

A Hampstead Haunting

By Elliot O'Donnell

Not very far from Well Walk, Hampstead, there is a detached three-storeyed house, which I will name "The Deacons," that has long been reputed to be haunted. Many and diverse accounts of the haunting have been given at different times and by different people; but that of the two men who are here designated "the Professor" and "the Novelist," and who, desirous of doing a little Psychical Research work on their own, together spent a night there, some few years ago, comes, in my opinion, nearest to the truth, and is, moreover, undoubtedly the most interesting. What they actually experienced in this old house, which possesses not one ghost only, but ghosts galore, the Novelist narrated to me as follows:

We began our vigil in a back room on the first floor at about ten o'clock. But, to begin with, I must tell you, we had very great difficulty in obtaining the landlord's permission to conduct this investigation, and I doubt if we should have succeeded had not my wife been a very old friend of his—in fact an old flame. Well, we chose this room partly because it had an atmosphere about it that strongly suggested the superphysical—more strongly, we thought, than any other room in the house, and partly because its French windows opened on to a verandah, from which—if the worst came to the worst—we could drop with comparative ease and safety on to the soft ground beneath. That I might turn tail was, of course, quite on the cards, for I am admittedly a coward, but, I must confess, I had great faith in the Professor. His courage, to my mind, was beyond question; he was so calm and collected, so dignified and, over and above all, so frightfully clever (he had at least half a dozen letters after his name) that, I could not imagine him yielding to any sudden fear or panic. Besides, he had seen ghosts—he had been to several materialising seances, where, he assured me, the most wonderful phenomena had taken place, whereas I was an utter novice—I knew nothing of spiritualism and had never to my knowledge even seen a medium.

But to proceed, we had, perhaps, been sitting in this back room half an hour, when I thought I heard a footstep outside on the staircase. The Professor remarked that it was only the timber creaking, and forthwith entered into such a lengthy dissertation on the causes of the expansion of metal and wood, that at last I could not help reminding him, that I had heard it all years before in the schoolroom. We then sat mute, and watched the shadows from the ivy leaves playing all sorts of mad pranks on the moon-lit floor; whilst every now and again queer little noises on the landing forced me involuntarily to glance in that direction.

Presently I caught the sound of horses' hoofs and wheels coming at a furious pace along the road, and, to my astonishment, the carriage, or whatever it was, seemed to turn in at the gates of "The Deacons." I then heard the crunching of gravel, and, immediately afterwards, a series of loud raps at the front door, which, since the Professor and I, when entering the house, had commented on the absence of a knocker, naturally sent a thrill of consternation through me. But it was when I glanced at the Professor that I got my first real shock of the evening. Prior to the knockings he had been leaning back in his chair,

with an expression of complete tranquility on his face, whilst his extremely easy attitude had suggested a self possession that almost bordered on indifference. All that was gone now. An entire metamorphosis had taken place. He was sitting bolt upright, his eyes almost twice their ordinary size, staring fixedly at the open doorway, his hands clutching the sides of the chair.

If ever a man was afraid, he was, and the sight of terror in one whom I had thought utterly proof against such weakness, made my blood run cold. Moreover, the knocking which had continued for some time, now suddenly ceased, the front door opened, and I heard something surreptitiously enter the house.

That was the climax as far as the Professor was concerned. Springing from his chair he dashed out of the window, on to the verandah, and that was the last I saw of him.

