



The Ghost House

My mother bought the house in 1949 as both a residence and an investment. Compared to the smaller homes the family was used to, it was quite an imposing building. Surrounded by landscaped gardens, it took pride of place on a corner block, a towering three-storey example of South London opulence in what was then a desirable location. My mother's idea was to turn it into a guest house, and the property was well-suited. Part of a deceased estate, it had been run as a clinic by the previous owner, a surgeon whose ancestry was French. These facts were irrelevant at the time, but would later help to explain some rather unusual and mysterious occurrences. For the moment, however, it was just regarded by us as a move to a new home.

Over the next few years the business side became well-established and the house developed a relatively happy atmosphere. The visitors contributed to this, many using it as a base for their London holiday, while some who were boarding for longer periods were adopted as extended family. These included student nurses, doctors and artists, musicians, and even the family of a middle-eastern oil magnate. The diverse mix seemed to work well. I remember them as joyous times and, for a young boy such as myself, the house held no fears or mystery other than those I created in my own imagination. Not until I was older did my mother relate incidents that were, to say the least, strange and a little creepy.

The first concerned an Irish lady who turned up on the doorstep seeking a room for a few days. Not every guest booked in advance, so there was nothing unusual in that, yet my mother confessed to feeling uneasy about taking her in. A couple of days later, she was cleaning the lady's room and happened to replace a clothes hanger in the wardrobe. There, propped in one corner she noticed an object wrapped in newspaper which looked and felt like a rifle. Putting two and two together to make five, Mum immediately deduced that the woman was something to do with the IRA and needed to have her gone. This wouldn't be easy for someone with a generous heart who would give even the most obnoxious the benefit of the doubt and a second chance. So she left taking any action for another day. The suspicion was still present, though, and when the opportunity arose, Mum went up to check on the room. She experienced a certain amount of relief on discovering that the "rifle" was no longer there, but the shattered remains of a glass ashtray in the waste basket rekindled her determination to confront the woman and issue her marching orders. In effect, the problem resolved itself when the Irish lady came rushing in and announced in a rather agitated tone that she was leaving immediately. She could not, she said, stay in a room where bizarre things happened. Something, she claimed, hadn't liked her from the start and last night it had thrown an ashtray at her! Mum was happy to let her go and wear the cost of the breakage. As for the woman's story, she dismissed it as alcohol-induced nonsense.

Some time later, a young man in insurance arrived, transferred from the North of England by his company and needing temporary accommodation while he settled into the new posting. He was quietly unassuming and, although somewhat naive, was not the kind of person prone to fantasy. So, a passing comment he made one morning took my mother aback. "Thank you for that cup of tea last night," he said. Mum was puzzled and asked what he meant. Steve explained that he had not been sleeping well and was pleasantly surprised when she had brought the beverage to his room, especially considering it was during the early hours. My mother knew nothing of this. In fact, she was adamant that not only didn't she provide room service, but also that it certainly wouldn't be delivered to the top floor at two o'clock in the morning! Steve, however, was un-phased and remained convinced it had happened. He even remembered what she was wearing - a black, full-length dress with a white apron. "I thought it a bit strange," he added, "Because it

was old-fashioned and not your style." Mum assumed he had been dreaming. There was no other explanation.... except for the fact that the room he was renting was the same one the Irish woman had stayed in!

Apart from this, the incidents seemed unrelated, and as no-one else in the house reported any strange happenings, the matter was forgotten. That is, until the electrical wiring started to play up. Ron, a friend who was an electrician, was engaged to renew some of the worst-affected. He was on the top floor right opposite Steve's old room in a small kitchen provided for the use of those residents unable to afford full board and lodging. Ron's idea was to save time and money by running a cable through the skirting board into the front bedroom and he had drilled a hole to achieve this. Having pushed sufficient wire through the hole, he went into the room, but was unable to see either the cable or the hole. Following some pertinent measurements, he went to my mother and reported that something wasn't quite right. It had always been assumed that the large front room extended across the entire width of the house; but, according to Ron's calculations, it was considerably shorter. From this, he deduced that there was a large cavity at the end, the same width as the kitchen wall, and which for some reason had been bricked up. Mother's answer was simple: "Let's have a look. Knock a hole in the wall." Against his better judgement, Ron did and discovered another room beyond. It was unfurnished, bore no obvious signs of previous habitation and was rather small; but it was just the kind of room at the top of a large house where a junior maid-servant might have been expected to sleep. The puzzle of the room opposite was beginning to take shape.

Steve's description of the woman who had brought him the tea certainly reflected the fashion and customs of a much earlier period. The furniture which had been purchased with the house dated back to the beginning of the twentieth century, an era when domestic service was a common occupation; and the presence of bell-pushes in every room endorsed the likelihood that some servants would have been employed there in the past. So, if one was to believe in such things, the ghost could have been the lingering spirit of a deceased maid, or perhaps a nurse who had attended the needs of patients when the house was used as a clinic. But why linger at all? Did the spectre have unfinished business, a message to impart, a task which it required someone still living to perform? On a more sinister note, might that task be exposure of, even revenge for an injustice which had been covered up? The sealing-off of the room hinted at something unmentionable, perhaps untoward having taken place there.

