No Living Voice

Thomas Street Millington

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'How do you account for it?'

'I don't account for it at all. I don't pretend to understand it.'

'You think, then, that it was really supernatural?'

'We know so little what Nature comprehends—what are its powers and limits—that we can scarcely speak of anything that happens as beyond it or above it.'

'And you are certain that this did happen?'

'Quite certain; of that I have no doubt whatever.'

These sentences passed between two gentlemen in the drawing−room of a country house, where a small family party was assembled after dinner; and in consequence of a lull in the conversation occurring at the moment they were distinctly heard by nearly everybody present. Curiosity was excited, and enquiries were eagerly pressed as to the nature or supernature of the event under discussion. 'A ghost story!' cried one; 'oh! delightful! we must and will hear it.' 'Oh! please, no, said another; 'I should not sleep all night—and yet I am dying with curiosity.'

Others seemed inclined to treat the question rather from a rational or psychological point of view, and would have started a discussion upon ghosts in general, each giving his own experience; but these were brought back by the voice of the hostess, crying, 'Question, question!' and the first speakers were warmly urged to explain what particular event had formed the subject of their conversation.

'It was you, Mr Browne, who said you could not account for it; and you are such a very matter−of− fact person that we feel doubly anxious to hear what wonderful occurrence could have made you look so grave and earnest.'

'Thank you,' said Mr Browne. 'I am a matter−of−fact person, I confess; and I was speaking of a fact; though I must beg to be excused saying any more about it. It is an old story; but I never even think of it without a feeling of distress; and I should not like to stir up such keen and haunting memories merely for the sake of gratifying curiosity. I was relating to Mr Smith, in few words, an adventure which befell me in Italy many years ago, giving him the naked facts of the case, in refutation of a theory which he had been propounding.'

'Now we don't want theories, and we won't have naked facts; they are hardly proper at any time, and at this period of the year, with snow upon the ground,' they would be most unseasonable; but we must have that story fully and feelingly related to us, and we promise to give it a respectful hearing, implicit belief, and unbounded sympathy. So draw round the fire, all of you, and let Mr Browne begin.'

Poor Mr Browne turned pale and red, his lips quivered, his entreaties to be excused became quite plaintive; but his good nature and perhaps, also, the consciousness that he could really interest his hearers, led him to overcome his reluctance; and after exacting a solemn promise that there should be no jesting or levity in regard to what he had to tell, he cleared his throat twice or thrice, and in a hesitating nervous tone began as follows:

'It was in the spring of 18—. I had been at Rome during the Holy Week, and had taken a place in the diligence for Naples. There were two routes: one by way of Terracina and the other by the Via Latina, more inland. The diligence, which made the journey only twice a week, followed these routes alternately, so that each road was traversed only once in seven days. I chose the.inland route, and after a long day's journey arrived at Ceprano, where we halted for the night.

The next morning we started again very early, and it was scarcely yet daylight when we reached the Neapolitan frontier, at a short distance from the town. There our passports were examined, and to my great dismay I was informed that mine was not en règle. It was covered, indeed, with stamps and signatures, not one of which had been procured without some cost and trouble; but one 'visa' yet was wanting, and that the all−important

one, without which none could enter the kingdom of Naples. I was obliged therefore to alight, and to send my wretched passport back to Rome, my wretched self being doomed to remain under police surveillance at Ceprano, until the diligence should bring it back to me on that day week, at soonest.

I took up my abode at the hotel where I had passed the previous night, and there I presently received a visit from the Capo di Polizia, who told me very civilly that I must present myself, even morning and evening at his bureau, but that I might have liberty to "circulate" in the neighbourhood during the day. I grew so weary of this dull place, that after I had explored the immediate vicinity of the town I began to extend my walks to a greater distance, and as I always reported myself to the police before night I met with no objection on their part.

