

# A HAUNTING

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By Robert Graves

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Hauntings, whether in waking life or dream, are emotionally so powerful, yet can be so seldom ascribed to any exterior agency, that they are now by common consent allotted to

the morbid pathologist for investigation - not, as once, to the priest or augur. A number of hauntings "yield to treatment", as the saying is. The great Dr. Henry Head told me once about a patient of his who was haunted by a tall dark man, always standing on the bed-side mat. Head diagnosed a trauma in the patient's brain, of which the tall dark man was a projection, and proved his case by moving the bed slowly around; the tall dark man swung with it in a semicircle until he ended on a verandah just outside the french window. An operation removed him altogether. And I read in an American medical paper the other day of a man who, as a result of advanced syphilis, was haunted by thousands of women every night; after he had been given extract of snake-root they were reduced to the manageable number of one only.

There are also occasional hauntings which most psychologists would tend to dismiss as fantasies, or as symbols of some inner conflict; but which, however grotesque, deserve to be accepted at their face value and placed in the correct historical context. Let me describe a persistent haunting from my own case-history. I am glad to say that it did not originate in a ghost-ridden childhood and is therefore easier to assess, though I cannot claim to have been in good mental or physical health at the time; on the contrary, I was suffering from vivid nightmares and hallucinations of the First World War, in which I had just fought. Shells used to burst on my bed at night. By day I would throw myself flat on my face if a car backfired, and every rose garden smelt terrifyingly of phosgene gas. However, I felt a good deal better now that the War seemed to be over: an armistice had been signed, and the Germans were not expected to renew the struggle.

January 1919 found me back with the Royal Welch Fusilier reserve battalion at Limerick, where twenty years before my grandfather had been the last Bishop of the Established Protestant Church of Ireland. Limerick a firm stronghold of Sinn Fein, King George Street had become O'Connell Street, and when our soldiers took a stroll out of barracks they never went singly and were recommended to carry entrenching-tool handles in answer to the local shillelaghs. This return as a foreign enemy to the city with which my family had been connected for over two hundred years would have been far more painful but for old Reilly, an antique dealer, who lived near the newly-renamed Sarsfield Bridge. Reilly remembered my father and three of my uncles, and gave me fine oratorical accounts of my Aunt Augusta Caroline's prowess in the hunting field, and of the tremendous scenes at my grandfather's wake - at which his colleague, the Catholic Bishop, had made attendance compulsory in tribute to his eminence as a Gaelic scholar and archaeologist. I bought several things from Reilly: Irish silver, prints, and a century-old pair of white, elbow-length Limerick gloves, left by the last of the Misses Rafferty and so finely made (from chicken-skin, he told me) that they folded into a brass-hinged walnut shell.

The shop smelt of dry rot and mice, but I would have gone there to chat more often, had it not been for a nightmarish picture hanging in the shop entrance: a male portrait brightly painted on glass. The sitter's age was indeterminate, his skin glossy-white, his eyes Mongolian, their look imbecile; he had two crooked dog-teeth, a

narrow chin, and a billy-cock hat squashed low over his forehead. To add to the horror, some humorist had provided the creature with a duddeen pipe, painted on the front of the glass, from which a wisp of smoke was curling. Reilly said that the picture had come from the heirs of a potato-famine emigrant, returned at last with a bag of dollars to die comfortably of drink in his native city. Why this face haunted and frightened me so much I could not explain; but it used to recur in my imagination for years, especially when I had fever. I told myself that if I ever saw a midnight ghost - as opposed to midday ghosts, which had been common enough phenomena during the later, neurasthenic stages of the War, and less frightening than pathetic - it would be exactly like that.

In the spring of 1951, when Reilly had lain thirty years in his grave, Julie Fiennes visited me in Majorca. She was an American: Irish Italian on her father's side, New Orleans French on her mother's; a textile designer by profession; young, tall, good-looking, reckless and romantic. She had come up "to take a look at Europe before it blows up". When we first met, a shock passed between her and me of the sort usually explained in pseudo-philosophic terms as "We must have met in a previous incarnation". Psychologists postulate "compatible emotion-groups". I am content to call it "Snap!" Indeed, as it proved, Julia and I could converse in a joking verbal shorthand, which meant little to anyone else, but for us expressed a range of experiences so complex that we could never have translated it into everyday language. An embarrassing, if exhilarating discovery, because this rapport between us, strong as it was, proved inappropriate both to her course of life and mine. We wanted nothing from each other except a humorously affectionate acknowledgement of the strength of the link; thirty-three years separated us; we belonged to different civilisations; I was perfectly happy in my own life, and she was set on going on and on until she came to a comfortable stop in either contentment or exhaustion; which she has since done.