I would have followed him had I been able—but I was too paralysed with fear to stir, and I simply had to wait, sick with terror, the entrance of the Unknown. What was it? What should I see? How would it come? God, such moments can only be appreciated—understood, by those who have experienced—and by those who have been situated, as I was situated then, alone, in strange—utterly strange surroundings, and alone with something that all my instincts told me was peculiarly fantastic and superphysical, and that I knew was prowling about and liable to come creeping after me at any moment. Can anyone wonder that I was terror stricken. The seconds passed, and still it kept at a distance. Then slowly a cloud began to obscure the room, the shadows, all around me on the floor, became merged into a black, impenetrable pall; and I heard first a creak and then the sound of soft, very soft foot on the staircase. Up and up they came. I tried move, to run away, to avert my gaze from the direction of the doorway and landing. I could not; and the steps gradually drew nearer and nearer until they reached the last stair; and stood on the landing in a direct line with me. At last they enter the room in which I am sitting, and still I can see nothing. Then, as they cross the floor towards my chair, I perceive two separate discs of pale phosphorescent light, which gradually materialise into two hands—two exquisitely beautiful hands—with slim, white, tapering fingers and rosy, highly polished flails. They are smothered in rings—rings that sparkle with diamonds, rubies and emeralds, and as they move swiftly towards me I receive a whiff of some delicious and subtle scent; someone then bends over me and I can feel the folds of their rich silken gown sweep against me. A soft arm encircles my neck, warm, fragrant lips are pressed against mine, and those delicate enchanting fingers soothingly caress by brow and cheeks. All fear vanishes in a moment—I am in Elysium.

“Oh, God,” I say to myself in ecstasies of joy. “What have I done to deserve this Heaven—may it continue for ever.”

The velvety fingers then open my mouth, a soft and cooling fluid is poured down my throat, my head is gently pressed back against the chair, and a cool hand is laid on my forehead. Under its touch I slowly lose consciousness and sink into the most entrancing luscious slumber. All was then a blank—a blank in which mind and soul seemed alike lost. The return to consciousness—to the cognizance of “I” again, was gradual—very gradual; but as soon as my sense of personal identity did come back, the yearning for that final scene of watchfulness—for that scented breath, those lovely feminine fingers followed quickly in its trail.

“Come back!” I prayed. “Oh, come back, if only for a moment and let me feel that heavenly soothing touch again.” There was no response. I endeavoured to speak—to call to them; I could not. I essayed to move my limbs; I could not.

Then suddenly, with lightning-like velocity, there flashed upon me, in succession, the facts that I was cataleptic—incapable of the slightest physical action—in bed, and no longer alone in the room.

Forms that I could not see, but whose presence I could none the less feel, were standing close beside me discussing my supposed death and funeral. Hands—coarse, disgustingly coarse and unsympathetic—measured me for my coffin, into which I was unceremoniously pushed. Then followed the ghastly process of hammering me down, during which I struggled frantically—with all the pent-up agony of the ten times damned—to overcome my catalepsy and shriek out; I could not. I was compelled to lie there helpless and breathe into my lungs the cursed, sickly odour of that sweet, nauseating varnished wood.

Stalwart arms then raised me up enclosed thus, and, carrying me downstairs, bumped me—like the thick-headed, infernal idiots that they were—into the hearse. I heard the rattling of harness and the jingling of bits, as the horses tossed and shook their heads prior to starting: after which came the rumble, rumble of the wheels on the hard road. Then, for a brief space of time, came a merciful blank, after which I awoke to the bitter, the hideous, the appalling reality that I was buried ALIVE.

The horror of my discovery so shocked me that I fainted; but the cold and stifling atmosphere of the earth, that despite the thickness of the coffin penetrated to the very marrow of my bones, brought me quickly to myself, and I instantly recollected all that had occurred.

The most frightful current of despair now surged through me. I endeavoured to shriek, to shout, to make any kind of noise, but could not move my jaws. I threw out my arms, which had been lying at full length, with the wrists crossed, and they struck the wooden walls of my prison a few inches above my face.

I banged my head, my body; kicked till I crunched my toes; writhed, struggled, swore, till the foam and blood poured out of my mouth, and I was forced to give in through sheer exhaustion.

I then became conscious of an unendurable oppression. The sea of black above me felt like a barrow-load of bricks on my chest, and I gasped, choked, retched, tearing the palms of my hands in ribbons with my nails.

