



THE CURTAIN.

The Story of a Ghostly House.

BY J. J. BELL.

I.

"It is certainly an amazing collection of photographs," said the visitor, and closed the portfolio with something like a sigh of relief. "As studies of human emotions as reflected on the human countenance they are, I should imagine, unique. But I must confess that some of them were almost too much for me. Candidly, I don't know how you had the nerve—or the heart—to take some of them. The lunatic laughing, for instance—ugh! And yet that was less horrible than the woman weeping."

"They are equally true to life," said the professor, with a quiet smile on his thin lips. He rubbed his hands, making a dryish sound. "Equally true to life!" He bent forward and stirred the fire, for the night was cold.

"Some of these photographs cost me considerable sums of money," he continued; "but I grudge nothing in the interests of truth. The thing has grown on me, I admit—fascinated me, if you like. Long ago you used to say—or, at any rate, suggest—that I could take nothing really seriously. Now you will perhaps allow that—"

"Oh, willingly," said the visitor. "I apologised in spirit twenty-five years ago, when the Canadian papers reported your appointment to the Chair of Biological Chemistry in—"

"You need not have apologised in such a hurry, my friend. I resigned after a couple of years—when my aunt left me her little fortune. They still call me 'Professor'—why, I don't know. No; I never took anything seriously until seven or eight years ago, when I took up this—shall we call it hobby? But you may apologise

now, if you like. What I have shown you to-night is by no means a proper sample of my work. I have some fine studies of children's expressions while at play, also some excellent examples of epileptics. Then, during my trip to Patagonia, I was so fortunate as to witness and record the torturing of a—"

"Man, man! how could you do it?" cried the visitor. "I've been through the Wiertz Gallery in Brussels—"

"Wiertz had great imagination; I have merely great patience. All the same, I believe Wiertz would have found inspiration in certain of my studies. There is one I would like to show you—the face of a man who fell from a great height. I had difficulty in securing the negative. It is not repulsive—"

"No, no. No more to-night, Drack, if you please. Indeed, it's time I was off."

"Help yourself first." The professor drew some lithia from a siphon.

The visitor took brandy, because he was feeling a little sick.

"By the way," Drack resumed, after a slight pause, "you are the first person who has seen my photographs. I do not say I have honoured you, but I have distinguished you. No other person shall see them during my lifetime. Afterwards—well, given a few more years, I shall leave my own monument. I have always had a great regard for you, Wilson. You did not rag me at school, and you stood by me at college. I am sorry we discovered each other again only on the eve of your return to Canada. It was good of you to give me this evening.

"I wonder if we shall ever meet again?"

"I'll be home in two years. But you should take a trip over to see me. You'd be right welcome. It would blow away morbid ideas, and all that, you know. Wilson laughed, but not freely. "Think over it, Drack; and bring your camera too—if you want some healthy snapshots."

"My dear fellow, you were always quick, but this time you've flown off with the wrong idea. I am not devoted to the more unhappy expressions of the human countenance—as you would admit, were I to show you my entire collection; but I confess they appeal to me by reason of the difficulty, not to mention the risk, in securing them. It is quite possible that a negative may yet cost me my life. But your adjective 'morbid' is quite out of place, apart from being commonplace. I simply want to make a collection of examples of every conceivable human emotion as betrayed by the human countenance. And, as I said, I do not exhibit the results. As regards the photographs which I have taken of you—"

"Of me!"

"—I promise to destroy prints as well as negatives after I have analysed them. Yes, I took you while you were examining the contents of that portfolio. Didn't you notice how I turned on the light? I took you five times. I fancy the most interesting negative will be obtained from the film exposed while you were looking at the weeping woman. Your expression was one, to put it conventionally, of mingled emotions. I shall analyse it, and let you know the percentages of pity, anger, disgust, etcetera."

"But how?"