One day, however, when I had been as far as Alatri and was returning on foot, night overtook me. I had lost my way, and could not tell how far I might be from my destination. I was very tired and had a heavy knapsack on my shoulders, packed with stones and relics from the ruins of the old Pelasgic fortress which I had been exploring, besides a number of old coins and a lamp or two which I had purchased there. I could discern no signs of any human habitation, and the hills, covered with wood, seemed to shut me in on every side. I was beginning to think seriously of looking out for some sheltered spot under a thicket in which to pass the night, when the welcome sound of a footstep behind me fell upon my ears. Presently a man dressed in the usual long shaggy coat of a shepherd overtook me, and hearing of my difficulty offered to conduct me to a house at a short distance from the road, where I might obtain a lodging; before we reached the spot he told me that the house in question was an inn and that he was the landlord of it. He had not much custom, he said, so he employed himself in shepherding during the day; but he could make me conformable, and give me a good supper also, better than I should expect, to look at him; but he had been in different circumstances once, and had lived in service in good families, and knew how things ought to be, and what a signore like myself was used to.

'The house to which he took me seemed like its owner to have seen better days. It was a large rambling place and much dilapidated, but it was tolerably comfortable within; and my landlord, after he had thrown off his sheepskin coat, prepared me a good and savoury meal, and sat down to look at and converse with me while I ate it. I did not much like the look of the fellow; but he seemed anxious to be sociable and told me a great deal about his former life when he was in service, expecting to receive similar confidences from me. I did not gratify him much, but one must talk of something, and he seemed to think it only proper to express an interest in his guests and to learn as much of their concerns as they would tell him.

'I went to bed early, intending to resume my journey as soon as it should be light. My landlord took up my knapsack, and carried it to my room, observing as he did so that it was a great weight for me to travel with. I answered jokingly that it contained great treasures, referring to my coins and relics; of course he did not understand me, and before I could explain he wished me a most happy little night, and left me.

'The room in which I found myself was situated at the end of a long passage; there were two rooms on the right side of this passage, and a window on the left, which looked out upon a yard or garden. Having taken a survey of the outside of the house while smoking my cigar after.dinner, when the moon was up, I understood exactly the position of my chamber—the end room of a long narrow wing, projecting at right angles from the main building, with which it was connected only by the passage and the two side rooms already mentioned. Please to bear this description carefully in mind while I proceed.

'Before getting into bed, I drove into the floor close to the door a small gimlet which formed part of a complicated pocket−knife which I always carried with me, so that it would be impossible for any one to enter the room without my knowledge; there was a lock to the door, but the key would not turn in it; there was also a bolt, but it would not enter the hole intended for it, the door having sunk apparently from its proper level. I satisfied, myself, however, that The door was securely fastened by my gimlet, and soon fell asleep.

'How can I describe the strange and horrible sensation which oppressed me as I woke our of my first slumber? I had been sleeping soundly, and before I quite recovered consciousness I had instinctively risen from my pillow, and was crouching forward, my knees drawn up, my hands clasped before my face, and my whole frame quivering with horror. I saw nothing, felt nothing; but a sound was ringing in my ears which seemed to make my blood run cold. I could not have supposed it possible that any mere sound, whatever might be its nature, could have produced such a revulsion of feeling or inspired such intense horror as I then experienced. It was not a cry of terror that I heard—that would have roused me to action—nor the moaning of one in pain— that would have distressed me, and called forth sympathy rather than aversion. True, it was like the groaning of one in anguish and

