

MR. BLINT AND THE DISCREDITABLE SPECTRES: A STORY

BY THEODORA BOSANQUET

I

MR. BLINT'S perceiving blue eyes noted with prompt approval the mellow dignity of the house that blocked the farther end of an avenue of rook-haunted elms. He tugged sharply at the cord of communication with the chauffeur's arm three times. That meant 'Stop,' but Harper's response was slightly delayed because he had at one time been an omnibus driver and had not completely shed his memories.

'That's some house,' Mr. Blint said to his secretary.

Chubbock agreed. He was always agreeable and supporting. He had n't really observed the house as they passed by the avenue, but he made up for that by pointing out a decaying notice-board which announced that this desirable mansion was to be let, unfurnished, and invited applicants to inquire of Messrs. Bissy and Shap, Kensington, for further particulars.

'I should like to look around,' Mr. Blint said, and Chubbock again agreed.

The tall, rusty gates between the wolf-crowned posts were padlocked and bolted. Chubbock suggested forcing them, but Mr. Blint, already in imagined possession, demurred. 'We'll find another entrance. Being through this gate would n't end our trouble. There must be ten or twelve elm trees across the way.'

'Elms are risky in a high wind, they don't root deep enough,' said Chubbock, who had learned that his em-

ployer liked being informed, 'but I wonder why they've been left to lie there?'

A few minutes' walking brought them to a little wooden door in the high lichen-stained wall, a tempting little door which yielded at once to Chubbock's push, and let them into a prickly thicket of rambling rose bushes. Sharp thorns scratched their hands and faces and tore their coats and trousers as they plunged along the overgrown path, struggling upward toward a broad terrace that promised ease. The ground fell sharply away from the house on this side, and they climbed the crumbling steps of three wide levels before they were at the walls of the building itself. Mr. Blint stared about him as he stood recovering easy breath.

It was clear that nobody had either lived in the house or cared for the place for many years. Ragged waves of rank vegetation surged over the surface of lawns and terraced borders right up to the weedy platform where he stood. In another month or two, when summer had fulfilled the promise of spring, every trace of ordered form would be lost in the triumph of the conquering wilderness. Mr. Blint turned his back on nature and gazed up at the stone-built house.

'Genuine Tudor,' he decided, but he did n't feel certain enough to express his opinion aloud. The business of architectural connoisseurship was taking time to learn. He said instead, 'That's a fine row of dormer windows.'

which were the kind of thing one could recognize quite easily.

'They've been targets for a lot of long-range catapult practice,' said Chubbock, stooping to pick up some smooth round stones. 'Queer that the boys have n't been to fetch some of their shot. Decent stones are n't too common.'

'Well, I reckon they've made it easy for us to walk inside. There ain't a sound windowpane in the whole front.'

They had little difficulty in opening one of the lower windows and climbing through into a long, low room that seemed, from its array of shelves, to have been a library. At the farther end it opened into a great central hall, where Chubbock's attention was caught by the tarnished splendor of a line of coats of arms painted on the dark panels. While Mr. Blint hurried from room to room, taking stock of all the dilapidated beauty and possible restoration, Chubbock's imagination played round the owners of those peeling coats of arms. Heraldry was not, as he would have said, his strong suit, but he made out that the constantly recurring representation of a castle, surmounted by a mailed fist, must be associated with the main line of the possessing family. Looking about for further evidence he discovered the monogram 'B. de B.' roughly carved on a panel over the fireplace.

Further research was checked by a noisy shout from Mr. Blint, who had reached the upper floor. Chubbock ran upstairs. He found the little man leaning out of the window at the western end of a long corridor. 'Look, Mr. Chubbock, look at that!' he exclaimed.

Chubbock looked out over the low walls of outbuildings to a shimmer of water. 'Yes, sir?' he said, gently inquiring.

'Fish ponds,' said Mr. Blint. Then he added, 'We'll go right back to Kensington.'

II

When he called next morning at the office of Messrs. Bissy and Shap, Mr. Blint amiably observed to the clerks in charge that he was pleased to meet them. 'Perhaps,' he added, 'you'll have heard of me— Abraham L. Blint, sole patentee of "My Mother's Tones" records, the only successful attempt yet made to reproduce the softer notes of the human voice. Your lightest whisper made audible throughout the Albert Hall.' He paused at this point for their recognition. Renouncing expectation, he went on: 'I presume you can put me in possession of an estate just outside Cutsdene village, County Oxford.'

