

No. 11 Welham Square

Herbert Stephen

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1

We were sitting in the drawing-room of our house at Bayswater one evening after dinner, in high good-humour. I had that day been appointed to a certain post at the British Museum which would afford me ample opportunity for the studies in which I was most interested, and put me in possession of what I expected to find an ample competence. We had been talking over my prospects, and the only cloud I could discern upon the horizon was that I should have to be at my post at an earlier hour in the morning than was comfortably compatible with the three-mile walk from our house to the Museum.

"What a pity," said my youngest sister Patricia, "that we don't still live in the dear old house in Welham Square! You could have got to the Museum from there in five minutes."

I was born after we left Welham Square, but Patricia was six years my senior, and could remember her nursery days there.

"Not at all," said my father, very abruptly; "the walk will do you all the good in the world."

As the old gentleman had been, to all appearance, fast asleep for at least ten minutes, I was rather surprised at the energy with which he spoke. Looking up, I saw my mother making anxious signals to Patricia, which she followed up by instantly changing the subject.

A few days afterwards, as I descended reluctantly into the bowels of the earth at the Edgware Road Metropolitan Station, on the way to my new work for the first time, this episode recurred to my mind, and I began to speculate upon what might be the reasons that made the mention of Welham Square distasteful to my parents. I determined to consult my eldest sister Ellen on the subject, and from her, and some other sources, I gradually accumulated the facts which I will present here in the form of a continuous narrative.

No. 11 Welham Square has always been the freehold property of my family. It was built, together with several adjoining houses, about the beginning of the eighteenth century by the owner of a plot of land in which the houses stand, a retired attorney, who had two nephews.

These were Andrew Masey, my great-great-great-grandfather, and his cousin, Ronald Masey.

Ronald, who was generally thought to be his uncle's favourite, and probable heir, was an exceedingly tall and powerful young man, with a forbidding and melancholy expression of countenance.

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As a boy he was singularly backward, and his incapacity for mental exertion seemed to develop, as he grew up, into something not far removed from downright idiocy. His weakness of mind caused him to be remarkably subject to the influence of those with whom he lived, and in particular his cousin Andrew, my ancestor, was supposed to exercise over him an influence almost amounting to fascination, and to be able to mould him to all the purposes of an exceptionally vigorous will. Shortly after the building of the houses in what is now Welham Square, the uncle of these young men died, and Andrew took possession of all his property under the provisions, as he asserted, of a will, the existence of which no one except Ronald had any interest in disputing, and which no one except Andrew, the sole executor and devisee, ever saw.

Shortly before his uncle's death, Ronald had become engaged to a young lady named Lettice White, to whom he was passionately attached, and it was generally supposed among the neighbours that upon his accession to the avuncular wealth the marriage would take place. But when a barely decent interval had occurred since the old gentleman's obsequies, the fair Lettice was led to the altar, not by the impecunious Ronald, but by his more fortunate cousin Andrew.

The newly married pair took up their residence in No. 11, and Ronald came to live with them.

When it was represented to Andrew by some of his few intimate acquaintances that this arrangement was so singular as almost to be thought improper, he curtly gave them to understand that Ronald's mental condition was not such as to permit of his only living relation allowing him to live alone, and that he was compelled by the merest considerations of family affection to take the unfortunate young man into his own household. So the three lived on in the stately and somewhat gaunt mansion, Andrew collecting his rents with methodical regularity, and otherwise giving his neighbours but little concern. As for Ronald, there soon came to be little doubt in anyone's mind of his confirmed imbecility. He appeared seldom, and when he did, was for the most part silent, regarding his cousin and former betrothed with an expression of the profoundest submission, which at times merged into a look of wild and hardly human apprehension, "like a terrified brute-beast," as it was put by an old lady who was one of the few friends occasionally privileged to partake of the gloomy hospitality of this uncomfortable establishment. Nothing more was ever known of the condition in which my ancestor, his wife, and his cousin lived, and no one was specially interested when, about six years after the marriage, Ronald, who had not been seen for many months, died, and was buried in a frugal manner.

Before he had been dead a year, Andrew and Lettice suddenly left their house and took up their abode elsewhere, and after a while a tenant was found for No. 11. Thirty years later, the lease of the house having expired, Andrew's son, who had succeeded to his father's property, came to reside there, but not for long. He left the house suddenly after a few years, and a rumour went abroad that it was haunted, probably by the ghost of the unfortunate Ronald. From this time No.

