

The Thing in the Upper Room

Arthur Morrison

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A shadow hung ever over the door, which stood black in the depth of its arched recess, like an unfathomable eye under a frowning brow. The landing was wide and panelled, and a heavy rail, supported by a carved balustrade, stretched away in alternate slopes and levels down the dark staircase, past other doors, and so to the courtyard and the street. The other doors were dark also; but it was with a difference. That top landing was lightest of all, because of the skylight; and perhaps it was largely by reason of contrast that its one doorway gloomed so black and forbidding. The doors below opened and shut, slammed, stood ajar. Men and women passed in and out, with talk and human sounds—sometimes even with laughter or a snatch of song; but the door on the top landing remained shut and silent through weeks and months. For, in truth, the *logement* had an ill name, and had been untenanted for years. Long even before the last tenant had occupied it, the room had been regarded with fear and aversion, and the end of that last tenant had in no way lightened the gloom that hung about the place.

The house was so old that its weather-washed face may well have looked down on the bloodshed of St. Bartholomew's, and the haunted room may even have earned its ill name on that same day of death. But Paris is a city of cruel history, and since the old mansion rose proud and new, the *hôtel* of some powerful noble, almost any year of the centuries might have seen the blot fall on that upper room that had left it a place of loathing and shadows. The occasion was long forgotten, but the fact remained; whether or not some horror of the *ancien régime* or some enormity of the Terror was enacted in that room was no longer to be discovered; but nobody would live there, nor stay beyond that gloomy door one second longer than he could help. It might be supposed that the fate of the solitary tenant within living memory had something to do with the matter—and, indeed, his end was sinister enough; but long before his time the room had stood shunned and empty. He, greatly daring, had taken no more heed of the common terror of the room than to use it to his advantage in abating the rent; and he had shot himself a little later, while the police were beating at his door to arrest him on a charge of murder. As I have said, his fate may have added to the general aversion from the place, though it had in no way originated it; and now ten years had passed, and more, since his few articles of furniture had been carried away and sold; and nothing had been carried in to replace them.

When one is twenty-five, healthy, hungry and poor, one is less likely to be frightened from a cheap lodging by mere headshakings than might be expected in other circumstances. Attwater was twenty-five, commonly healthy, often hungry, and always poor. He came to live in Paris because, from his remembrance of his student days, he believed he could live cheaper there than in London; while it was quite certain that he would not sell fewer pictures, since he had never yet sold one.

It was the *concierge* of a neighbouring house who showed Attwater the room. The house of the room itself maintained no such functionary, though its main door stood open day and night. The man said little, but his surprise at Attwater's application was plain to see. Monsieur was English? Yes. The *logement* was convenient, though high, and probably now a little dirty, since it had not been occupied recently. Plainly, the man felt it to be no business of his to enlighten an unsuspecting foreigner as to the reputation of the place; and if he could let it there would be some small gratification from the landlord, though, at such a rent, of course a very small one indeed.

But Attwater was better informed than the *concierge* supposed. He had heard the tale of the haunted room, vaguely and incoherently, it is true, from the little old engraver of watches on the floor below, by whom he had been directed to the *concierge*. The old man had been voluble and friendly, and reported that the room had a good light, facing north-east—indeed, a much better light than he, engraver of watches, enjoyed on the floor below. So much so that, considering this advantage and the much lower rent, he himself would have taken the room long ago, except—well, except for other things. Monsieur was a stranger, and perhaps had no fear to inhabit a haunted chamber; but that was its reputation, as everybody in the quarter knew; it would be a misfortune, however, to a stranger to take the room without suspicion, and to undergo unexpected experiences. Here, however, the old man checked himself, possibly reflecting that too much information to inquirers after the upper room might offend his landlord. He hinted as much, in fact, hoping that his friendly warning would not be allowed to travel farther. As to

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the precise nature of the disagreeable manifestations in the room, who could say? Perhaps there were really none at all. People said this and that. Certainly, the place had been untenanted for many years, and he would not like to stay in it himself. But it might be the good fortune of monsieur to break the spell, and if monsieur was resolved to defy the *revenant*, he wished monsieur the highest success and happiness.

