

# The Figure on the Stairs

*Being a Case of Haunting near Sydenham*

By Elliot O'Donnell

Some years ago there stood a cottage midway between the Crystal Palace Park Road and Sydenham that was alleged to be haunted, and the following is one of the several versions, once current, of what took place there.

Walking late one night in the immediate vicinity of the Crystal Palace Park Road, Charles Vyse was so buried in thought that he did not realise where he was going, until he had plunged into a deep rut; he then awoke to the fact that he had wandered off the main thoroughfare and was in a kind of lane—indeed, from the intense silence and utter desolation of the place he might have been in the backwoods of North America. The night was too dark for him to see very distinctly, but, froth what he could make out, the lane was skirted by low hedgerows and threaded its way through a succession of kitchen gardens or allotments and fields. In the latter he could discern, here and there, small buildings that looked like sheds or outhouses, and on either side of him, huge leafy trees, whose gentle rustling was almost the only sound that disturbed the all-pervading stillness. Vyse was in just the right mood for a walk, close confinement at work—he was a writer—had made his limbs ache and his lungs yearn for a breath of pure air, just such air as this lane afforded, and at each step he drew in a deep breath, so as to inhale to the uttermost the delicious clover-scented ether that brought with it recollections of happy days among the braes and banks of Argyll and on the moors around his ancestral home in County Donegal. With his head thus literally in the air he had progressed a considerable distance, when the sudden booming of a church clock making him wonder what the time was, he stood still and counted. Twelve! Should he return or go on? He felt in his pocket, his latchkey was there all right; and besides, if it were not, everyone would be in bed by this time. He would go on. So on he went—and, after a few minutes' brisk walking, came to a gap in the hedgerow and a cottage, that was obviously uninhabited and apparently on the verge of collapsing. Even from a distance he could see the rafters bare of any thatch, and when he got nearer to it, he perceived that the glass in all the windows was cracked and broken, and that the trellis-work of the porch was, without exaggeration, falling in fragments.

There was, however, a picturesqueness about the place, that particularly appealed to him, and a something that caused him to decide on a closer inspection. Advancing up the short, narrow path that separated it from the lane, he pushed open the crazy old door and stepped into a kind of passage.

The place was larger than he imagined, and to his astonishment there was a semi-basement, the ground at the back being on a much lower level than the garden in front. It was, in fact, a very oddly constructed building, unlike any other that Vyse had ever seen. There were rooms and passages galore, and yet, from the front, it had appeared quite tiny. Walking very gingerly, for the boards were loose and rotten, Vyse first of all explored the ground floor, and then, ascending a very rickety and dangerous staircase, he found himself on a miniature landing. Opening one of the doors he stumbled over something that slipped away from under him and went scampering down the stairs. For a moment he

was badly scared; then assuring himself that it was only a rat, he laughed, and went on with his work of exploration. At last, having visited all the rooms in the upper part of the house, Vyse was descending the flight of steps leading to the semi-basement, kitchen, when, one of his feet caught in a hole, and he fell backwards with a crash. For several minutes he lay stunned, and, on recovering consciousness, it took him some time to realise where he was and what had happened. He tried, of course, to get up, but finding that he could not extricate his foot from the hole into which he had stepped and that his ankle, which he feared must be badly sprained, was causing him the most excruciating pain, he gave up the attempt and sank down again feeling utterly helpless and forlorn.