11 descended from father to son, the adjoining property being sold piecemeal as the family necessities dictated. Occasionally the successive freeholders made attempts to live there, but they never stayed more than a few months, and on each occasion of their removal the rumours of ghostly possession were renewed. These, however, would die away, and tenants would after a time be found, who never suffered from any inconvenience. The last occupation by the owner was that of my father, who moved into the house when my sister Patricia was a little girl. After living there a year he left precipitately, but Ellen could give me no particulars of his reasons for doing so, and knew only that he disliked any reference to the house, and never mentioned it himself. The house was now let to a stockbroker with a family.

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Five years had elapsed since the conversation I related at the beginning of the previous chapter.

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My parents had both died, and Patricia was married and living with her husband in a provincial town. My career at the Museum had been a prosperous one, and I was now entrusted with a more responsible and better paid office. The tenant of No. 11 Welham Square had just given me notice of his intention to depart from it, and it occurred to me that it would be interesting to follow what seemed to be the family destiny, and try living in the house myself, to say nothing of the fact that it was admirably suited to my requirements. I felt fully capable of confronting any number of ghosts, and my wife was neither timid nor superstitious. Accordingly at the beginning of the new year we established ourselves, with our two babies, and my sister Ellen, who lived with us, in Welham Square, greatly delighted with the proximity of my work, with the solid masonry, spacious apartments, and roomy passages of our new abode, and with the remnant of eighteenth-century fashion and grandeur which seemed to pervade the neighbourhood. And in Welham Square we lived prosperously, without any kind of disturbance, for upwards of six months.

In the course of July my wife and the children left home to spend a couple of months at the seaside. I intended to join them when the time came to take my holiday, and in the meantime I stayed in London, going daily to my work. Ellen stayed on with me to keep house in the absence of her sister-in-law.

One evening, four or five days after my wife's departure, I was sitting in my study, a large room with a door leading into the drawing-room, and a heavy curtain hung over my side of the door. It was past eleven; my sister had retired half an hour before, and the two maids who were left in the house were presumably in bed and asleep. I was therefore surprised to hear heavy and somewhat slow footsteps, apparently those of a large man, ascending the stairs from the ground-floor.

The front door I knew was locked and chained, nor had I heard anyone ring. The steps paused for a moment on the landing outside my door, and then I heard the intruder proceed to go up the next flight of stairs leading to the bedrooms on the second floor. I sprang up, seized a candle, and opened the door. As I stood on the threshold of my room I seemed to hear footsteps, as of a man heavily mounting the stairs at the top of the flight leading up from my door. But, though I held the light above my head, I could see no one. Everything wore its usual aspect. I walked quickly up the stairs, but nobody was visible. I searched all the empty rooms, but with no result. I called up Ellen and the maids, but none of them had seen or heard anything. I am ashamed to say that I made a specially rigorous investigation of a large room at the back of the house, which we used for a night nursery, and which tradition declared to have been the abode of my ill-fated kinsman Ronald Masey. I then went downstairs and completed my search of the entire premises. Everything was in order, and at the end of an hour I went back to my study and my book, rather annoyed with myself for having spent so much time in so fruitless an exploration, and determined to think nothing more about the matter.

It was the next night after this that I suddenly started up very wide awake with a conviction that somebody was in my bedroom. I seemed to hear still ringing in my ears the sound of a long-drawn human sigh. I sat up, trembling with excitement, and looked about in the dim twilight of dawn in late July. I could see no one, but I did not feel alone. The feeling of suspense became unbearable. I jumped out of bed, and walked with nervous determination to the window, where I turned round and faced the room, such light as there was being behind me. I saw no one. Again I walked across the room, and as I did so I felt unmistakably that wave of air that meets one walking in the streets when someone on foot passes close to him in the opposite direction. I seemed to feel the light graze of a passing substance against my nightgown. I was dimly conscious of a faint, indescribable odour, calling up recollections of a time of life long but indefinitely past. And while I stood fixed to the spot with surprise and horror, my heart beating violently, I heard distinctly four long heavy steps passing from me towards the window. The floor creaked under their weight. The next instant I felt that I was alone. But it was not until long after the morning was as light as noon that I fell asleep again.

I awoke much troubled in mind, and doubting whether I should not, like my fathers, be compelled to leave this uncanny dwelling; but when in some measure restored by breakfast, I determined to say nothing to my sister at present, but to wait and see whether the situation would in any way develop itself. My resolution was fated to be

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put to the test sooner than I expected.