Once again I was motionless. The darkness all around me, comparable only with the intensity of the silence, overwhelmed me with its frightful solemnity. It was the darkness of Death—the intervening barrier to all the mysteries of Futurity.

Then I thought of my past life—of its neglected opportunities; its countless failures, vices, sins; of the evil that I had but too often returned for evil; and as my memory rehearsed all this, a great, an indescribably great terror of what the Unknown would have in store for me gripped me with fearful tenacity. Oh, if I could only escape! Live my life again.

The air in the churchyard above me never seemed so sweet, so fresh, so free, nor the grass so green, so vivid.

And then I thought of my friends. If only I could inform them that I was still alive! One second, the briefest duration of time possible, and they would know.

I imagined their joy, their indescribable joy, on learning their mourning was all in vain—that the doctor had been mistaken—that I was still breathing, still animate.

How promptly they would fly to save me, and with what rapture I should hear the sound of pick and shovel paving my way to freedom!

Then the hopelessness of my position came home to me with new cruelty. It was impossible to acquaint them with my position—the truth would never be revealed.

I must die—die down here—alone—alone amid all the still and fetid paraphernalia of the charnel-house.

The charnel-house—the feeling of oppression at once left me. My brain grew clear. Without opening or rolling my eyes I could see on either side of me—see into the vast expanse of slimy, reeking mould.

Great God; what had that man died of—that hideous, festering corpse, with swollen hands and bloated cheeks; and that woman, that toothless woman with the grizzly hair; and that child—that tiny, half-formed skeleton with the unspeakable relics of a face.

I saw them all, row upon row, line after line, and as I looked at them they looked at me—and grinned. Grinned with a grin that made me swoon; and when I looked again, they had all vanished, and in their stead I saw a dreadful, worm-like figure come writhing and wriggling through the earth towards me. Its body was yellow, and its face like a bladder of lard!

Hand over hand, leg over leg, it came, until it touched my feet, and I intuitively recognised in it—the Elemental of Death.

Then, again, my senses left me; but, after a long, uninterrupted period of obliteration, consciousness suddenly returned, and I found myself seated once more beside the open windows at “The Deacons.”

Never again did I attempt a sitting there, that one experience was enough. I made endless endeavours, however, to get in touch with former tenants of the house, and in the end I succeeded. Two of them, a Mr De Cossart and Mrs Smith, came to see me the same morning.

Mr De Cossart arrived first. He was a tall, thin, ascetic-looking man, of probably rather more than middle age, clad in a suit of rusty black.

He might have been a Plymouth Brother, or a German waiter of a particularly thrifty turn of mind.

“You have something to tell me,” I said, offering him a seat and closing the door carefully, for fear of any eaves-dropping on the part of my extremely motherly and exceedingly officious landlady.

“I have,” Mr De Cossart replied, shaking his head gloomily as I indicated the whisky bottle.

“Two years ago I took ‘The Deacons’ on a twelve-month’s lease, but I only occupied it for one night. I did not dare try to sleep there twice.

“My household was a small one—a staid, elderly housekeeper (I had been a widower for three years), a cook, and housemaid.

“We had all retired to rest by ten o’clock, and it was about midnight—I had struggled in vain to sleep—when I heard a footstep in the corridor.

“It rapidly approached my door, and I was much alarmed by series of tremendous crashes on the upper panels.

“Thinking that it was the housekeeper come to tell me that the house was on fire, I slipped on a dressing-gown, and, rushing to the door, flung it open.

“It was not the housekeeper, however, but,” and Mr De Cossart, shuddering, cast a fearful, half-expectant look around him, “the lofty and enshrouded figure of a man with wild, staring eyes, shrunken cheeks, and bloody foaming lips. He raised his fingers towards me, they clawed the air convulsively, and I noticed their ends were battered, raw, and bleeding.

