

The Dressing-Room

Cases of Hauntings at the Prince Regent and Other Theatres

By Elliott O'Donnell

The idea of a theatre being haunted—a theatre where everything is bright and everyone full of life—must, for the moment, strike one as preposterous. Why, the mere thought of the footlights, to say nothing of the clapping of hands and thunders of applause from the Gods, conjures up a picture which is the very antithesis of ghosts. Besides, why should a theatre be haunted? To be haunted, a place must have a history—someone must have committed a crime there, such as murder or suicide; and surely no such thing has ever happened in a theatre! Imagine a murder, a real one, at Drury Lane, or a suicide, say, at the Gaiety! Why, the thing is monstrous, absurd! And as to a ghost—a *bona fide* ghost—appearing on the stage or in the auditorium, why, such an idea is without rhyme or reason; it is, in fact, inconceivable, and the public—the all-wise public—would, of course, laugh it to scorn.

But stop a moment. Does the general public know everything? Is not the theatre, to it, simply the stage, and is it not profoundly ignorant of all that lies beyond the stage—away back, behind the hidden wings? Is it not profoundly ignorant, also, of the great basement below the stage with its dark and tortuous passages; and profoundly ignorant of the many flights of cold and carpetless stairs, leading to story upon story of seemingly never-ending dressing-rooms and corridors? What does it know, too, of the individual lives of the many generations of actors and actresses, call-boys and dressers who have toiled wearily up those stairs and along those dimly lit passages in between the acts? what does it know of the thoughts of all that host of by-gones—of their terrible anxieties, their loves, their passions? what does it know of the tragedies with which, doubtless, many of these people have been intimately associated, and of the crowd of ghosts they have, wittingly or unwittingly, brought with them from their own homes?—f or ghosts, even as they haunt houses, haunt people and mercilessly attach themselves to them. Moreover, although they have long since been forgotten, tragedies have occurred in some of the oldest of the London theatres. Hunt up the records of eighty and ninety years ago, and you will find that more than one dressing-room witnessed the tragic ending of some lesser star, some member of the crowd, a mere “walker on”; that duels were not infrequently fought in grim earnest on the boards; and that more than one poor super has been found hanging from a cobwebby beam in a remote corner of the great maze-like basement of the building.

Again, think of the site of a London theatre! prehistoric man or beast may well lie buried there; witches accused of practising their nefarious rites on or near that site may well have been burnt there.

Think, too, of the houses that once may have stood there! Inns, with dark tell-tale stains on their boards; taverns, tainted with vice—the rendezvous of truculent swashbucklers and painted jades; and even more terrible still, cruel and ghastly slaughter-houses.

Ground, then, and houses alike, all may have had their hauntings; and the ghosts may have stayed on, as ghosts often do, haunting anew each successive building. Yes, more

than one London theatre is haunted—and several of these theatres have more than one ghost.

The proprietors affect ignorance and of course tell you nothing. They like to see long queues of people waiting for admission to their show, but they have no desire to see a corresponding crowd at the box office seeking permission to sit up all night in the theatre to see the ghost. No, if you want to find out if a theatre is haunted, you must not apply to the proprietor, you must inquire of the actors themselves; and, in order to stand a really good chance of discovering the truth, you should, if possible, for a time become one of them. It was for the purpose of making such a discovery that I took it into my head one day last year to apply for a walk on at the Mercury. I had often wondered if the Mercury was haunted. I speedily found out that it was not. Still, I was not altogether disappointed, for I learned from some of my fellow-walkers on and from one of the stage hands of several very interesting cases of hauntings at other of the London theatres. There is the Prince Regent's, for instance, which, as recently as the late nineties had a dressing-room, 25, that was always kept locked. It was in the autumn of 1897 that John W. Mayhew was engaged to play a small but rather important part there in *The Merciful Pirate*. The cast was an unusually large one, and Mayhew discovered that he had to share dressing-room 25 with another actor called Talbotson. The opening night of the play, however, Talbotson was laid up with influenza, and Mayhew had room 25 to himself. Being one of those over-anxious people who err on the side of being ultra-punctual, he arrived at the theatre at least an hour before the curtain went up, and, on the way to his room, he paused to chat with the stage doorkeeper.