So much for the engraver of watches; and now the *concierge* of the neighbouring house led the way up the stately old panelled staircase, swinging his keys in his hand, and halted at last before the dark door in the frowning recess. He turned the key with some difficulty, pushed open the door, and stood back with an action of something not wholly deference, to allow Attwater to enter first.

A sort of small lobby had been partitioned off at some time, though except for this the *logement* was of one large room only. There was something unpleasant in the air of the place—not a smell, when one came to analyse one's sensations, though at first it might seem so. Attwater walked across to the wide window and threw it open. The chimneys and roofs of many houses of all ages straggled before him, and out of the welter rose the twin towers of St. Sulpice, scarred and grim.

Air the room as one might, it was unpleasant; a sickly, even a cowed, feeling, invaded one through all the senses—or perhaps through none of them. The feeling was there, though it was not easy to say by what channel it penetrated. Attwater was resolved to admit none but a common-sense explanation, and blamed the long closing of door and window; and the *concierge*, standing uneasily near the door, agreed that that must be it. For a moment Attwater wavered, despite himself. But the rent was very low, and, low as it was, he could not afford a sou more. The light was good, though it was not a top-light, and the place was big enough for his simple requirements. Attwater reflected that he should despise himself ever after if he shrank from the opportunity; it would be one of those secret humiliations that will rise again and again in a man's memory, and make him blush in solitude. He told the *concierge* to leave door and window wide open for the rest of the day, and he clinched the bargain.

It was with something of amused bravado that he reported to his few friends in Paris his acquisition of a haunted room; for, once out of the place, he readily convinced himself that his disgust and dislike while in the room were the result of imagination and nothing more. Certainly, there was no rational reason to account for the unpleasantness; consequently, what could it be but a matter of fancy? He resolved to face the matter from the beginning, and clear his mind from any foolish prejudices that the hints of the old engraver might have inspired, by forcing himself through whatever adventures he might encounter. In fact, as he walked the streets about his business, and arranged for the purchase and delivery of the few simple articles of furniture that would be necessary, his enterprise assumed the guise of a pleasing adventure. He remembered that he had made an attempt, only a year or two ago, to spend a night in a house reputed haunted in England, but had failed to find the landlord. Here was the adventure to hand, with promise of a tale to tell in future times; and a welcome idea struck him that he might look out the ancient history of the room, and work the whole thing into a magazine article, which would bring a little money.

So simple were his needs that by the afternoon of the day following his first examination of the room it was ready for use.

He took his bag from the cheap hotel in a little street of Montparnasse, where he had been lodging, and carried it to his new home. The key was now in his pocket, and for the first time he entered the place alone. The window remained wide open; but it was still there—that depressing, choking something that entered the consciousness he knew not by what gate. Again he accused his fancy. He stamped and whistled, and set about unpacking a few canvases and a case of old oriental weapons that were part of his professional properties. But he could give no proper attention to the work, and detected himself more than once yielding to a childish impulse to look over his shoulder. He laughed at himself—with some effort—and sat determinedly to smoke a pipe, and grow used to his surroundings. But presently he found himself pushing his chair farther and farther back, till it touched the wall. He would take the whole room into view, he said to himself in excuse, and stare it out of countenance. So he sat and smoked, and as he sat his **eye** fell on a Malay dagger that lay on the table between him and the window. It was a murderous, twisted thing, and its pommel was fashioned into the semblance of a bird's head, with curved beak and an **eye** of some dull **red** stone. He found himself gazing on this **red eye** with an odd, mindless fascination. The dagger in its wicked curves seemed now a creature of some outlandish fantasy—a snake with a beaked head, a thing of nightmare, in some new way dominant, overruling the centre of his perceptions. The rest of the room grew dim, but the **red** stone glowed with a fuller light; nothing more was

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present to his consciousness. Then, with a sudden clang, the heavy bell of St. Sulpice aroused him, and he started up in some surprise.

