

## Chapter 18: She was Tortured by Demons Story of Esther Cox

- Nandor Fodor -

ANDREW LANG said that "since the days of ancient Egypt ghosts have learnt and forgotten nothing. About their ways, he might have added, we have learnt nothing and forgotten everything. We know of haunted houses, and we hear of haunted men. The ghost in the haunted house is the least troublesome of the two. You leave it alone and it will leave you alone. The manhaunter, the poltergeist, will not. It carries on in daylight. It is bent on mischief and malice. It is cruel, occasionally malefic and a danger to life.

Fortunately, the latter type is extremely rare. The victims of the poltergeist are usually children nearing the age of puberty. But no physiologist has yet succeeded in running poltergeists to their lair. Their mystery cannot be dissociated from the gamut of psychic experiences. As a rule, they inflict but a short ordeal. The nameless horror which stalked Esther Cox at Amherst, Nova Scotia, in 1878-79 knows of no precedent.

Professor William James, in his presidential address to the Society for Psychical Research, approached The Great Amherst Mystery with respectful interrogation as the most interesting case of its kind on record. The epithet is rather mild for a Grand Guignol. For in the house of Daniel Teed, an honest shoemaker, "murder lurked in the air". Esther Cox, his 19 years old sister-in-law, was tormented by fiends, fresh from hell, against whom no human power could prevail.

The original record of the phenomena we owe to Walter Hubbell, an American actor. He believed himself smart enough to expose the ghost. When he found a genuine mystery, he conceived the brilliant idea of taking Esther Cox on a lecture tour, hoping that the ghost would do a turn on the stage. It was, however, the audience which made things lively. The company managed to escape lynching and went back to Amherst to face the wrath of the ghost.

Hubbell's journal of 2,500 words in which he jotted down his daily experiences is extant. Except in colouring and dramatization, it discloses no serious discrepancy from the book of 10,000 words in which his story was first published. The facts have never been challenged. In 1907 they were borne out by a personal investigation on the spot. Dr. Hereward Carrington, Director of the New York Psychical Institute and Laboratory, interviewed the survivors and visited Esther Cox in Boston, where she lived a normal and happy married life. She was known there as a hardworking' respectable and truth-loving woman. But she would not speak of her experiences. She was "afraid they would come back".

According to Hubbell's summary, the reign of terror in the Teed home commenced on September 4th, 1878. Esther Cox and her sister Jennie heard a rustle in a pasteboard box under their bed. They thought it was a mouse. They pulled out the box into the middle of the room. The box sprung into the air about a foot, then fell and turned over. When it happened again the girls grew frightened, and their screams brought in the family. They listened to the story, roared with laughter, and sent the girls back to bed.

The following night Esther Cox jumped out of bed livid with terror. She was visibly swelling up. She screamed with pain and ground her teeth. There was a loud report like a peal of thunder. Mrs. Teed rushed out, thinking the house had been struck by lightning. As Esther was helped to bed three more terrific reports were heard, apparently coming from under her bed. They had a strange effect on Esther. She immediately assumed her natural appearance and sank into sleep.

Four nights later the attack returned with additional phenomena. The bedclothes, flew off the girls. Pillows jumped up and struck people in the face. A succession of the same mysterious reports restored quiet.

This was too much for the family. Dr. Carlitte was sent for. He found Esther suffering from a tremendous nervous shock. As he delivered his opinion the pillow slid out from under Esther's head, straightened itself, faced the doctor, then it slipped back. Dr. Carlitte's eyes opened wide with astonishment. The pillow repeated the act, and in a tug-of-war with John Teed, a healthy young farmer, proved the stronger one. The loud reports commenced under the bed and on the floor of the room. The bedclothes flew off.

"Before they had been put back on the bed to cover Esther, the distinct sound as of some person writing on the wall with a metallic instrument was heard. All looked at the wall whence the sound of writing came, when, to their great astonishment, there could be plainly read these words, 'Esther Cox, you are mine to kill'. Every person in the room could see the writing plainly, and yet a moment before nothing was to be seen but the plain wall. I have seen this writing; it was deeply indented in the wall, and looked to me as if it had been written with a dull instrument, probably a large iron spike. I say a dull instrument, because the writing had a very uneven appearance, and the invisible power that wrote it was certainly neither an elegant nor an accomplished penman."