"I noticed," he remarked, "when I was dressing for rehearsal yesterday that my room smelt very musty. Isn't it often used?"

"It hasn't been used since I've been here," was the reply.

"Why?" said Mayhew.

"I can't tell you," the doorkeeper answered surlily. "If you want to know, you had better ask the stage manager.

Not caring to do this, Mayhew made no further remarks, but hastened upstairs. No one was about, and the noise of his footsteps sounded strangely loud in the silent emptiness of the passages. He entered his room at last, hung his coat and hat on the door, and, crossing to his seat in front of a small mirror, sat down. "After all," he said to himself, "I'm glad Talbotson won't be here tonight. I'm not in a mood for talking, and the fellow bores me to distraction." He lit a cigarette, leaned back in a more comfortable attitude, and for some minutes allowed himself to revel in the luxury of a perfectly blank state of mind. Suddenly the handle of the door turned—a solitary, isolated sound—and he sat up sharply in his chair. "Who's there?" he shouted. There was no response.

"I couldn't have latched it properly," he reasoned, and once again he leaned back in his chair and smoked. Five or six minutes passed in this fashion, and he was thinking of beginning to dress, when there was another noise. Something behind him fell on the floor with a loud flop.

Once again he turned swiftly round. It was his hat—a hard felt bowler. It had fallen from the door peg on which he had hung it, and was still feebly oscillating.

"It is curious how one sometimes notices all these little things," he reflected. "I dare say door handles have turned and hats have fallen a thousand times when I might have heard them and haven't. I suppose it is because everything is so very quiet and I'm alone

in this part of the building.” Then he glanced at his coat—a long, double-breasted ulster — and rubbed his eyes thoughtfully. “Why,” he exclaimed, “what a curious shape the thing has taken! It’s swelled out just as if someone were inside it. Or has my eyesight suddenly gone wrong?” He leaned forward and examined it closely. No. He was not mistaken. The coat was no longer untenanted. There was something inside it—something which filled it like he had done; but it was something to which he could ascribe no name. He could see it there, and mentally feel that it was peering at him with eyes full of the most jibing mockery and hate; but he could not define it. It was something quite outside his ken, something with which he had had no previous acquaintance. He tried to whistle and appear nonchalant, but it was of no avail. The coat—his coat—had something in it, and that something was staring back at him. What a fool he had been to come so early. At last, with a supreme effort, he took his eyes from the door, and, swinging round in his chair, resumed smoking. He sat thus for some moments, and then a board close behind him creaked.

Of course there is nothing in a creak—boards and furniture are always creaking, and most people attribute the creaking to a change in the temperature. So did Mayhew. “The room is beginning to get warm—the gas has heated it,” he said; “that is why.” Still he gradually lowered his eyes, and when they rested on the mirror in front of him, he gave the barest suspicion of a start. In the mirror were reflected the door and the coat, but the latter hung quite limply now. There was nothing whatever filling it out.

What in Heaven’s name had become of the thing? Where had it got to? Close beside Mayhew was the grate, and a sudden rustling in it, followed by a hurried descent of soot, made him laugh outright. The explanation was now so very simple. The wind was responsible for it all—for the door handle, the hat, the coat, and the creak. How truly ridiculous! He would dress. With that object in view he threw the end of his cigarette in the fender and, rising, was about to quit his seat, when his eyes fell on his gloves. He had thrown them quite carelessly on the wash - stand, almost immediately in front of him, and he had noticed nothing remarkable about them then. But now—surely it could not be the wind this time; there were hands in them, and these hands were strangely unlike his own. Whereas his fingers had blunt, spatulate tips, the tops of these fingers were curved and pointed like the talons of some cruel beast of prey, and the palms were much longer and narrower than his own. He stared at them, too fascinated to do otherwise, and it seemed to him that they shifted their position and came nearer to him, with a slow, stealthy, silent motion, like that of some monstrous spider creeping murderously towards its helpless victim. He watched them for some moments quite motionless, and then, yielding to a sudden fit of ungovernable fury, he threw his tobacco pouch at the nearest.