There lay the dagger on the table, strange and murderous enough, but merely as he had always known it. He observed with more surprise, however, that his chair, which had been back against the wall, was now some six feet forward, close by the table; clearly, he must have drawn it forward in his abstraction, towards the dagger on which his eyes had been fixed. . . The great bell of St. Sulpice went clanging on, repeating its monotonous call to the Angelus.

He was cold, almost shivering. He flung the dagger into a drawer, and turned to go out. He saw by his watch that it was later than he had supposed; his fit of abstraction must have lasted some time. Perhaps he had even been dozing.

He went slowly downstairs and out into the streets. As he went he grew more and more ashamed of himself, for he had to confess that in some inexplicable way he feared that room. He had seen nothing, heard nothing of the kind that one might have expected, or had heard of in any room reputed haunted; he could not help thinking that it would have been some sort of relief if he had. But there was an all-pervading, overpowering sense of another Presence—something abhorrent, not human, something almost physically nauseous. Withal it was something more than presence; it was power, domination—so he seemed to remember it. And yet the remembrance grew weaker as he walked in the gathering dusk; he thought of a story he had once read of a haunted house wherein it was shown that the house actually was haunted—by the spirit of fear, and nothing else. That, he persuaded himself, was the case with his room; he felt angry at the growing conviction that he had allowed himself to be overborne by fancy—by the spirit of fear.

He returned that night with the resolve to allow himself no foolish indulgence. He had heard nothing and had seen nothing; when something palpable to the senses occurred, it would be time enough to deal with it. He took off his clothes and got into bed deliberately, leaving candle and matches at hand in case of need. He had expected to find some difficulty in sleeping, or at least some delay, but he was scarce well in bed ere he fell into a heavy sleep.

Dazzling sunlight through the window woke him in the morning, and he sat up, staring sleepily about him. He must have slept like a log. But he had been dreaming; the dreams were horrible. His head ached beyond anything he had experienced before, and he was far more tired than when he went to bed. He sank back on the pillow, but the mere contact made his head ring with pain. He got out of bed, and found himself staggering; it was all as though he had been drunk—unspeakably drunk with bad liquor. His dreams—they had been horrid dreams; he could remember that they had been bad, but what they actually were was now gone from him entirely. He rubbed his eyes and stared amazedly down at the table: where the crooked dagger lay, with its bird's head and **red** stone **eye**. It lay just as it had lain when he sat gazing at it yesterday, and yet he would have sworn that he had flung that same dagger into a drawer. Perhaps he had dreamed it; at any rate, he put the thing carefully into the drawer now, and, still with his ringing headache, dressed himself and went out.

As he reached the next landing the old engraver greeted him from his door with an inquiring good-day. "Monsieur has not slept well, I fear?"

In some doubt, Attwater protested that he had slept quite soundly. "And as yet I have neither seen nor heard anything of the ghost," he added.

"Nothing?" replied the old man, with a lift of the eyebrows, "nothing at all? It is fortunate. It seemed to me, here below, that monsieur was moving about very restlessly in the night; but no doubt I was mistaken. No doubt, also, I may felicitate monsieur on breaking the evil tradition. We shall hear no more of it; monsieur has the good fortune of a brave heart."

He smiled and bowed pleasantly, but it was with something of a puzzled look that his eyes followed Attwater descending the staircase.

Attwater took his coffee and roll after an hour's walk, and fell asleep in his seat. Not for long, however, and presently he rose and left the café. He felt better, though still unaccountably fatigued. He caught sight of his face in a mirror beside a shop window, and saw an improvement since he had looked in his own glass. That indeed had brought him a shock. Worn and drawn beyond what might have been expected of so bad a night, there was even something more. What was it? How should it remind him of that old legend—was it Japanese?—which he had

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tried to recollect when he had wondered confusedly at the **haggard** apparition that confronted him? Some tale of a demon—possessed person who in any mirror, saw never his own face, but the face of the demon.