I did not get home that evening till close upon dinner-time. When I entered the drawing-room Ellen greeted me with, "Oh, Edward! What do you think has happened? Sikes is dead!" Now Sikes was a grey parrot belonging to my wife. He was so called because when he first came to us it was affirmed of him, perhaps rather libellously, that, like the hero of Mr.

Calverley's poem, he "habitually swore." He certainly did from time to time blaspheme somewhat unreservedly.

I was secretly not altogether sorry to hear of his demise. So I answered with much composure, "Did the cat eat him?"

"No," said Ellen, "he died in the most horrible convulsions."

I went up to get ready for dinner, thinking more of how to prevent my wife from replacing Sikes by another clamorous bird than of the manner of the lost one's death, but in the course of our meal it occurred to me that his fate was an odd one.

"How did Sikes come to have convulsions?" I asked.

"Why, it was most curious," answered Ellen. "I was going to tell you about it. I was in the drawing-room writing letters, and suddenly I heard a tremendous screaming and flapping, and I looked up, and there was Sikes turning over and over in the air, and pecking, and clawing, and flapping his wings, and screaming, and before I could get to him he suddenly twisted his head right round two or three times, and tumbled down dead on the floor."

"But do you mean," I said, "that he was carrying on these gymnastics up in the air?"

"Yes; when I saw him he was quite up above his cage, which was on the little table, and in his struggles he must have wrung his own neck."

"That seems rather remarkable."

"Yes; and another remarkable thing was that he must have opened the door of his cage and got out all by himself, which I never heard of his doing before, because I had been feeding him with cake after lunch, and I know the door was fastened then. I found it open when he was dead."

"Had he been out long?"

"No. He must have been seized almost directly he got out, because it so happened that about five minutes before he began to scream, I fancied I heard the door open, and looked up to see if anyone was coming in, and no one was there, but I happened to see the parrot, and he was in his cage just as usual."

"Well," I said, "I suppose he's dead, and there's an end of it; but it is a very singular catastrophe. I hope Marion won't be inconsolable."

During the rest of dinner I was conscious of being rather poor company. Following close upon the mysterious occurrences I have described, Sikes's unhappy fate troubled me. My suspicions were, however, so undefined, and seemed even to me, when I tried to contemplate them from an impartial point of view, so ridiculous, that I could not bring myself to communicate them to Ellen, and incur the contempt which would be the deserved portion of a grown-up man who confessed to being seriously disturbed by an odd sound in an empty house, and by a commonplace nightmare. I have no hesitation in revealing these sentiments now that subsequent events have

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justified them. But that evening I again determined to wait. I did not have to wait long.

It was a cold evening, and, after bidding good-night to my sister, I lighted a fire in my study and sat down to enjoy a new novel I had long been wishing to read. I was about halfway through my volume when I suddenly felt a sensation of cold. I looked up. The fire was burning brightly, but I did not feel its warmth. It was as though some opaque body, or a large glass screen, had been interposed between me and it. A moment afterwards I felt the heat fall on my face again.

Had I heard the muffled sound of a footstep on the hearth-rug close to me? I put out my hand and felt nothing but the warmth of the fire. As I gazed about the room in surprise my eye fell on an armchair standing on the other side of the fire. It was a nearly new chair, which I had bought shortly after coming to Welham Square. It had a leather seat, smooth and unworn, with particularly good and yielding springs. Hung upon its back was an antimacassar, worked aesthetically in crewels. As I looked at this chair it struck me that the seat was considerably depressed, as though some one had recently sat down upon it, and the seat had failed to resume its ordinary level. This surprised me, for I had sat in the chair that morning and felt sure the springs had then been in good order. I looked at the antimacassar. Towards the top it was pushed up in wrinkles. As I looked, it occurred to me that it was impossible for it to hang in such a manner by itself. It looked for all the world as if an invisible but substantial human frame was then actually sitting in the chair. When this notion occurred to me, I sat dazed with an indescribable horror, staring stupidly at the chair, which did not move. In an access of frenzied terror, I hurled the book I was reading at the chair. Did it strike the seat, or did it glance away a few inches from the edge and fall on the hearth-rug? The next instant the seat of the chair rose up audibly to its normal level, and the antimacassar fell out into its usual folds, still preserving, however, the traces of its previous wrinkles. I started up, and rushing to the chair, began to prod it. I could discover nothing unusual in its condition. As I was doing so I felt a hand, beyond all doubt, laid steadily on my shoulder. I faced round and saw nothing. "Who are you?" I shouted.

