—teeth, everlastingly teeth. Always a-dreaming or fancying they are seeing or swallowing teeth. I’ve heard so much about teeth and swallowing teeth, for the last ever so long—ever since Mr Arbuthnot died—that I really begin at times to have the same fancy, in fact I’ (here a look of awful anticipation crept into his eyes) ‘I imagine—my God, I AM—choking.’ ”