It rolled convulsively over on its back after the manner of some living stricken creature, and then, gradually reassuming its shape, stealthily began once more to approach him. At last his nerves could stand it no longer. A demoniacal passion to smash, burn, torture it seized him, and, springing to his feet, he picked up his chair, and, swinging it round his head, brought it down with the utmost frenzy on the wash-stand. He was looking at his handiwork—the broken china, chair legs, and gas shade—when the door of his room opened and the call-boy timidly entered.

Mayhew kept the stage waiting some minutes that night, but the management did not abuse him nearly so violently as he had anticipated, and the next evening he was allotted another room.

Then it transpired, leaked out through one of the old supers who had worked at the theatre for years, that room 25 had always borne the name of being haunted, and that, excepting in circumstances such as the present, it had invariably been kept locked. Some two years ago, according to the old super, when just such another emergency had occurred and the room had been used, the same thing had happened: the gentleman who had been put there had been seized with a sudden fit of madness, and had broken everything he could lay hands on; and some time before that a similar experience had befallen an actress who had unavoidably—there being no other room available—occupied room 25.

Now had Mayhew not heard of these two cases, he might have concluded, in spite of feeling sure that he had been in a normal state of mind upon entering the room, that what he had gone through was due merely to an over-excited imagination; but since he now knew that others had witnessed the same phenomena, he saw no reason to doubt that there was some peculiarly sinister influence attached to the room. As to the cause of the haunting, he could elicit nothing more authentic or definite than the somewhat vague recollections of a very old actor. According to this rather doubtful authority, shortly after the opening of the theatre, one of the performers had suddenly developed madness and had been confined in room 25 till a suitable escort had been found to take him to an asylum. It was the only tragic occurrence, he asserted, that had ever taken place in that theatre. Now, supposing this to be true—that a madman really had been conducted from the stage to room 25 and temporarily confined there—might one not reasonably believe that in this incident lay the origin of the hauntings? It was in this room, in all probability, that the outbreak of madness passed its most acute stage—that psychological stage when the rational ego makes its last desperate stand against the overwhelming assault of a new and diseased self. And again—supposing this incident to be a fact—what more likely than that the immaterial insane ego of the afflicted man would, at times, separate itself from his material body and revisit the scene of its terrible conflict, permanently taking up its abode there after its material body had passed away? This theory—a very possible one, to my mind—would have strong support from parallel cases, for half the most malignant forms of haunting are directly traceable to the earth-bound spirits of the insane. There are several houses within a short walking distance of Bond Street that were once the temporary homes of mentally afflicted people, and they are now haunted in a more or less similar manner to room 25.

If this story of the old actor's is not correct—if his memory played him false—then of course one must look around for some other solution; and as, apparently, there is no history attached to the Prince Regent Theatre itself, one must assume either that the site of the theatre was haunted prior to the erection of the present building; or that the ghost was originally attached to some person who once occupied room 25, and that it subsequently left that person and remained in the room; or that some article of furniture in room 25, possibly even a fixture, was imported there from some badly haunted locality. There is, indeed, evidence regarding the first point; evidence that, either on or close to the site of the theatre, the remains of prehistoric animals—animals of a singularly savage species, which makes it more than likely that they met with a violent death—were unearthed; and as ghostly phenomena in the form of animals are quite as common as ghostly phenomena in the form of human beings, the hauntings of room 25 may very possibly be due to the spirit of one or more of these creatures. Or again, they might be

caused by what is generally known as a Vice Elemental, or “Neutrarian”; that is to say, a spirit that has never inhabited a material body, but which is wholly hostile to the human species. Such spirits are often, I believe, drawn to certain spots by the lustful or malicious thoughts of individuals, and might well be the case at the Prince Regent’s Theatre.

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It was also during my engagement at the Mercury that I heard of a haunting at the Lombard. This theatre, it appears, has a ghostly visitant in the form of a particularly malevolent-looking down.

According to one report, a lady and her daughter—Mrs. and Miss Dawkins—occupied box 3 one January night during the run of an exceedingly pretty modern version of *Cinderella*.