"What do you want?" But no answer came. I was alone.

I sat cogitating till one o'clock, and then I went to bed. Just as I was getting into bed it occurred to me that perhaps I might be annoyed in the dark, and though I had not yet seen anything, the prospect seemed rather awful, and with a slightly trembling hand I lighted a night-light.

When I had done so, and got into bed, I was rather disposed to be ashamed of myself, and thought I would put it out, but, partly no doubt from a disinclination to get out of bed, I determined that in any case it would do no harm, and that I would leave it as it was. It occurred to me what an odd thing it is that one feels safer in bed than anywhere else, whereas in fact one is never in a more defenceless situation. Then I went to sleep.

I do not know what time I woke. It seemed to me that the air was blowing in upon my chest where the bedclothes should have covered me up. And yes, certainly there was an odd depression in my pillow, close in front of my face, as if some heavy weight were pressing it down. I put up my hand to investigate. I touched something on the pillow. I caught hold of it, and turned cold with terror. For I held tightly in my hand, another hand, neither cold nor warm, but large and solid. My light was still burning, and there was no one to be seen. The hand was suddenly jerked away from me. I sprang out of bed, and rushed to the fireplace with a despairing feeling that someone followed close behind me. I seized the poker, turned round, and struck wildly at the air. Whether I hit anything or not I do not know. I remember only that as I was recovering myself from a frantic lunge at nothing, I received a sharp and stunning blow on the back of my head. When I came to myself it was six in the morning, and I was lying on the floor where I had fallen. The night-light was out, and the morning sunlight was streaming in at my window. There was a very large and painful bruise where I had been struck.

I felt that this was getting beyond a joke. It was all very well to frighten me, but when my ghostly enemy took to knocking me down like a ninepin, I was not going to keep it to myself any longer. I had no intention of surrendering, for the blood of the Maseys was up, and the fact that each of my ancestors since the house was built had sooner or later evacuated the premises made me all the more determined not to be driven away without making some further resistance. So I revealed to my sister Ellen the whole of my experience in the matter. She was decidedly sceptical about the ghost, if ghost it could be called, and suggested that I was not well. I vowed that I was as well as any man with a great hole in the back of his head could be, and she consented to the arrangement that I proposed that she should sit up for a night or two in the drawing-room, while I was in my study, with the door open between us, and that if any remarkable incident occurred, I should call her in. In order not to be wholly without male assistance in case I should be attacked, I invited a college friend of mine named Prescott, a strong, sensible, and energetic young doctor who lived near us, to keep my sister company in the drawing-room. He, when he heard my story, was, as befitted a scientific young professional man, exceedingly facetious at my expense, but he willingly consented to share our watch, and to sleep in the house. That evening I sat up as usual in my study, while Prescott and Ellen beguiled the hours in the drawing-room with light literature, until about half-past two, when, nothing having occurred, we settled to go to bed, and separated; Prescott divided between high spirits at the temporary triumph of incredulity, and a tinge of disappointment at the non-occurrence of anything in the shape of a row, and Ellen rather indignant with me for having kept her up so long to no purpose. After the stormy experiences of the two preceding nights I thoroughly enjoyed an unbroken sleep.

I prevailed upon my sister and my friend to give the ghost one more chance, and the next evening saw us again comfortably established in the two rooms, separated only by the curtain which hung over the door of communication.

It may have been eleven o'clock when I heard a board creak just behind my chair. Uttering a shout, I sprang up, and dashed at the spot from which the noise had come. I came into heavy contact with what felt like a gigantic human figure. Prescott and Ellen hurried into the room and beheld me wildly grappling, apparently with nothing at all. "By Jove!" said Prescott, "he has got them." "Them" I believe meant some kind of hallucinations upon which Prescott professed to be an authority, but I was struggling furiously with my unseen antagonist, and had no breath for explanations.

"Seize him! seize him!" I cried.

At that moment my prey burst from me, hurling me with prodigious violence across the room.

Prescott rushed forward, and as he did so was tripped up by what he afterwards described as a heavy kick from an unseen foot, and sent sprawling on the floor. Fortunately I was prostrate at the other end of the room, and could not be suspected of having had a hand, or a foot, in this outrage.