“The phantasm—for I knew at once it was a ghost—did not attempt to molest me, but confronting me just long enough for its features to be firmly impressed on my mind, suddenly vanished, and then I saw two lovely hands—a woman’s—that, seizing me gently by the arm, took me back to bed and soothed me to sleep. It was a fool’s paradise, for when I awoke, or rather fancied I awoke, I underwent all the hellish agonies of premature burial, only recovering consciousness, when the maid brought me hot water in the morning.

“I was so struck with the singularity of the visitation, that I prosecuted inquiries in the neighbourhood, and discovered that my description of the apparition corresponded with a Mr Robert Valentine, who had once been a tenant of the house.

“I got in touch with his relatives, who although never on very friendly terms with him, were greatly affected by what I told them. His body was exhumed; every evidence of premature burial was visible, and, on analysing the contents of his stomach, the latter was found to contain a powerful narcotic, after the nature of conine.

“The deceased might have been in the habit of taking drugs; there was nothing to suggest the narcotic found in his stomach had been administered to him with any sinister motive. He had certainly not been poisoned, but the coma produced by the conine had not unnaturally been mistaken for death, and—he had been buried *alive*.

“The matter ended there. What more could be done? The deceased had been attended by some strange, unknown doctor; the whereabouts of his widow was entirely enigmatical.

“I got out of touch with the dead man’s relatives and went abroad—Turin. There I met a beautiful woman. I fell in love with her face, but more especially with her hands”—here Mr De Cossart shivered, and cast a furtive look at the door. “They were the exact counterpart of those that had appeared to me in spirit form at ‘The Deacons.’

“We were married, but not before she persuaded me to assign all my property to her. She now no longer caresses me, and I have horrid dreams at night.”

“In short, sir,” I said, gazing at him intently, “she is not what she professed to be at first? You have misgivings?”

“I have,” he whispered, “the strongest misgivings. My dreams are repetitionary of the one I had at ‘The Deacons.’ I believe she is the woman.”

“You have her photograph?” I asked curiously.

“Yes—there it is. I thought perhaps you might like to see it. Doubtless you are a physiognomist, as is the case with so many novelists,” and he handed me the photo as he spoke.

I was about to examine it, when there came a gentle tapping at the door, and an emaciated woman in black, who announced herself as Mrs Smith, glided unceremoniously into the room.

Mr De Cossart rose to go. I detained him, and the woman catching sight of the photograph, uttered a loud ejaculation.

“My Sakes!” she cried, “if that isn’t Mrs Furniss.”

Mr De Cossart started.

“Do you know the lady?” he said, pushing the photo under Mrs Smith’s nose and eyeing her closely.

“Are you the author gentleman?” Mrs Smith gasped.

Mr De Cossart shook his head solemnly.

“No,” he replied in a melancholy voice. “I am this lady’s husband.”

“But she was Mrs Furniss, wasn’t she?” Mrs Smith said, taking the seat I offered her.

Here I thought fit to interrupt.

“Mrs Smith,” I explained to Mr De Cossart, “is also interested in ‘The Deacons’ affair—that is why she has come here this morning. Let us hear what she has to say. You may speak freely before us,” I added, turning to Mrs Smith—” like me—this gentleman has had strange experiences at ‘The Deacons.’”

“But,” Mrs Smith commenced tremulously, “I want it to be in confidence—it must be in confidence. Will you promise, both of you, you won’t make use of anything I tell you to get me into trouble?”

We promised.

“In a month’s time,” she murmured, “it won’t make any odds, as I shall in all probability be dead. I’ve three incurable cancers—one on my breast, one just over an artery, so the doctor says, on my neck, and one—”

“Great Heavens!” Mr De Cossart broke in, his face livid. “Don’t diagnose here, begin your story.”