despair, but not like any mortal voice: it seemed too dreadful, too intense, for human utterance. The sound had begun while I was fast asleep—close in the head of my bed—close to my very pillow; it continued after I was wide awake—a long, loud, hollow, protracted groan, making the midnight air reverberate, and then dying gradually away until it ceased entirely. It was some minutes before I could at all recover from the terrible impression which seemed to stop my breath and paralyse my limbs. At length I began to look about me, for the night was not entirely dark, and I could discern the outlines of the room and the several pieces of furniture in it. I then got out of bed, and called aloud, "Who is there? What is the matter? Is anyone ill?" I repeated these enquiries in Italian and in French, but there was none that answered. Fortunately I had some matches in my pocket and was able to light my candle. I then examined every pan of the room carefully, and especially the wall at the head of my bed, sounding it with my knuckles; it was firm and solid there, as in all other places. I unfastened my door, and explored the passage and the two adjoining rooms, which were unoccupied and almost destitute of furniture; they had evidently not been used for some time. Search as I would I could gain no clue to the mystery. Returning to my room I sat down upon the bed in great perplexity, and began to turn over in my mind whether it was possible I could have been deceived—whether the sounds which caused me such distress might be the offspring of some dream or nightmare; but to that conclusion I could not bring myself at all, much as I wished it, for the groaning had continued ringing in my ears long after I was wide awake and conscious. While I was thus reflecting, having neglected to close the door which was opposite to the side of my bed where I was sitting, I heard a soft footstep at a distance, and presently a light appeared at the further end of the passage. Then I saw the shadow of a man east upon the opposite wall; it moved very slowly, and presently stopped. I saw the hand raised, as if making a sign to someone, and I knew from the fact of the shadow being thrown in advance that there must be a second person in the rear by whom the light was earned. After a short pause they seemed to retrace their steps, without my having had a glimpse of either of them, but only of the shadow which had come before and which followed them as they withdrew. It was then a little after one o'clock, and I.concluded they were retiring late to rest, and anxious to avoid disturbing me, though I have since thought that it was the light from my room which caused their retreat. I felt half inclined to call to them, but I shrank, without knowing why, from making known what had disturbed me, and while I hesitated they were gone; so I fastened my door again, and resolved to sit up and watch a little longer by myself. But now my candle was beginning to burn low, and I found myself in this dilemma: either I must extinguish it at once, or I should be left without the means of procuring a light in ease I should be again disturbed. I regretted that I had not called for another candle while there were people yet moving in the house, but I could not do so now without making explanations; so I grasped my box of matches, put out my light, and lay down, not without a shudder, in the bed.

'For an hour or more I lay awake thinking over what had occurred, and by that time I had almost persuaded myself that I had nothing but my own morbid imagination to thank for the alarm whish I had suffered. "It is an outer wall," I said to myself; "they are all outer walls, and the house is built of stone; it is impossible that any sound could be heard through such a thickness. Besides, it seemed to be in my room, close to my ear. What an idiot I must be, to be excited and alarmed about nothing; I'll think no more about it." So I turned on my side, with a smile (rather a forced one) at my own foolishness, and composed myself to sleep.

'At that instant I heard, with more distinctness than I ever heard any other sound in my life, a gasp, a voiceless gasp, as if someone were in agony for breath, biting at the air, or trying with desperate efforts to cry out or speak. It was repeated a second and a third time; then there was a pause; then again that horrible gasping; and then a long−drawn breath, an audible drawing up of the air into the throat, such as one would make in heaving a deep sigh. Such sounds as these could not possibly have been heard unless they had been close to my car; they seemed to come from the wall at my head, or to rise up out of my pillow. That fearful gasping, and that drawing in of the breath, in the darkness and silence of the night, seemed to make every nerve in my body thrill with dreadful expectation. Unconsciously I shrank away from it, crouching down as before, with my face upon my knees. It ceased, and immediately a moaning sound began, which lengthened out into an awful, protracted groan, waxing louder and louder, as if under an increasing agony, and then dying away slowly and gradually into silence; yet painfully and distinctly audible even to the last.

'As soon as I could rouse myself from the freezing horror which seemed to penetrate even to my joints and marrow, I crept away from the bed, and in the furthest corner of the room lighted with shaking hand my candle, looking anxiously about me as I did so, expecting some dreadful revelation as the light flashed up. Yet, if you will

believe me, I did not feel alarmed or frightened; but rather oppressed, and penetrated with an unnatural, overpowering, sentiment of awe. I seemed to be in the presence of some great and horrible mystery, some bottomless depth of woe, or misery, or crime. I shrank from it with a sensation of intolerable loathing and suspense. It was a feeling akin to this which prevented me from calling to my landlord. I could not bring myself to speak to him of what had passed; not knowing how nearly he might be himself involved in the mystery. I was only anxious to escape as quietly as possible from the room and from the house. The candle was now beginning to flicker in its socket, but the stars were shining outside, and there was space and air to breathe there, which seemed to be wanting in my room; so I hastily opened my window, tied the bedclothes together for a rope, and lowered myself silently and safely to the ground.

'There was a light still burning in the lower part of the house; but I crept noiselessly along, feeling my way carefully among the trees, and in due time came upon a beaten track which led.me to a road, the same which I had been travelling on the previous night. I walked on, scarcely knowing whither, anxious only to increase my distance from the accursed house, until the day began to break, when almost the first object I could see distinctly was a small body of men approaching me. It was with no small pleasure that I recognized at their head my friend the Capo di Polizia. "Ah!" he cried, "unfortunate Inglese, what trouble you have given me! Where have you been? God be praised that I sec you safe and sound! But how? What is the matter with you?