As we struggled to our feet, while Ellen stared wildly about, we all heard two or three hurried steps, as of a man running; there was a tremendous crash, and all was still. But the curtains had swung violently back into the window, and the window itself, plate-glass, frame, and all, was burst clean away outwards.

Prescott was as white as a sheet, and the sensible and strong-minded Ellen was actually crying, which impressed me more than anything else in the scene.

"Let us leave this horrible house," she said; "something worse will happen if we stay."

But I was filled with an unreasonable kind of courage at having, as it seemed, put our inexplicable visitor to

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flight; and I was besides conscious of a certain degree of pride in the assurance that Prescott had been converted, and would hardly talk again about my having "got them."

"We can't go tonight," I said, "and as our gentleman seems to have taken himself off for the present, we had better consider what's to be done next. I am sure Prescott wants to stay and investigate the phenomenon."

We shut the shutters over the wreck of the window, and sat talking over the event until late at night. By degrees I contrived to infuse into my companions some of my courage, and at last, no further disturbance having taken place, we all went to bed in pretty good spirits. I placed a loaded double-barrelled pistol on the table by my bedside, thinking that if a ghost could be struggled with, he ought to be able to be shot, and Prescott placed within reach a large bowie-knife, which he had brought back from America, and had long been wishing for an opportunity to make use of.

When I woke I thought my last hour had come. My throat was tightly grasped by two extremely strong hands. A crushing weight was on my chest. I tried to shout, but could not. I was rapidly being strangled. And as I lay writhing, my eyes, forced half out of their sockets, glared through the light of the night-light at the opposite wall, which looked precisely as usual, except that, as the squeezing of my throat grew more and more intolerable, my view of the room slowly darkened. But of the horrible and only too palpable from that was killing me I could see no trace.

In unavailing despair I clutched at the iron wrists that held me down. In another moment I believe I should have become unconscious. Then, a last gleam of hope, the thought of my pistol, flashed through my mind. I stretched out my hand, and as I lay I could just reach the end of the barrel. I drew it towards me, and with an expiring effort pushed the muzzle of it close against what I took to be the invisible body of my tormentor, and fired. We never found the bullet, or any trace of it afterwards. Instantly the hands relaxed their grip on my throat a little, and with a violent effort I wrenched my neck away; then a heavy body fell sideways from my bed to the ground, and I fell too, grappling with it. At that moment Ellen and Prescott, who had been aroused by the sound of the shot, burst into the room. There they saw me struggling, partly on the floor, and partly kneeling apparently on space. They rushed to my assistance. Both of them felt the thing, both of them grappled with it. The struggles of our enemy became fainter.

Managing to get one hand free I repossessed myself of the pistol, which had fallen on the floor, and emptied the second barrel into what I judged to be the breast of the spectre. I fired straight downwards, apparently at the floor, but of that bullet we saw no more than of the other.

Meanwhile Prescott stabbed furiously with the bowie-knife, and each time he dashed the blade down its progress was arrested before it reached the carpet. Then the struggles ceased, and nothing was heard except our rapid panting. We were all kneeling on and holding down what looked like space, and felt like the form of a tall and athletic man.

"We've done for it, whatever it is," said I hoarsely.

Prescott burst into a foolish giggle. "By Jove!" he said, "we'll make a cast of it and see what it's like."

As he spoke the form of our victim was agitated by a desperate convulsion, which shook us all off. Before we could seize it again a deep groan burst from the place where we had held it, and the word "Lettice!" rang through the room in a tone of sepulchral melancholy. Then there was silence.

I threw myself on the floor not, as I had intended, on the prostrate figure. We searched the room, and then the house, but we could find absolutely nothing. Nor from that day to this has anyone, to the best of my knowledge, seen, heard, or felt anything whatever of this ghastly being.

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After much consideration we determined to keep the adventure to ourselves, for a time at any rate. Indeed, it was only last summer, when we had lived in the house for a good number of years without any kind of ghostly interruption, that I described the circumstances herein narrated to my wife. She doesn't believe them, and I am sorry I told her.

Was it the ghost of Ronald Masey? Did it voluntarily depart and leave us alone because it considered that the annoyances it had inflicted upon my ancestors and me were sufficient, and that the tale of its vengeance upon our house, for the wrongs, whatever they were, inflicted upon Ronald in his lifetime by Andrew and Lettice, was complete? Or did we actually kill it? Perhaps we did. He was a poor weak creature when he was alive.