They hunted the property through several folios, finally running it down as 'Blackmere Hall,' a fine Tudor mansion (with later additions), beautifully situated in salubrious surroundings, comprising a large walled garden, fish ponds, a park, and several acres of shooting. To be let on a long lease.

'It appears to have been empty a long time. You gentlemen don't happen to know why, do you?' Mr. Blint asked.

Neither of the young gentlemen could imagine why.

'I'd kind of hoped there might be a family ghost,' Mr. Blint explained. 'I promised to get an old English house for a birthday present for my daughter, and she's crazy to have a ghost. However, I'll take the risk of there not being one. You put the thing through for me right now.'

A week of such hustling as the clerks of Messrs. Bissy and Shap had never before been subjected to in their tranquil lives put Mr. Blint in possession. He engaged a landscape gardener, a sanitary engineer, and an architect, licensed them to engage all the labor they required at any price they liked,

wrote to his daughter, Regina, that he had a good specimen of a Tudor house which would be ready for her birthday, and told Chubbock to do his best to discover a potential family ghost in the history of Blackmere Hall.

The gardener, the architect, and the sanitary engineer applied themselves expectantly, though not without mutual bickering, to their jobs. Regina Blint cabled that she should sail on June 12.—a clear six weeks ahead, but Regina was a natural cabler. Chubbock, delving in county histories and parish records, and supplementing these researches by inquiries in the Cutsdene public houses, was able to offer his employer plenty of reassuring evidence of the thoroughly haunted condition of the place.

It had come into the possession of the de Banville family in 1550, when one Brian de Banville (Chubbock remembered the monogram over the fireplace), impoverished by a dissolute and expensive mode of life, had sought to mend his fortunes by espousing an heiress whose appearance had discouraged less bold or less desperate men. The chronicler of Brian's marriage described her, indeed, as 'Black-browed and squinting with a mighty hump upon her back.' The child of this matrimonial venture, inheritor of his father's tastes and his mother's looks, was the first of a long line of 'wicked lords,' who held and bled the property till 1880, when the last baron died childless and intestate. The place had passed to the son of a sister, who had escaped the perpetual virginity that was the common portion of the bad-tempered, ill-favored de Banville women by bribing her father's groom to run away with her. Her son enjoyed his inheritance for less than a day. He was found dead on the floor of his bedroom the morning after his arrival, with black finger marks on his

throat, and his wife gibbering in a corner of the room. The elder of his two sons was drowned in the fish pond on the day of his father's funeral; the younger, separated from his family at this juncture by an attack of measles, had never been inside the gates. He had a firm conviction that a visit would prove unhealthy for him. He had, therefore, let it, on a thirty years' lease, to a gentleman who, having amassed a fortune in the city, wished to acquire a position in the country. But the gentleman had discovered, after a tenancy of one week, that Blackmere Hall was in the wrong part of the country, and the place had remained empty ever since.

These were the more important of the facts collected by the industrious Chubbock, who laid them before Mr. Blint with some pride. Not every untenanted house had so rich a train of sinister associations nor so bad a reputation among the villagers in the vicinity. Not even to steal timber, not even to recover catapult shot would the strong men or the limber lads of the village enter the precincts of Blackmere Hall. The landscape gardener, the architect, and the sanitary engineer had alike found local labor unavailable. Workmen had to be conveyed in motor lorries from Oxford every day.

III

The gurgling of the new cistern was one of the first noises to attract the attention and arouse the suspicion of the de Banvilles. After that they began to notice many other changes during their nightly peregrinations. Hot-water pipes coiled about the walls, the roof became water tight, the windows were completely glazed, the drains exposed and replaced, the courtyard turned into a dumping ground for bricks and mortar. Comparing notes

of indignation, the de Banvilles found themselves agreed for the first time since their death. The fury that consumed their incorporeal bosoms burned the fiercer for their inability to resist the invasion of their premises. By daylight they were without any power to demonstrate their displeasures, and each evening the bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, and gardeners laid down their tools and sought their lorries at 6 o'clock, with the punctual unanimity of good trade unionists.