"The clock on the mantelpiece contains a camera, electrically controlled from a point on the arm of the chair I am sitting in. You can, of course, rise up and destroy the clock, but I beg you to spare it. You have the promise that none save ourselves shall handle the negatives. Besides, I am trusting you."

Wilson, dropping his eyes, helped himself to a little more brandy.

"Hardly fair," he said, slowly.

"I wonder how you got some of the photos you showed me. . . . No, no! I don't want to know."

"I don't want to tell you," said Drack, quietly. "But I don't want you to go off to Canada with any grudge against me." He rose and went to the mantelpiece. "Look here!" He opened the side of the gilded clock and withdrew a roll of film. "So much for the face of my friend!" He tossed it into the fire, which devoured it speedily, and went back to his chair.

"Thanks," said Wilson, with an uncertain laugh. "But I would have trusted you, Drack."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," replied the professor. "I want to be able to come to see you in your healthy Canadian home with a clear conscience."

"Then you will come?"

"I will come—as soon as I have added one to my collection. . . . But I do not know when that may be. It's an extraordinary thing—the world is full of terror—yet thus far I've never been able to secure what you would call a terror-stricken expression—a face speaking pure, abject terror."

"Oh, stop it, man! You'll get it from me if you go on talking like that."

"But have you ever seen one?—could you describe it? Take, for instance, the case of a man who has made a bet that he will spend the night in a room reputed to be haunted; the case of a man who suddenly sees, or imagines he sees, the thing he declared impossible. Now, what—"

Wilson got up and drained his glass.

"You're the same old Drack," he said, "and yet now you give me the creeps. Hang it, man! Drop all this, and sail with me on Saturday. Let me book a berth for you first thing in the morning. What do you say?"

Drack shook his head, smiling kindly—more kindly than he usually smiled.

"I'll come as soon as I've caught and developed the Terror, Wilson. I've a plan for its capture in my mind now. It came a minute ago! I'll come to you then. If I don't come soon, you'll understand that—er—something has gone wrong. But I

must capture it—I will capture it! . . . Must you go?"

"It's half-past one. I can't stand late hours. I expect that is what has got on my nerves. Sorry if I've been rude, old man."

"Oh, that's all right," the professor replied, absently. "I'll 'phone for a cab."

"Thanks, I'll walk. Perhaps it's your excellent brandy, perhaps it's your equally excellent conversation, Drack—but there's something that wants to be walked off before I sleep to-night."

Having bidden his guest good-night, Professor Drack returned to his study, and halted on the hearthrug, gazing at the clock.

"Pity," he muttered—"a great pity! His composite expression of pain and disgust was worth having. But I can get that elsewhere . . . Now, that thought—that idea—that—why, it was an inspiration!" He dropped into a chair. "I've got it! By Heaven, I've got it! I'll capture Terror yet!"

II.

The taximeter indicated 5s. 4d. when Professor Drack called through the tube: "House on the left—stop there."

"Thenk Gawd!" muttered the driver, for the night was black and bitter. "'Ouse is shut, sir," he added, as Drack opened the cab door and alighted. "Looks as if it 'ad been shut for a century, sir. Cold night, sir. 'Ope you'll find——"

"Thanks!" said Drack briefly. "It's a night for keeping the mouth shut, my friend." He turned to the interior of the cab.

"Here we are, Captain Inglis," he said, cheerfully.

"Where?" came the drowsy question.

"Somewhere beyond the radius." Drack laughed, and lowering his voice continued: "It's not too late to change your mind, Captain. Say the word, and we'll drive back to town now."

A laugh came from the cab. "My dear chap, I'm going to interview the ghost to-night—or may I go to—sleep. Shouldn't wonder if I do the latter."

"'Sh! Quietly, man!" whispered Drack, gripping the elbow of the tall, heavily-built man who came not quite steadily from the cab.

Captain Inglis stared about him with eyes rather bleared. "I say, where are we?" he asked.

"At our destination."

"Are there no other houses?"