You look like one possessed."

'I told him how I had lost my way, and where I had lodged.

' "And what happened to you there?" he cried, with a look of anxiety.

' "I was disturbed in the night. I could not sleep. I made my escape, and here I am. I cannot tell you more."

' "But you must tell me more, dear sir; forgive me; you must tell me everything. I must know all that passed in that house. We have had it under our surveillance for a long time, and when I heard in what direction you had gone yesterday, and had not returned, I feared you had got into some mischief there, and we were even now upon our way to look for you."

'I could not enter into particulars, but I told him I had heard strange sounds, and at his request I went back with him to the spot. He told me by the way that the house was known to be the resort of banditti; that the landlord harboured them, received their ill−gotten goods, and helped them to dispose of their booty.

'Arrived at the spot, he placed his men about the premises and instituted a strict search, the landlord and the man who was found in the house being compelled to accompany him. The room in which I had slept was carefully examined; the floor was of plaster or cement, so that no sound could have passed through it; the walls were sound and solid, and there was nothing to be seen that could in any way account for the strange disturbance I had experienced. The room on the ground−floor underneath my bedroom was next inspected; it contained a quantity of straw, hay, firewood, and lumber. It was paved with brick, and on turning over the straw which was heaped together in a corner it was observed that the bricks were uneven, as if they had been recently disturbed.

' "Dig here," said the officer, "we shall find something hidden here, I imagine."

'The landlord was evidently much disturbed. "Stop," he cried. "I will tell you what lies there; come away out of doors, and you shall know all about it."

' "Dig, I say. We will find out for ourselves."

' "Let the dead rest," cried the landlord, with a trembling voice. "For the love of heaven come away, and hear what I shall tell you."

' "Go on with your work," said the sergeant to his men, who were now plying pickaxe and spade.

' "I can't stay here and see it," exclaimed the landlord once more. "Hear then! It is the body of my son, my only son—let him rest, if rest he can. He was wounded in a quarrel, and brought home here to die. I thought he would recover, but there was neither doctor nor priest at hand, and in spite of all that we could do for him he died. Let him alone now, or let a priest first be sent for; he died unconfessed, but it was not my fault; it may not be yet too late to make peace for him."

' "But why is he buried in this place?"

' "We did not wish to make a stir about it. Nobody knew of his death, and we laid him down quietly; one place I thought was as good as another when once the life was out of him. We are poor folk, and could not pay for ceremonies."'The truth at length eame out. Father and son were both members of a band of thieves; under this floor they concealed their plunder, and there too lay more than one mouldering corpse, victims who had occupied

the room in which I slept, and had there met their death. The son was indeed buried in that spot; he had been mortally wounded in a skirmish with travellers, and had lived long enough to repent of his deeds and to beg for that priestly absolution which, according to his creed, was necessary to secure his pardon. In vain he had urged his hither to bring the confessor to his bedside; in vain he had entreated him to break off from the murderous band with which he was allied and to live honestly in future; his prayers were disregarded, and his dying admonitions were of no avail. But for the strange mysterious warning which had roused me from my sleep and driven me out of the house that night another crime would have been added to the old man's tale of guilt. That gasping attempt to speak, and that awful groaning—whence did they proceed? It was no living voice. Beyond that I will express no opinion on the subject. I will only say it was the means of saving my life, and at the same time putting an end to the series of bloody deeds which had been committed in that house.

'I received my passport that evening by the diligence from Rome, and started the next morning on my way to Naples. As we were crossing the frontier a tall figure approached, wearing the long rough cappoua of the mendicant friars, with a hood over the face and holes for the eyes to look through. He earned a tin money−box in his hand, which he held out to the passengers, jingling a few coins in it, and crying in a monotonous voice, "Anime in purgatorio! Anime in purgatorio!"

I do not believe in purgatory, nor in supplications for the dead; but I dropped a piece of silver into the box nevertheless, as I thought of that unhallowed grave in the forest, and my prayer went up to heaven in all sincerity—"Requiescat in pace!" '