The de Banvilles passed sleepless days in the halls of the damned discussing the approaching menace to their enjoyment of their nocturnal quarters. Making a virtue of necessity they talked with tolerance of the building operations. 'The place will last us the longer,' as one shade expressed it.

Nevertheless, they took full advantage of their first opportunity for practising any art but patience. This occurred when the old English furniture, acquired throughout the English countryside at prices that would have made the dealers writhe with anguish if they had known, arrived in several *pantehnicon* vans. The unloading and arrangement of this collection was estimated to last two days. The night watchman left in charge when the first day's unpacking was ended fled away shrieking at midnight to the Banville Arms, where he threatened to die in convulsions.

Mr. Blint hurried down from London the moment he was aware of this event. He interrogated the man with eager curiosity, but could extract little information beyond that 'several of 'em' had surrounded him and that a monstrous white hound with a fiery tongue had pursued him to the gates. Mr. Blint lost no time in letting his daughter know these glad tidings.

'Real Tudor ghosts with usual domestic animals,' he cabled. She replied that she was sailing immediately lest they should have vanished before she could see them.

'She'll be right here in another ten days,' Mr. Blint told Chubbock. 'You hire a set of English servants to-morrow at a Registry Bureau, so we'll be able to have the house ready for her. You're so clever, Mr. Chubbock, I can trust you to get the real old kind, but you show them to me before they start in, just so that I can bring a fresh eye to bear and see if they look the family servant type.'

The fresh eye could detect nothing that was n't typical about the collection presented to its notice by Chubbock. There was a housekeeper with gray hair and big spectacles who genuflected with an audible rustle of her black silk skirts. There was a shaven butler, wearing a Roman nose at an angle of perfectly discreet dignity. There were footmen who were noticeable for nothing but their height and their impassive expression. There was a red-faced cook and a pale-faced kitchen maid. There were variously demure housemaids. There was a boot boy in the uniform of a scout.

Mr. Blint's natural desire to induct this company into the house himself melted away before the housekeeper's serene assurance that everything should be ready for his arrival in time for dinner on the day after their own installation. He began to recognize the beauty of the English tradition of perpetual readiness for the coming of the master. Clearly it was one of the rules that you must give your servants a start in the first place. Afterwards it was their business never to be taken by surprise. Amicably wishing to play his own part worthily, Mr. Blint fell in with the proposed arrangement.

IV

For the first time in their long years of honorable service the housekeeper and the butler had failed to maintain their attitude. When Mr. Blint and his secretary entered the Hall they found it void of any human presence.

Chubbock's immediate fear that he had engaged a gang of burglars with a pretty talent for amateur theatricals was dispelled by the shining array of plate on the sideboard. Then he saw an envelope addressed to Mr. Blint lying on a salver. The enclosed note stated in respectful terms and unsteady writing that the entire staff had left for London, 'not being equal to the strain of another night.'

'You go right back and hire another set, Mr. Chubbock. You can tell them whatever you think they ought to know and you can offer them double wages.'

'But you'll come too, sir,' Mr. Chubbock urged. 'You can't stay here alone.'

Mr. Blint's blue eyes were gleaming and his thin straight lips were so nearly relaxed from their habitual and misleading line of dogged determination as to be almost parted. 'Why, Mr. Chubbock, it is n't that I don't appreciate your company, but I know you'll understand my feeling; I can get the full flavor better by myself. You can send Harper down with a car first thing tomorrow.'

Chubbock never argued. He was too tall and too modest. 'Are you going to sit up all night?' he asked.

'I shall do very well in the big chair. But have some supper before you start back. They've laid out plenty of cold food,' said Mr. Blint, leading the way to the table.

They ate in silence, Mr. Blint exalted above the level of easy speech and Chubbock depressed below it.

The only reference he made to the situation in which he was to leave his employer was contained in an offer of his electric torch, 'in case anything goes wrong with the light.'

Mr. Blint refused. 'I'd rather use a candle in one of those pewter candlesticks.'