Work he felt to be impossible, and he spent the day on garden seats, at café tables, and for a while in the Luxembourg. And in the evening he met an English friend, who took him by the shoulders and looked into his eyes, shook him, and declared that he had been overworking, and needed, above all things, a good dinner, which he should have instantly. "You'll dine with me," he said, "at La Perouse, and we'll get a cab to take us there. I'm hungry."

As they stood and looked for a passing cab a man ran shouting with newspapers. "We'll have a cab," Attwater's friend repeated, "and we'll take the new murder with us for conversation's sake. Hi! *Journal!*"

He bought a paper, and followed Attwater into the cab. "I've a strong idea I knew the poor old boy by sight," he said. "I believe he'd seen better days."

"Who?"

"The old man who was murdered in the Rue Broca last night. The description fits exactly. He used to hang about the cafés and run messages. It isn't easy to read in this cab; but there's probably nothing fresh in this edition. They haven't caught the murderer, anyhow."

Attwater took the paper, and struggled to read it in the changing light. A poor old man had been found dead on the footpath of the Rue Broca, torn with a score of stabs. He had been identified—an old man not known to have a friend in the world; also, because he was so old and so poor, probably not an enemy. There was no robbery; the few sous the old man possessed remained in his pocket. He must have been attacked on his way home in the early hours of the morning, possibly by a homicidal maniac, and stabbed again and again with inconceivable fury. No arrest had been made.

Attwater pushed the paper way: "Pah!" he said; "I don't like it. I'm a bit off colour, and I was dreaming horribly all last night; though why this should remind me of it I can't guess. But it's no cure for the blues, this!"

"No," replied his friend heartily; "we'll get that upstairs, for here we are, on the quay. A bottle of the best Burgundy on the list and the best dinner they can do—that's your physic. Come!"

It was a good prescription, indeed. Attwater's friend was cheerful and assiduous, and nothing could have bettered the dinner. Attwater found himself reflecting that indulgence in the blues was a poor pastime, with no better excuse than a bad night's rest. And last night's dinner in comparison with this! Well, it was enough to have spoiled his sleep, that one—franc—fifty dinner.

Attwater left La Perouse as gay as his friend. They had sat late, and now there was nothing to do but cross the water and walk a little in the boulevards. This they did, and finished the evening at a café table with half a dozen acquaintances.

Attwater walked home with a light step, feeling less drowsy than at any time during the day. He was well enough. He felt he should soon get used to the room. He had been a little too much alone lately, and that had got on his nerves. It was simply stupid.

Again he slept quickly and heavily and dreamed. But he had an awakening of another sort. No bright sun blazed in at the open window to lift his heavy lids, and no morning bell from St. Sulpice opened his ears to the cheerful noise of the city. He awoke gasping and staring in the dark, rolling face—downward on the floor, catching his breath in agonized sobs; while through the window from the streets came a clamour of hoarse cries: cries of pursuit and the noise of running men: a shouting and clatter wherein here and there a voice was clear among the rest—"A *l'assassin! Arrêtez!*"

He dragged himself to his feet in the dark, gasping still. What was this—all this? Again a dream? His legs trembled under him, and he sweated with fear. He made for the window, panting and feeble; and then, as he supported himself by the sill, he realized wonderingly that he was fully dressed—that he wore even his hat. The running crowd straggled through the outer street and away, the shouts growing fainter. What had wakened him? Why had he dressed? He remembered his matches, and turned to grope for them; but something was already in his hand—something wet, sticky. He dropped it on the table, and even as he struck the light, before he saw it, he knew. The match sputtered and flared, and there on the table lay the crooked dagger, smeared and dripping and horrible.

Blood was on his hands—the match stuck in his fingers. Caught at the heart by the first grip of an awful

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surmise, he looked up and saw in the mirror before him, in the last flare of the match, the face of the Thing in the Room.

(The End.)