The characters were nearly a foot high. Before the eyes of a bewildered doctor a piece of plaster detached itself from the same wall, turned a corner in its flight, and fell at his feet. The pounding commenced again, then it left the room and sounded on the roof of the house as blows from a sledgehammer. It was a moonlit night. The doctor saw no one on the roof. Yet the pounding could be heard from 200 yards away.

The newspapers got hold of the story. Rev. Dr. Edwin Clay, a well-known Baptist clergyman, came to investigate. He advanced the theory that Esther Cox's body became an electric battery which flashed minute and invisible lightning. Rev. R. A. Temple, Pastor of the Wesleyan Church at Amherst, had no theory to submit. But he saw a bucket of cold water become agitated and to all appearance boil while it was standing on the kitchen table.

Dramatic discoveries followed. Esther could hear the ghost. He was going to put the house on fire. To the consternation of all, lighted matches began to fall from the ceiling. A dress of Esther bounced off the nail in the wall, rolled up, slid under the bed and began to burn. They hid the matches. The ghost found them and by lighting fires all over the house kept the inhabitants in a state of fearful agitation. He apparently heard every word and answered questions by knocking three times for yes, once for no. A little later he became visible to Esther, an old man with a scraggy grey beard, dressed like a dirty tramp. He glared at her and said that if she did not leave the house at once he would kindle a fire in the loft under the roof and burn them all to death.

Driven out by the fiend, Esther found refuge in the house of John White, a local saloon keeper. For four weeks she was left in peace. Then the devil's work began. One day while she was scrubbing the hall, the brush disappeared from under her hand. She screamed, for she heard the ghost say that he had taken it. After a vain five minutes' search the brush fell from the ceiling, just grazing her head in its fall. The ghost could be heard by all people walking about in the house, and twice he stabbed Esther in the back with a clasp-knife belonging to White's little boy, leaving the knife sticking in the wound, and terrorized all and sundry in the house.

When Hubbell arrived on the scene Esther Cox was back at her uncle's house. The ghost put in a terrible protest against his stay in the haunted cottage.

"I had been seated about five minutes," he writes, "when, to my great amazement, my umbrella was thrown a distance of fifteen feet, passing over my head in its strange flight, and almost at the same instant a large carving knife came whizzing through the air, passing over Esther's head, who was just then coming out of the pantry with a large dish in both hands, and fell in front of her, near me, having come from behind her and out of the pantry. I

naturally went to the door and looked in; no person was there."

"Oh, you will soon get used to them. I do not think they like you," said Esther Cox.

That was an under-statement of the ghost's sentiments. During the day a large chair rushed against Hubbell from the opposite side of the room, nearly knocking the one on which he sat from under him. The copped shoe of little George hit him a heavy blow behind the ears. A glass paper weight, weighing fully a pound, missed his head by inches and spun around for one quarter of a minute on the seat of the chair where it fell. It was followed by an empty inkstand, two bottles, his satchel, and a piece of cake snatched from little George's hand. When the child protested his clothes were torn off. And Esther's face was loudly smacked again and again by an invisible hand which left plain finger marks on her cheeks.

Hubbell was treated to a variety of vanishing mysteries. At breakfast the lid of the sugar bowl was heard to fall on the floor. But it disappeared. Five minutes later Mrs. Teed, Esther and himself saw it fall from the ceiling.

"I saw it just before it fell," he writes, "and it was at the moment suspended in the air about one foot from the ceiling. No one was within five feet of it at the time. The table knives were then thrown upon the floor, the chairs pitched over, and after breakfast the dining-table fell over on its side, rugs upon the floor were slid about, and the whole room literally turned into a pandemonium, so filled with dust that I went into the parlour."

Next morning "I removed the lid (of the sugar bowl) and placed it on the table beside my cup of coffee, put sugar in the coffee, and had almost put my hand on the lid to put it on the sugar bowl to keep the flies out, when it disappeared - literally melted into the air."