He had no intention of putting the lighting apparatus to any test. Firelight and candlelight were the proper illumination for ghosts, not acetylene gas. He sent Chubbock away in the twilight, and settled himself in the inglenook of the great hall to await the coming of night.

Night came with a sighing wind that rustled through the leaves of the elms and sent branches tapping gently against the windows. Beyond the wavering patch of firelight the comfortable forms of solid oak chairs and tables were blotted out in the darkness. Mr. Blint turned away from the fire so that nothing visible could approach without his observation, and reminded himself frequently of the position of each of the five doors leading off from the hall. The staircase was easily remembered — besides the polish of the steps occasionally reflected the gleam of a leaping flame.

After he had replenished the fire for the fifth time, he began to relax a little of his strained attention. Observation with nothing to observe but the flickering shadows was fatiguing. His thoughts began to wander across the Atlantic.

They came to heel smartly as his ears caught the sound of voices on the stairs, whispering. He sat very straight and still, staring up into the blackness, listening to the sound of feet that came tapping down the wooden steps and the swish of silken skirts. But no form emerged from the dark shadow.

Mr. Blint asked himself if he could be mistaken. Perhaps the rising wind

had sounded like muttered speech. Perhaps the tapping branches had reminded him of footsteps. Perhaps rats or mice —

A scream ran down the stairs, then three pistol shots in quick succession, then a yell of triumphant laughter. Lighting his candle as he stumbled up the stairs, Mr. Blint ran hurrying toward the sound. But the laughter died away before he could locate it, and he was recalled to the hall by a hollow groan.

When he reached the hall it was full of whispers, but there was nothing to be seen.

At the end of another hour Mr. Blint was tired. Rapid pursuit and stealthy stalking had equally failed to bring him into any relation with the owners of the ghostly voices. His own speech was the only articulate sound among the indistinguishable murmurs. 'Could n't you wait a bit?' he called vainly after retreating footsteps as he pattered along with his candle held aloft.

With the return of daylight the voices were hushed and Mr. Blint was forced to the rueful conclusion that he was no seer. Probably, he admitted, he had not sufficiently exercised his psychic faculties. But it was a consolation to remember that Regina had exercised hers. She was never without a presentiment or an intuition.

He put the case to a friend with whom he was lurching. 'It is n't,' he explained, 'as if I could n't hear the darned ghosts. I know they're there.'

His friend told him he was the victim of auditory hallucinations, a commonplace trouble curable by psychoanalysis.

Mr. Blint took an intelligent interest in the theory, but was not wholly convinced of its application. 'Is that so?' he said. Then, suddenly aware that a wonderful idea had been born

to him, he added: 'Well, if I am hallucinated any I guess I can fix up a witness that won't be. You come to my rooms next Saturday at 11 A.M., and I'll show you something very interesting.'

He arrived punctually to find Mr. Blint and Chubbock busy putting together a big gramophone. The case was decorated with a picture of a baby, presumably orphaned, being lulled to sleep by a record of 'My Mother's Tones.'

'This is the new witness,' Mr. Blint explained. 'I got the apparatus fitted up to take records in the places where the ghosts seemed to be making the most noise. Now we'll see whether they made any impression.'

'Ah, great scheme,' said his visitor, but he looked as if he expected nothing from it.

'Put in the staircase disc, Mr Chubbock.'

Chubbock selected the disc, fixed it in position and set it rotating.

The sounds that first reached Mr. Blint were as unrecognizable as the mutterings he had heard himself while he watched in the hall. By degrees, however, as he grew accustomed to the faint thin pitch, he made out fragments of articulate sentences, and began to be able to piece them together.

The moving disc moved on, dragging Mr. Blint's amazed attention in its wake. He held his breath for a horrified moment, letting it out in a low whistle. He looked at the door, which was safely shut. Then he looked at Chubbock's cheeks, which were bright pink. Finally he looked at his skeptical friend, whose face was hidden by his hands.

It should be remembered that although it had been disappointing for Mr. Blint not to see any ancestral shades, it had been far more disconcerting for the de Banvillès not to

bring off any of their effects. They had been at immense pains to arrange a series of scenes from the most discreditable parts of their earthly history. Representations of murdered wives, tortured rivals, mouthing maniacs had been set with every care for verisimilitude; and Mr. Blint, instead of being reduced to twittering imbecility, had run about with a lighted candle begging them to show themselves. Naturally the de Banvilles had been beside themselves with impotent rage.