"It's a dark night. You'd see others in daylight at no great distance." Drack took a key from his pocket, and pointed to a large iron gate. "Try if you can unlock it, Captain," he said, handing over the key, "while I instruct the chauffeur."

The Captain stepped stiffly to the gate—some half-dozen paces.

Drack turned to the driver. Handing him a half-sovereign, he said, "Wait for ten minutes—no more. If we don't return in that time we shall spend the night there. If we decide to stay before the ten minutes are up, I shall close the front door loudly, and you can take that as your dismissal. Understand?" He looked steadily at the man. "I wired my servant to have the house ready, but it is possible he may not have received my wire, as he was on holiday."

"Very good, sir. . . . The gate seems to be locked sir. Looks as if——"

"My servant had only the key of the back entrance. Now you understand that you are to wait for ten minutes, or until you hear the door bang?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, in case we do not require you, further, good-night."

"Good-night, sir," said the man. "I understand." But, as a matter of fact, he was wondering. He had once been a witness in a burglary case, and nowadays it took little to raise his suspicions.

Professor Drack was already beside the Captain. "Sorry I gave you the wrong key," he said softly. "Allow me."

Inglis stood aside, chuckling. "I was blaming that last brandy-and-soda," he remarked. "Now you've

done the trick, Mr. — Excuse me, but I've forgotten your name."

The gate opened.

"Come along," said Drack. "Take my arm. The avenue is very dark."

"You seem to know the way, old cock," the Captain observed.

"I've been here several times in daylight. Sure you wouldn't like to go back?"

"Rot! . . . Fifty pounds, you said, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Twenty-five when I leave you to-night—twenty-five when I call for you in the morning. As a matter of fact, I'll make it fifty in the morning, if you can then swear that nothing—er—troubled you."

"Guess I'll earn the fifty. Gad! that would just help me over the stile. I say! it was funny our meeting to-night, wasn't it—in that old restaurant where I was blueing my last sov.?" Inglis became garrulous over the recollection. "And," he concluded, "the whole thing means that you want to buy this house, provided you're satisfied that there's no ghost, or whatever the thing is?"

"Precisely. And as I explained to you, I'm too nervous to make the experiment myself. I chose you, Captain Inglis, after considerable search, because you appeared to me to be a man without nerves—"

"Devil a nerve," said the Captain cheerfully.

"—and without imagination."

"Never was bothered that way. . . . I fancy you'll buy the house, old cock. Has it a wine-cellar attached?"

"I'm afraid not. . . . Mind the steps, Captain Inglis."

They had come to the house, a square, old-fashioned building with shuttered windows. In the dark it loomed above them like a precipice.

Drack guided his companion up the broad steps, and inserted a key in the door, which opened easily.

"Go in." He put the door to behind them without closing it.

The next moment the hall was ablaze.

"Gad! This is civilised enough," cried the Captain. "Electric light and fully furnished!"

"I arranged for the light. As for the furniture, the previous owner, and

all connected with him, left in a hurry. Come this way, please."

Drack crossed the hall, and opened a door on the left. Putting in his hand he touched a switch, and beckoned the other to follow him. He entered the room.

For an instant Inglis halted in the doorway. "Damned queer place," he said, looking up and down and about him. Then he laughed and followed the Professor.

"I'm sorry I could not arrange for a fire," said Drack, leaning against the mantelpiece of white marble. "But you'll find rugs on the couch there. Sorry, too, there's only one light available"—he nodded towards a metal-shaded reading lamp fixed to a small table beside an easy chair—"but you'll find illustrated papers and some books on the under shelf in case you can't sleep."

Inglis was still staring about him. "Damned queer place," he said again.

Drack went over to the small table. He opened a paper packet, and a stream of sovereigns tinkled into the lamplight.

"Perhaps you would prefer to return to town with me. The cab is waiting."

"And fifty in the morning?" said Inglis, eyeing the gold.

"Fifty in the morning—certainly."

"All right," said the Captain. "When shall you call for me?"