The lights were down and all eyes were focused on Cinderella, one of the prettiest and daintiest little actresses in London, dressed in pink and sitting before a very realistic make-belief of a kitchen fire, when Miss Dawkins, who had her elbows resting on the balustrade and was leaning well forward, heard a faint ejaculation from close beside her. Fearing lest her mother was ill, she turned sharply round, and was somewhat surprised to see that Mrs. Dawkins had left her seat and was leaning against the wall of the box with her arms folded and a most satirical smile on her face. Both the attitude and the expression were so entirely novel that Miss Dawkins could only conclude that her mother had suddenly taken leave of her senses; and she was deliberating what to do, when a feeling that a sudden metamorphosis was about to take place held her spellbound. Bit by bit her mother seemed to fade away, to melt into the background; the dim outline and the general pasture remained, but instead of the actual body and well-known face, she saw something else gradually begin to form and to usurp their place. Her mother had very delicate and beautifully shaped hands, but these vanished, and the hands Miss Dawkins now looked on were large and red and coarse—horribly coarse. Fearful of what she might see next, but totally unable to fight against some strange, controlling agency, she continued to look. First, her eyes rested on a pair of sleeves—white, baggy, and soiled; then on a broad, deep chest, also clad in white and decorated in the most fantastic manner conceivable in the centre; then on a short, immensely thick neck; and then on the face. The shock she now received was acute. Instinct had prepared her for something very startling, but for nothing quite so grotesque, nor so wholly at variance with the general atmosphere of the theatre. It was the painted, crinkled face of a clown—not a merry, jesting grimaldi, but a clown of a different type—a clown without a smile—a clown born and fully trained to his business in Hell. As he stood there glaring at the footlights, every feature, every atom of his person breathed out hate—hate of a nature so noxious and intense that it seemed to Miss Dawkins as if the very air were poisoned by it. Being a devout Catholic, she at once crossed herself and, although almost powerless with honor, began to pray. The face then faded till it entirely disappeared, and Miss Dawkins once again found herself gazing upon the well-known countenance of her mother.

“Why are you standing?” she asked.

“I am sure I don’t know,” Mrs. Dawkins replied. “But I don’t like this box. I think there is something very unpleasant about it. I haven’t been myself for the last few minutes. When I was sitting by you just now, I suddenly became obsessed with a bitter hatred

against everyone on the stage. The very sight of them maddened me. It seemed to me I had met them all in a former existence and that they had done me some irreparable injury. I got up and began to plot how I could best get even with them. Then the idea of setting fire to the theatre seized me. I had clear visions of a small, dimly lighted room, with which I was strangely familiar, down below the stage in a dark, draughty basement. I knew every inch of the place as if I had lived there all my life. 'I will go there,' I said to myself, 'and apply a match. If anyone sees me, no one will suspect. They will only say, "It's old Tom. He didn't get the chuck after all. He's come back." ' I was repeating the words 'It's old Tom,' and 'Fire,' when something seemed to strike me very forcibly on the forehead. This caused me the greatest agony for a moment. Then you spoke, and I was myself again."

"Would you like to go home?" Miss Dawkins asked anxiously.

"I think I would," was the response. And they went.

Subsequently, a few judicious inquiries elicited no little light on the matter.

Many years before, an old actor, called Tom Weston, had been employed annually in pantomime at the Lombard as clown. Like so many of his profession, however, particularly the older ones, he took to drink; and he was so often intoxicated on the stage that the management were at last obliged to dismiss him. He took his dismissal very badly, and one night, having gone to the theatre in disguise, he was discovered in the act of setting fire to a room immediately beneath the stage. In consideration for his many years' service and age, the management did not prosecute, but recommended his friends to keep him under close supervision. Tom, however, very soon ceased to cause the management any anxiety, for, two days after he had attempted, in so diabolical a manner, to wreak his vengeance on all who had been associated with him at the theatre, he shot himself dead in his own home. But on every anniversary of his death, so it is affirmed, he is either seen or heard, or his presence is in some way demonstrated, in box 3 of the Lombard Theatre. That his spirit should frequent that particular spot in the theatre seems to be a fact for which no reason can be assigned.