He was, indeed, in an extremely undesirable predicament. No one at home knew—and no one would ever guess—where he was, and as he was just sufficiently far from the road to be out of hearing—shout as loud as he could—he could not attract the attention of anyone that might happen to pass by. Unless, perchance, some other fool should pay the house a visit, as he had done, which was most improbable, his prospects of ever getting away seemed remarkably small, and for all he could see to the contrary he would have to remain where he was indefinitely. Lying on his back and putting one arm through the bannisters he tried to ease himself, but the violent twitchings of his foot gave him little peace, whilst, to add to his discomfort, cold currents of air, continually blowing down the stairs, chilled him to the bone. At times, too, the pain was so great that he shrieked and swore, and when it subsided—and a temporary lull in his sufferings took place—he relapsed into a kind of stupor, in which he lost cognisance of his surroundings and his mind was a mere jumble. It was in this state of alternate pain and respite from pain, that he passed the entire night, every second seeming an eternity. At last the dawn broke and he saw its first pale beams steal into the darkness beneath him and illuminate the white-washed walls. He was making another desperate effort to free himself, and had to his infinite joy just succeeded in doing so, when he was startled at the sound of a heavy thud. The next moment two men came tiptoeing stealthily along the passage facing him and halted at the foot of the stairs. The glow from without being focussed on their faces, enabled him to see their features fairly clearly. They were dark browed, sinister-looking ruffians, and their eyes glittered cruelly as they glanced up the staircase. The manner in which they stared, not at him but at something apparently beyond, made him turn round, when he received another shock. Standing on the top of the stairs, with a look of ghastly horror in her white face, was an old woman. She was in her night-clothes, and from her general appearance—her grey hair parted down the middle and brushed smoothly and primly away from her forehead, her plain and somewhat old-fashioned night-cap, and her hands which, besides being rather red and coarse, showed other signs of hard work, Vyse took her to be one of the servant class, perhaps a housekeeper, or a very superior old nurse. She did not look at Vyse, her whole attention being concentrated on the two ruffians, one of whom, unclasping a murderous-looking knife, put his foot on the staircase with the intention of ascending. This produced a climax. The old woman's under-jaw dropped, her eyes grew glassy and her limbs stiffened, just as if the hand of death had suddenly fallen on her.

With a cry of alarm, Vyse, no longer able to control himself, staggered to his feet, and, as he did so, the figures both of the two men and the woman instantly vanished. For the first time since his arrival in the cottage he now felt really terrified, and, limping along as fast as he could, he quitted the building and made for home.

Some few months afterwards a somewhat curious sequel to this incident occurred.

Vyse, who was then living in Earl's Court, put an advertisement in one of the papers for two unfurnished rooms and received a letter from a certain Lady B—, stating that she (Lady B—) had two rooms in her house that might suit his purpose and inviting him to call.

He did so, and, to his astonishment, perceived in the aged domestic who answered the door to him the exact counterpart of the old woman he had seen on the staircase in the tumbledown cottage. Hair, features, height, all was exact, even to the red and swollen knuckles and coarse finger tips. But if his surprise was great, hers was even greater, for no sooner had her eyes alighted on him than she ejaculated "May the saints preserve us, if it isn't he—the man of my dream"; and, on being pressed for an explanation, she at last managed to tell Vyse that for many years she used to dream continually of living in the most peculiarly constructed cottage with a very dark and sinister basement. She dreamed she slept in a room in which there was a cupboard full of gold and fancied that every night she awoke sweating with terror to hear someone trying to break into the house. At last, in a dream more frightfully realistic than any she had hitherto experienced, she was absolutely certain that burglars had succeeded in getting into the lower premises, and, believing that her one chance of safety lay in her reaching the hall in time to bolt the door that cut off the basement from the rest of the house before the intruders began to ascend, she scrambled out of bed, pell-mell, and rushed down stairs.

On arriving at the head of the kitchen stairs, however, she found to her horror that the door had been removed. She was now too late to escape. Footsteps were already ascending the stairs, and, impelled by a fearful curiosity she could not resist, she stood on the top step and peered down. Below her were two dreadful looking ruffians with dark evil faces and horrible weapons in their hands, and, as their eyes met hers, she saw them light up with a hideous look of glee. Springing forward they were about to make a rush at her, when a young man— of whom, she declared, Vyse was the living image—suddenly appeared on the stairs and barred their way. At the sight of this totally unlooked for stranger, the burglars turned tail and fled, and she was about to thank her deliverer, when, seized with a sudden sense of giddiness, she sank against the wall in a faint. On recovering consciousness she found, of course, it was only a dream, but all the same she was thankful to say that she had never since that night dreamed of the cottage again. When she had finished, Vyse narrated his experience, and, on comparing dates, they came to the conclusion that the dream she had dreamed last had occurred on the very night of his ghostly adventure in the cottage at Sydenham.

Naturally interested in such a remarkable coincidence, and wishing to see the cottage near the Crystal Palace Park Road, Lady B—— gladly agreed to Vyse's proposal that she and her old servant should visit the place with him. Accordingly, they arrived there on the morrow, and the old servant, upon entering, declared most emphatically that it was, without question, the cottage she had dreamed about. There was the cupboard—now, alas, with no gold in it—there the kitchen staircase—and there, at the top of it, no door—but only upon the wall on either side certain indications that from thence a door had been removed.

In a vain attempt to solve this mystery Vyse subsequently learned that many years previously a miserly old woman who lived in the cottage and was said to be enormously

rich, was found standing at the top of the kitchen staircase one morning— in her night attire—stone dead, having died—so it was believed—