"Seven o'clock?—six? Say six? Very good."

"You don't happen to have a drink on the premises, old cock?"

"Sorry to be inhospitable, but I didn't think of that."

The Captain looked disappointed.

"By the way," said Drack, "how old are you?"

"Thirty-two."

"Heart all right?"

"What d'you mean?—Oh, of course it's sound enough. Trying to scare me—eh? Guess this damned queer place would scare some fellows. What . . ."

Captain Inglis was a trifle fuddled, and the numerous questions he was fain to ask became entangled. But he got out one distinctly.

"What's behind?" he asked, pointing at a curtain, or rather pair of cur-

tains close-drawn, that stretched right across the room, a dozen feet from where he stood.

"This is a very long room, and the curtains divide it," was the reply.

"Yes; but what's behind?"

"That," said Drack, holding out his hand, "is—so I believe—just what the previous tenant wanted to know. Perhaps he did learn, but unfortunately he was unable to tell anything coherently."

"You mean——"

"I must get back to town, Captain Inglis. It is almost midnight. I wish you a good-night."

Inglis gave his hand a little unwillingly. "I could have done with a drink," he said sulkily. "Why is everything here black and white?"

"As I have said, the previous tenant was unable to tell anything. There is still time for you to change your mind, Captain Inglis." Drack spoke from the doorway.

"Oh, damn it! Beg pardon, old cock—good-night." The Captain was fingering the gold. "But you might bring a flask in the morning."

"I'll do so," said Drack, and went out, closing the door softly.

Inglis, his eyes on the sovereigns, stood listening. He heard nothing from the hall, which he had noticed was covered with heavy rugs, but presently the front door clanged noisily, and a minute later came, faintly, the sound of a motor. "Old what's-his-name must have sprinted down the avenue," he reflected, and proceeded to pocket the coins.

That done, he procured a rug from the couch, and, wrapping it round his legs, seated himself in the easy-chair. He filled and lit his pipe, and took up an illustrated paper. But soon the pipe went out, and the paper slipped from his knees.

"A damned queer place," he said once more. "Guess the previous proprietor was dotty."

It was rather a queer place. Save for the blank walls, mantelpiece, and ceiling, which were a dead white, everything was a dead black—carpet, hangings, the few pieces of furniture, and even the rugs. And it was cold. Inglis got up and put a second rug round his shoulders. He was in even-

ing dress with a light overcoat. Settling himself in the easy-chair again he made a bid for sleep. But he had taken either a drink too many or a drink too few—he declared for the latter—and though his eyes closed his brain remained stupidly restless. Ere long the utter silence began to make itself oppressive.

III.

He had made up his mind not to look at his watch, but at the end of several hours, as it seemed, he did so. He stared at it, held it to his ear, and stared again. Ten minutes to one.

"Gad! this is slow work," he muttered with a laugh, which broke off abruptly.

Had the great black curtain moved?
... Nonsense!

He produced his matches and prepared to relight his pipe, though he was horribly thirsty. The box slipped from his fingers.

Undoubtedly the curtain had moved—moved slightly towards him.

"A draught," he thought. "A house like this would be full of draughts." He stooped to recover the scattered matches, but kept his eyes on the curtain. With half a dozen matches in his hand he sat up, and endeavoured to remove the shade from the lamp, so that the light might be dispersed through the shadowy space. But the shade was fixed. This annoyed him. He got out of the rugs, rose, and tried the several switches near the door; but, as the old man had said, they were not acting. It then occurred to him to open the door, and let in light from the blazing hall; after that he would examine the curtain and see what was behind it.

The door resisted him.

"Hadn't thought of that," he said to himself, "but I suppose it was fair enough." After some hesitation he crossed the thick-piled black carpet to what he took to be a window. The black curtain there he drew aside rather gingerly. Yes; it was a window right enough, but stoutly shuttered. He tried the shutters, and presently

discovered that the cross-bar was padlocked.