With Beryl, to whom I am married, I enjoy the less spectacular but more relevant rapport which comes from having all friends in common, four children, and no secrets from each other. The only eccentric form which our rapport takes is that sometimes, if I am working on some teasing historical problem and go to bed before I reach a solution, its elements may intrude not into my dream but into hers. The classic instance was when she woke up one morning, thoroughly annoyed by the absurdity of her nightmare: "A crowd of hags were swinging from the branches of a large tree in our olive grove and chopping off the ends with kitchen knives. And a horde of filthy gipsy children were waiting below to catch them..." I apologised to Beryl. I had been working on textual problems in the New Testament, and establishing the relation between Matthew xviii. 20 and Isaiah xvii. 6 which ran: "As the gleaning of an olive-tree: two or three berries at the top of the topmost branch"; and of this with Deuteronomy xxiv. 20: "When thou beatest thine olive-trees thou shalt not go over the boughs again: the gleanings shall be for the stranger, the fatherless and the widow". I went to bed wondering idly how the fatherless



The Black Watch marching into Limerick in 1895.

and the widow managed to glean those inaccessible olives, if no able-bodied stranger happened to be about.

"Well, now you know!" Beryl answered crossly.

Once when Julia and I were taking a walk down a dark road not far from the sea, and exchanging our usual nonsense, I suddenly asked her to tell me something really frightening. She checked her pace, clutched my arm and said: "I ought to have told you, Robert, days ago. It happened when I was staying with my grandmother in New Orleans, the one who had the topaz locket and eyes like yours. I guess I must have been twelve years old, and used to ride to school on my bicycle about half-a-mile away. One summer evening I thought I'd come home by a different route, through a complicated criss of cross-streets. I'd never tried it before. Soon I lost my way and found myself in a dead-end, with a square patio behind a rusty iron gate, belonging to an old French mansion overgrown with creepers. The shutters were green too. It was a beautifully cool, damp place in that heat. And as I stood with my hand on the latch, I looked up, and there at an attic window I saw a man's face. He grinned and rapped on the glass with leprous fingers and beckoned to me..."

By Julia's description it was the identical face that had been painted on glass in Mr. Reilly's shop. When I told her about it, we broke into a run of perfect terror, hurrying towards the nearest bright light.

I thought it over afterwards. Perhaps Julia had become aware of my long-buried fear, which then became confused in her imagination with childhood memories of New Orleans; and it stood out so vividly that she really believed that she had seen the face grinning at her. She mentioned no pipe; but then the pipe could be discounted as extraneous...

Soon afterwards Julia went off on a rambling tour through France, Austria and Italy and next year revisited Majorca with her mother. That was September 1952. She found me collaborating in a film-script ... One day as

we all sat outside a cafe, Julia ... repeated the story of the New Orleans face. Her mother gasped and shook her roughly:

"Darling, why in Heaven's name didn't you tell me about it at the time?"

"I was terrified".

"I believe you're making it up from something I told you, sweetie. I saw the same face myself before you were born - **and** the rusty iron - **and** the creepers and the shutters".

"You never told me anything of the sort. Besides, I saw it myself. I don't have other people's visions..."

It occurred to me: "Probably her mother had the vision, or whatever it was, first. And then Julia as a child must have heard her telling the story to somebody, and incorporated in it her own private nightmare world".

I was now in a position to review the story from the beginning. In 1919, I had been neurotic, as a result of having spent thirteen months in the trenches under continuous bombardment, and had begun to "see things" in France even before the fragment of eight-inch shell went clean through my right lung and knocked me out. Limerick was a dead-alive city haunted by family ghosts, and the glass picture focussed my morbid fears of the past and future - yes, it must have been the portrait of a turtle-man\* brought back to Ireland from the Southern States.

Julia and I: because of the unusually close rapport between us, partly explained by her Irish blood, it was not surprising that we should be scared by the same sort of face. And why should Julia's mother not have stumbled across the same old house in New Orleans, and seen the same turtle-man peering through the attic window twelve years previously?

\* Turtle-folk is the name given to a small number of white people who live in the Lower Mississippi region. Because they have no sweat glands, their skins have to be kept constantly damp. They have high cheek bones, a weak growth of hair and Mongolian-like eyes. — Editor.