

The Man Behind the Door, or No.— Brockley Road, S.E.

By Elliot O'Donnell

Some years ago, at the house of a friend in Norwood, I met a Mr and Mrs Thorpe who told me of a strange experience they had once had in Brockley.

"We neither believed nor disbelieved in ghosts," they said, "when we went to live at No. Brockley Road, S.E., but we hadn't been in the house very long before we arrived at the conclusion that it was what is popularly termed 'haunted.' During our stay there we were repeatedly disturbed by the sound of a latchkey being fitted in the lock of the front door, and by footsteps running up and down the first flight of stairs, yet, whenever we went to look, we saw no one.

"On other occasions, however, when we were not expecting to see anyone, we both fancied we could detect the somewhat indistinct figure of a man, dressed in an old-fashioned high chimney-pot hat and Albert coat, standing, as if in the act of watching and listening, on the mat behind the front door. We spoke to him several times, but never got any response, and the moment we tried to touch him, he invariably vanished.

At first, we were very frightened, but as we never saw anything more alarming than this apparently harmless apparition, we gradually got accustomed to it and eventually overcame our fear. At the same time, neither of us at all relished the idea of being left alone in the house, and it was partly on that account that we finally gave it up."

I asked them if they knew its history, and received a rather discouraging reply.

"We have heard certain rumours," they said, "but we very much doubt their authenticity. Mr Johnson, the dairyman, who lives close to it might be able to tell you something, as he occupied the house for three or four years."

They evidently did not wish to be pumped, so I let the matter rest for the time being, and later on, when I had a little time to spare, I paid a visit to Brockley Road and, without much difficulty, found Mr Johnson. But he was by no means inclined to be communicative.

"It is true," he said, "I did hear a lot of queer noises while I was there, and I often used to think I saw someone standing on the mat in the hall, behind the front door, but I prefer not to talk about it, as the landlord has threatened one person I know with an action for slander of title, and I don't want to get let in for anything of that sort."

"Is the house empty," I asked.

"It was yesterday," Mr Johnson grunted. "Why?"

"Because," I replied, "I should like to spend a night there."

To my surprise, the moment I made this statement, Mr Johnson's features visibly relaxed.

"What, to see the ghost," he chuckled. "Now look here, I see you're interested, and so am I, but it must be between ourselves. Well, that house has always fascinated me, and it fascinates me more now, oddly enough, than when I lived in it, and often of a night, when the street is still, and everyone has gone to bed, I feel obliged to steal out and have a look at it. Going up to the front door, I lean my head against the panels and listen, and when I hear deep, heavy breathing coming to me from the other side, I know he is there right enough—there, as usual, watching and waiting. Poor devil, he never seems to get any respite. No matter whether it is winter or summer,

raining, hailing, or snowing, he invariably keeps his vigil, standing still and listening, God knows why, or for what. I thought of him last Christmas Eve and wondered if the Powers that ordain things behind the scenes would give him a night off.

"I kept on thinking about him to such an extent that, at length, I could bear it no longer; I slipped out of the house, leaving all the warmth and comfort, and jollity behind, and hurried off to Brockley Road, and, sure enough, when I arrived at No. and laid my head against the door, I could hear him. There he was as usual, all alone in that dark, cold, empty house, standing still and listening. I called out to him and expressed my sympathy, and I thought I heard a sigh, but it may have been imagination. Anyhow, I got no other sort of reply and I came away feeling very depressed and unhappy. Indeed, it quite spoilt my Christmas, for all the time I was eating my roast turkey and plum pudding, and the kiddies were pulling crackers and talking all kinds of nonsense, the dark, deserted house and that solitary watcher kept rising up before me.

"No matter what sins he had committed, I thought, in his lifetime, no punishment could be more terrible than having to stand there, all alone, night after night, year after year, with no other companion saving the rats, and mice, and shadows. If that isn't hell, I don't know what is?"

"And you don't know the history of the house," I ventured.

"No," Mr Johnson said, his manner changing again. "I know nothing, and, mind, I haven't told you anything—that is to say, if anybody asks," and as he would not say another word, I left him.

I then went to the house and inspected it. It was to let, and apparently there was no caretaker. How I obtained admission, I won't say, as others might be tempted to follow my example; but get in I did, and two nights later found me in the hall, with no other companion saving my faithful canine friend—Ghoul—an Irish terrier.

My first impression of the place was that it was quite ordinary—there was nothing weird about it, no dark cupboards or gloomy recesses, or anything that in any way suggested the presence of the superphysical. And yet Ghoul did not seem at all at home, nor did I. There was the usual something which I have detected in so many haunted houses, that filled me with a feeling of vague apprehension and indefinite fear.

Being somewhat cold, for the place had obviously been without fires for a long time, I drank some hot tea, which I had brought with me in a thermos flask, and then commenced a thorough exploration of the premises. Bidding Ghoul follow, I slipped on a pair of rubber soles and descended into the basement. Having satisfied myself no one was there, I went upstairs, and finally took up my position for the night, seated on the stairs leading into the hall and facing the front door. Ghoul sat close beside me.

The weather being wet and forbidding there were very few people in the street; at long intervals steps might be heard scurrying past the house—otherwise all was still, save for the gentle pattering of the rain and occasional noises, which obviously came from next door. At last, minute after minute sped by in absolute silence—a silence that seemed to intensify with the passing of every second that brought us nearer midnight, and at about one, the stairs above me gave an ominous creak, Ghoul growled, and my heart went pitter-pat, pitter-pat.