“It’s a beginning and an ending, it seems to me,” the woman sighed. “Well, sirs, I live at Hampstead. Three years ago I lost my husband there—he died of Bright’s disease. I was working then—my business is the laundry—for Mrs Furniss, who occupied ‘The Deacons.’ From the very first she had taken a peculiar interest in my husband’s case, but I did not think there was anything very remarkable about that, till she called at my house one day, and, getting me alone in our little back parlour, suddenly said: ‘I suppose, Mrs Smith, your husband’s illness is a very great expense to you.’

“‘That it is, ma’am,’ I replied, drying my eyes on the corner of my apron, ‘a very great expense!’

“‘Is there any hope of his recovery?’ Mrs Furniss asked again.

“I shook my head.

“‘None, ma’am,’ I said. ‘The doctor says he can’t live for more than three or four days at the most.’

“‘How often does the doctor come?’ she asked again.

“‘Never unless I send for him, ma’am,’ I answered.

“She then touched me on the shoulder with her beautiful hand—she had the slenderest fingers you can imagine, gentlemen—and in low and measured tones, hissed rather than spoke.

“‘You are very poor,’ were her words. ‘Money would be extremely welcome to you. You would do much for £100.’

“I admitted I would—much. A hundred pounds is a fortune to a poor woman.

“ ‘Very well, then,’ she observed. ‘I want you to let your husband come to my house and remain there till he dies, when his body will be brought back here for burial. I can assure you he will be well looked after at “The Deacons,” and as, you say, he has to die. It cannot matter to him where his death takes place, whereas it will make a great deal of difference to you.’

“The strangeness of her proposal staggered me. I did not know what to make of it.

“ ‘But, ma’am.’ I stammered, ‘what is your motive?’

“ ‘Oh! you wouldn’t understand if I told you,’ she replied, with a curious smile, ‘and if you want that £100—don’t ask. Do you agree?’

“I knew Mrs Furniss would be as good as her word, and I should get the money—I had no fears on that score—so I consented. My husband was tractable. I talked him round. Jim—that’s my only boy—and I smuggled Smith into ‘The Deacons’ at the dead of night, and brought his body home three nights later. No one saw us, and the doctor told me I did quite right in not sending for him earlier, as nothing could have saved my husband. I got the hundred pounds, and we—Jim and I—took good care to hold our tongues. What certainly did strike us as rather queer was that Mr Furniss, whom we never even knew was ill—they had only been in this neighbourhood a year—died about the same time as my husband, and from the same complaint.”

I looked at Mr De Cossart. Our glances met, and we both shuddered.

“Are you sure Mr Furniss died of Bright’s disease?” I asked.

Mrs Smith shrugged her shoulders.

“That is what I heard,” she said. “Several people told us so. His funeral was a very quiet one—no one there but the widow and paid mourners. He did not seem to have been on very good terms with his relations. Well, gentlemen, try how we would, Jim and I couldn’t get the affair out of our minds. We often had horrible dreams, always about being buried alive, and hands—hands like those beautiful long snowy white hands of Mrs Furniss.”

“Then what do you think, Mrs Smith?” I asked abruptly. “You have formed a theory!”

“I think,” she replied, with the pregnancy of solemn admonition in her tones, “I think that my poor husband was substituted for Mr Furniss, and that the doctor whom Mrs Furniss suddenly sent for, unaware of the deception, gave what he thought to be a genuine certificate of death.

“A change was again made, my husband’s corpse was brought back home, and the real Mr Furniss was buried from ‘The Deacons’; but as sure as I sit here, gentlemen, I believe he was buried *alive*, and that devil of a wife of his did it on purpose. Now, gentlemen, I’ve eased my mind of what’s been weighing on it for the past three years, and if you think there is anything in what I have said, at the end of a month have Mr Furniss exhumed.”

“That has been done already, Mrs Smith,” Mr De Cossart slowly observed, “and your suspicions were only too well justified—he was buried alive. But you, Mrs Smith, have nothing to fear; your secret is safe—unfortunately only too safe—for I’ve married the murderess!”