They had not, however, been speechless. Mr. Blint waited while the disc performed a few more revolutions. Then he sprang forward and stopped the machine.

‘I don’t reckon,’ he said slowly, ‘there’s a mighty amount for a man of my experience to learn about vice. I’m acquainted with most kinds of wickedness to be found in the United States and the Argentine Republic. I’ve heard language in saloons out West that would blow you gentlemen from here to Alabama. But the things recorded on that disc——!’ He threw the window wide open and leaned out to inhale a deep breath of the good London air. ‘What makes me sorry,’ he went on, ‘is the disap-

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pointment to Miss Blint. I could n’t be responsible for letting a pure-minded, high-thinking young American girl run the risk of meeting ghosts like those. Mr. Chubbock, you go and fix it with those agents. Tell them to get me another Tudor house within the week.’

‘If you’ve no other use for the discs,’ said his converted friend, ‘I might take them to the Society of Psychological Research. They would value them immensely.’

‘I don’t think I could do that,’ said Mr. Blint.

‘Not in the interests of science?’

Mr. Blint’s conscience was made in New England. It was impervious to the claims of science when they conflicted with the claims of morality. ‘I’ve attended meetings of the Society,’ he explained, ‘and I would n’t like the members to hear what we’ve heard this morning. Several of them are University professors.’

Lest he should be further tempted, the champion of ancestral decency destroyed the evidence with the poker.

Nevertheless, the de Banvilles had won their battle. They had routed the invader and regained peaceful possession of a greatly strengthened habitation.

THAT YOUNG, SHY CLERGYMAN

BY MAX BEERBOHM

FRAGMENTARY, pale, momentary — almost nothing — glimpsed and gone — as it were, a faint human hand thrust up, never to reappear, from beneath the rolling waters of time, he forever haunts my memory and solicits my weak imagination. Nothing is told of him but that once, abruptly, he asked a question, and received an answer.

This was on the afternoon of April 7, 1778, at Streatham, in the well-appointed house of Mr. Thrale. Johnson, on the morning of that day, had entertained Boswell at breakfast in Bolt Court, and invited him to dine at Thrale Hall. The two took coach and arrived early. It seems that Sir John Pringle had asked Boswell to ask Johnson what were the best English sermons for style. In the interval before dinner, accordingly, Boswell reeled off the names of several divines whose prose might or might not win commendation. 'Atterbury?' he suggested.

Johnson: Yes, Sir, one of the best.

Boswell: Tillotson?

Johnson: Why, not now. I should not advise anyone to imitate Tillotson's style; though I don't know; I should be cautious of censuring anything that has been applauded by so many suffrages. South is one of the best, if you except his peculiarities, and his violence, and sometimes coarseness of language. Seed has a very fine style; but he is not very theological. Jortin's sermons are very elegant. Sherlock's style, too, is very elegant, though he has not made it his principal study. And you may add Smalridge.

Boswell: I like Ogden's Sermons on Prayer very much, both for neatness of style and subtlety of reasoning.

Johnson: I should like to read all that Ogden has written.

Boswell: What I want to know is, what sermons afford the best specimen of English pulpit eloquence.

Johnson: We have no sermons addressed to the passions that are good for anything; if you mean that kind of eloquence.

A Clergyman (whose name I do not recollect): Were not Dodd's sermons addressed to the passions?

Johnson: They were nothing, Sir, be they addressed to what they may.

The suddenness of it! Bang! — and the rabbit that had popped from its burrow was no more.

I know not which is the more startling — the *début* of the unfortunate clergyman or the instantaneousness of his end. Why had n't Boswell told us there was a clergyman present? Well, we may be sure that so careful and delicate an artist had some good reason. And I suppose the clergyman was left to take us unawares because just so did he take the company. Had we been told he was there, we might have expected that sooner or later he would join in the conversation. He would have had a place in our minds. We may assume that in the minds of the company around Johnson he had no place. He sat forgotten, overlooked; so that his self-assertion startled everyone just as on Boswell's page it startles us. In Johnson's massive and magnetic presence only some very remark-