I then fancied I could detect something like soft footsteps stealing very stealthily down, pausing every now and again as if their owner were intent on not being heard. As on all occasions, when I am alone in a haunted house, I now grew horribly afraid and wished to goodness I had never been fool enough to come. Yet being there, and fully realising I had to see the thing through, I determined to try and pull myself together. Overcoming my fear with an effort—and I admit it was a supreme effort—I stood up, shone my pocket flashlight up and down the stairs behind me, and, to my infinite relief, saw—no one.

Then I sat down again and once more resumed my vigil. The silence grew, and intermingling with it now came a feeling that Ghoul and I would shortly be spectators of a drama or incident, which everything around us—walls, stairs, shadows, and the very atmosphere itself were anticipating.

I distinctly felt a tremendous concentration going on all around us, which seemed as if it must very speedily reach a culminating point, when something definite would happen. It came, however—as these kind of things usually do—with the most startling abruptness. The intense silence that reigned supreme throughout the house was suddenly broken by the clear and unmistakable sound of a key being fitted in the lock of the door. Ghoul snarled, the door flew open, and a cool draught of air blowing past me, fanned both cheeks. Still I saw no one. The house was once again silent, but only for a while, for, from out of the gloom ahead of me, came a sigh—the sigh of someone in very great distress—and Ghoul this time whined.

I could now no more have moved or shut my eyes than I could have flown. I felt impelled by some wholly invisible force, against which I was absolutely powerless, to sit staring straight ahead of me, vainly endeavouring to pierce the darkness.

Then, quite suddenly, I perceived with a thrill a very faint light or glow which kept on developing, until it finally took the shape of a tall, thin man, dressed in a black frock coat and tall silk hat. He had his back to me at first, and from his attitude I gathered he was expecting someone—watching and listening for them. On Ghoul whining he turned slightly and I saw his face. . . . It was a face that once seen was never forgotten, and, even now, after a lapse of some ten or twelve years, it often comes back to me. It was frightfully colourless, the white brow and cheeks being fringed with hair and whiskers of jet black; but it was the eyes that fascinated me most—they were dark, deep set and luminous and, as they met my gaze, I could read in their depths the most unspeakable suffering and tragedy.

Though the figure seemed somewhat unreal and visionary, the face appeared to me just the reverse; and so certain was I that what I beheld was an objective spirit entity that I made the most desperate efforts to overcome my terror, which was pitiable in the extreme.

Here I was, confronted with one of the most unusual examples of psychic phenomena I had ever encountered, a phantasm of the non-malignant type, endowed, as it seemed only too obviously, with real human intelligence. Here, within a few feet of me was a genuine clue to the riddle of the ages—not the poor, silly make-belief ghost usually seen at alleged materialising seances, and with which, as witness the famous masked medium case of last year, so many spiritualists are deluded—but a bona fide denizen of the other world, a denizen that held within its knowledge the greatest of all mysteries—that of life and death. If, if only I could prevail upon it to speak—to answer even one question, then I should have obtained all that I had been striving for for years and in one swift bound have advanced further—immeasurably further—than any living mortal.

I tried to speak—God alone knows how hard I tried, or for how long—and at last I succeeded. What I actually said I can not remember. So chaotic was my mind, surging with a thousand and one emotions, that I forgot my words almost as soon as I had uttered them. Again I struggled, and again something passed my lips; but there was no response. The figure still stood there in an attitude of expectancy, the cool wind through the cracks of the door rustling past it, and fanning the hair and whiskers on its white face, but it gave no sign of having heard me.

Then, quite suddenly, I became calm, wonderfully, supernaturally, calm, with every faculty I possessed extraordinarily active and alert.

I spoke again, and, throwing all my heart and soul into my utterance, implored the figure to speak and satisfy my yearnings as to whether there was a future life for me or not. It made no reply. Then, thinking that, perhaps, it might not be able to make any verbal sounds with those white ethereal lips, I exhorted it, instead, to make use of signs, to give me any indication, however small, that it was capable of hearing and comprehending the living human voice.

Our eyes looked into one another's as I spoke, but in its gaze I could detect no alteration of expression, nothing different from what there had been all along, nothing to show it was in the least degree conscious of what I was saying.

Bitterly disappointed I stood up, and, stepping towards it, put out my hand to touch it on the shoulder. My fingers encountered nothing, and before I could actually realise what was happening, I found myself on the door-mat—alone. The figure had vanished, nor did it appear again.

Nights later, however, when I was again in the neighbourhood, resolving to put to the test the experiment tried by Mr Johnson, I cautiously approached the house, and, putting my ear against the door, listened.

Ghoul, who was with me, growled, for, coming from the other side of the panels, and immeasurably emphasised by the utter stillness of the street and night, was the sound of breathing—deep, heavy breathing, that stopped short every now and again, as if the producer of it had had his attention suddenly arrested was listening—and then went steadily on again.

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I have heard several so-called explanations of the haunting, but none more feasible than the following. Soon after the houses in the Brockley Road were built, No. — was tenanted by a couple whom I will designate Mr and Mrs Mills. Mr Mills was a commercial traveller, and on one occasion, during his absence from home, his wife, who happened to be much younger than he, became acquainted with a handsome foreigner, and so far succumbed to his advances, that, in the end, she decided to elope with him. The husband returned on the day she had taken her departure, and, thinking she had merely gone on a visit to some friends, sat up awaiting her return. Hour after hour passed by but he heard no welcome sound of footsteps, and the morning found him, white and haggard, still standing in the hall—waiting.

Later on in the day he received a telegram. It was terse and to the point:

“I'm not coming back.—Violet.”

He read it through several times, and then, putting on his hat and overcoat, he walked down to the river and drowned himself.