"A damned queer place," he muttered, returning to the easy chair, and looking again at his watch. Four minutes to one. As he replaced it in his pocket he fancied that the great curtain bulged. Sitting straight, he glanced sidelong at the hearth. There were no fire-irons. Ere long he realised that there was nothing in the room available as a weapon—not even a light chair. He wished he had had the wit to provide himself with something in that way. He began to feel that the old man had not treated him fairly in leaving him utterly defenceless. He regretted that he had not taken one drink less—or, rather, one drink more.

Not that he was afraid! . . .

The black curtain bulged quite distinctly.

"Who's there?" he called, hoarsely.

A minute later he sniggered. "Curse those draughts! It's infernally cold. Feel as if I were in for influenza." He put his hand to his head and found it wet.

Not that he was afraid! . . .

He picked up one of the tumbled rugs, and let it go again. Something was irritating his left hand. He opened it, and found several vestas sticking to the palm.

"Wits gone wool—"

The curtain again!

He rose to his feet, throwing back his shoulders, and stepped forward a few paces. Perhaps it was some trickery on the old man's part. But no; the old man would hardly have paid twenty-five pounds. . . .

Inglis halted half-way between the hearth and the curtain. What had the old man said about the previous owner? Did he mean that the previous owner was dead, or—what? Inglis wished he had kept wide-awake during the long cab journey. There was much he would like to have known, but he had been so infernally drowsy and comfortable.

Not that he was afraid! . . .

He stood, swaying ever so slightly, staring at the curtain. He thought as hard as his clouded brain would let him. The point was that he was in a

haunted house. That was the point, wasn't it. But, then, he didn't believe in haunted houses. Yet supposing—

Was that a sound behind the curtain? Inglis strained his ears. A chill seemed to ripple over his body. There it was again! What was it? . . . A sort of muffled munching sound, accompanied by low but heavy breathing. Was it human? What was it?

Inglis sidled to the door, and twisted and tugged at the handle. Then, with teeth set and fingers working, he stole on tiptoe to the window. He grunted softly as he strove to burst the padlock without creating a noise. He could make nothing of it. Desperate, he looked about him. He was a strong man. By using the couch as a battering-ram he might break down the door. But the noise. . . . He knew there was something behind the curtain. . . . A dog? . . . Why not peep cautiously? . . . But the sound—there it was again—that was no dog—it was something swinish, something—guzzling.

He would risk the battering-ram. He must get out. He forgot about the fifty pounds in the morning. He must get out now—at once! He left the window. The couch was not far away. He would point the low end at the door, then charge for all he was worth. At the couch he stopped short. Something was moving behind the curtain. He must keep silent awhile. He faced the curtain, about five feet from it.

Of a sudden he sniffed involuntarily. What was that smell? What! Raw meat—good Heaven! It was raw meat—flesh!

Ere he could step backward the curtain bulged towards him, and in the same instant the lamp went out.

And out of the blackness a hot, foul breath puffed in his face.

He screamed.

There was a blinding flash, and Captain Inglis fell heavily.

.

"All right. Don't be alarmed," said the voice of Professor Drack.

A switch clicked; the place was flooded with light, dimmed somewhat by a cloud of magnesia vapour.

"All right!" repeated the Professor, cheerfully, leaving his camera and sundry curious-looking pieces of

pneumatic apparatus. "All right. Let me help you up. Sorry you tripped. What? Fainted? Well, here we are. Always prepared for emergencies." He knelt down, restoratives in his hands. "This is my own house, you know," he went on, foolishly, for he was excited, and carried away by the supreme success of his experiment; "and everything is faked—except the negative itself. Now then, Captain, your collar——"

Professor Drack paused abruptly, his countenance the colour of ashes.

Two minutes later he rose stiffly to his feet, and stood gazing down at Inglis.

He did not hear the panting of a motor approaching the gate.

"What a pity!" he murmured, at last. "What a pity, after so excellent a result!"