Later, while Esther was about to enter the pantry, the lid came out from inside the pantry, being pushed through a broken pane of glass covered with brown paper, and fell to the floor, a distance of fully fifteen feet from its original place.

It was almost of daily occurrence for the ghost to bring articles from locked trunks and closets and place others in their stead. During breakfast the ghost knocked upon the table and produced a perfect imitation of whatever sounds were called for: drumming, sawing wood, rubbing out linen garments on a wash-board, etc. The cat was lifted from the floor to a height of five feet into the air, and then dropped on Esther's back, whence it rolled to the floor. It was so frightened that for several days it would not venture into the house again. It could see something, for the hair often rose on its tail and back, and it would leave the house in terror.

On the night of June 26th the ghost amused himself by sticking pins in Esther and Jennie and marking them from head to foot with crosses. The following day Hubbell was busy pulling pins out of Esther. "They came out of the air from all quarters, and were stuck into all the exposed portions of her person, even her head and inside of her ears." Twice an attempt was made to cut Esther's throat with a carving-knife. Once she was stabbed in the neck with a pair of shears, and once in the head with a fork.

The general pandemonium was no more due to a single ghost. There were several. Their names were found out and, in some instances, their story was traced. The chief malefactor was "Bob" Nickle; he said he was sixty years old when he died, and a shoemaker. Another infamous character answered to the name of "Maggie" Fisher. She said that she has been in hell for twelve years. Other ghosts stated their names as Peter Cox, Jane Nickle, and Eliza McNeal. They all could knock in an individual style and they were all ingenious in devising fresh torture for Esther. But none could outdo "Bob".

"I am positive," writes Hubbell, "that a more demoniac ghost or scheming scoundrel never haunted a house or tortured a human being as did this fire

fiend and terror of the household."

He cursed in the strongest language. The ghost retaliated. The hand of Esther, while she was writing a letter to her sister, was rudely seized, and she wrote in a different hand:

"G \_ d \_ Hubbell's *sole* to hell and yours!"

One afternoon Hubbell saw Esther and Mrs. Teed talk in an undertone. After much hesitancy, he was informed that "Maggie" stole a pair of black and white striped stockings belonging to Esther and put them on. According to Esther, the ghost raised the wrap she wore as far as her knees and she had seen the stockings on her legs. Hubbell commanded Maggie to give the stockings back. In a minute they fell out of the air and lay upon the floor before their eyes.

During the latter part of July it was no longer possible to keep Esther in the house. The violence of the ghosts was insupportable. Fires were continually lit, things were broken, and "strange, unnatural voices could be heard in the air, calling us by our names in the broad light of the day."

So Esther Cox was driven out again. The last that Hubbell heard of her was that the ghost burnt down a barn where she stayed, and that she was sentenced to four months in jail in lieu of the ghost.

Is there any solution to this fearful mystery? Some time before the trouble started a shoemaker, named Bob McNeal, attempted, at the point of a revolver, to commit an outrage on Esther Cox. According to a critical study of the Great Amherst Mystery by the late Dr. W. F. Prince, Research Officer of the Boston Society for Psychical Research, "the name of 'Bob' Nickle is but a thin disguise for that of the man who was the centre to Esther of both attraction and horror, 'Bob' McNeal. Bob Nickle was, like his prototype, a shoemaker. The 'malice' of the ghost as shown in many of the manifestations was but the dramatization of the depth of wickedness and mischief which the girl had suddenly glimpsed in the living man. The scratching on the wall of the words, 'Esther Cox, you are mine to kill', was but her automatic supernalization of the threats of McNeal as, maddened and exulting in his brute strength, he held the revolver to her breast."

Daniel Teed explained the true nature of the torture to Hubbell.

"It is plain from the journal," writes Dr. Prince, "that the torture consisted in 'Bob' Nickle being supposed to act the part of the incubus, an obvious objectification of McNeal's vile purpose on the night of August 28th."

Does this analytical explanation light up the mystery? Hubbell believed that the actual villain of the piece was a ghost who obsessed "Bob" McNeal, the living man, and transferred his attention to Esther when, as a result of the shock, her nervous system became disorganized.

So much is certain that the psychological explanation provides no answer for the greater part of this awful mystery.