We played around with theories of this nature for a while, but were never particularly concerned that our house might be haunted. After all, as far as we knew only two of the guests had received visitations, little harm had been done, and when there were no further occurrences, the topic died its own death. Some years later, my interest was renewed by a television documentary about a local unsolved mystery that had been enacted in 1876 at a property known as The Priory. It was located in the same street as our home and, being at the edge of the park where I used to play, I had often walked past it in ignorance of the dark secrets fermenting within its walls. According to the documentary, the affluent head of the household had died in suspicious circumstances, yet a coroner's inquest had failed to conclude whether it was the result of an accident, suicide, or murder. The case was only mildly intriguing as crime mysteries are, but some of the facts struck a familiar chord. With the help of an old friend who was staying with us at the time, I began delving into the details more thoroughly. We eventually concluded that the death at The Priory might be linked in some way to the bizarre incidents at our guest house.

Our presumptions were based on the property's former use as a clinic and the added fact that the doctor running it had family ties to France. Although he would not have featured in the case, being far too young, it was likely there was an earlier connection. Perhaps he had bought an existing, viable practice from a colleague who was French; and that person *could* have been involved. I deduced this for a number of reasons. For one, the victim's wife, who was also a

possible suspect, frequently spent time at a French health spa. For another, when her husband was discovered to be severely ill, the regular family doctor was not called, but rather a medical person who lived, apparently, much closer. Remembering that in those days the suburb was in its infancy with fewer residences - even the inquest had to be held at the local pub because the area had nothing more suitable - it was unlikely that there would have been more than one general practitioner in a location with so few prospective patients. Could a doctor living in our house have been the one called to the emergency? It is possible.

None of this, of course, helped explain the ghost of a maid serving a cup of tea in the middle of the night. Nor her compulsion to throw an ashtray at a woman she could not have known. Maybe she just liked men and had something against women in general. But what if she had been in service at the time and had learned something which implicated the perpetrator of the crime to be a woman, possibly the wife? And what if that woman had found out and silenced her, permanently? Living just down the road, she may even have had a relationship with the victim, giving her access to intimate family secrets that might have helped change the coroner's verdict. Perhaps the wife was having an affair with the local doctor? Such assignments weren't unheard of. And a medical person would know the best ways to dispose of an unwanted spouse. As for Steve and the cup of tea, what was the message there? Could it have been that the poison wasn't in the victim's sherry as was assumed at the time, but rather in some tea he had been served earlier?

The many questions surrounding the mysterious death at the old Priory were never answered. Neither were the strange visitations at the guest house which was eventually sold. My parents bought a small hardware shop further down the same street, keeping in touch with the new owners who would pop in occasionally for a chat. They were continuing on with the same business, taking in guests and fairing reasonably. But it wasn't easy, confided John, the one it seemed, who did most of the work. His partner, Gordon, was inclined to be somewhat liberal with his favours and often had his actor friends to stay at no charge. "I wouldn't mind so much," added John, "But they always find something to complain about!" Then he went on to ask sheepishly: "Did anything strange happen while you were in the house?" My mother looked puzzled and prompted him to explain. "Well," he said, "One of Gordon's cronies claimed he had a sleepless night because it sounded like someone in the room above was moving furniture around all night. I told him the room hadn't been let. In fact, the whole top floor was empty." Mum asked which room Gordon's friend was in, to which John replied: "Number three." Room three just happened to be directly below number five, Steve's old room! The ghost, it seemed, was still around and making her presence known. In a way, it was a relief to believe that the house alone was the object of its attentions and it had elected to stay there.

Over a period from the mid-sixties to 1972, our entire family emigrated to the Antipodes. I eventually settled in Western Australia and built a new house on previously undeveloped land which, to my knowledge, had no remarkable history. The neighbouring house had been constructed just months before mine and was similarly free from concerning associations. When it was put up for sale, I encouraged my mother to buy it. She was a widow by then and I felt she would benefit from being close to family in her Autumn years. It worked well. We saw Mum every day, maintained her garden and the property in general, shared weekend meals together and even our cat spent half of its life asleep on her bed. They were happy times and when she died peacefully in her sleep we liked to think that she had closed her own book quietly and with few regrets. Her house had never experienced any traumatic or bizarre events, definitely none that might leave a lasting impression. So, it came as something of a shock when, shortly after moving in, the young couple to whom it was sold asked whether anyone had died in the house. They would have known that it was part of a deceased estate, but we had thought it wise not to mention that Mum had actually passed away in the master bedroom. We countered the awkward question with one of our own, curious to know why they thought that might be the case. The

young husband explained: "On a few occasions, the television switches itself on after we've gone to bed." To which his wife added: "And something odd happened in the kitchen last night. We heard pots and pans being moved about. We got up to investigate and found the cupboard doors open! It's really weird."

It certainly was and it sent shivers down my spine. Despite having never witnessed these, or any events of a supernatural nature, I have no reason to disbelieve those who claim they have. Can buildings or the ground they stand on be haunted by unnatural entities? Might those forces be attracted to a living person to such a degree that they would attach themselves to that particular individual and travel with them wherever they might go? Or is it possible that a living person could be so receptive to individuals on the other side that they might invite them to return to the present? Even if she had stirred something from the dark past of the old guest house that continued on after she had left, it wouldn't explain the strange visitations in my mother's new Australian home. Not unless she had brought the spectre with her.

There is one other thought: the ghost was her all along, having returned from a former life to spend time in the London dwelling where she was once in service, then later lingering a while to continue gracing her much-loved Australian home. Only my mother knows whether any of this is true, and unfortunately she has gone now. But perhaps I will be able to ask her about it if, at some time in the future, she decides to pay us a visitation.

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