

Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Recently I made the severe mistake of describing Clark Ashton Smith as "surely the most venerable of F&SF's contributors — not so much in age as in practice of his craft." Mr. Smith, who began his professional career in 1910 at the age of seventeen, was the first to point out that this distinction of venerability belongs unquestionably to Lord Dunsany. Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, 18th Baron Dunsany, was born in 1878 and published a magnificent volume of fantasies, THE GODS OF PEGANA, as early as 1905. Now, a full fifty years later, Dunsany still writes with charm, ingenuity, and a fluent ease which is the envy of younger rivals — and with striking modernity of concepts, as in this his newest tale, which deals delightfully with the latest electronic developments in the ancient science of exorcism.

The Ghosts of the Heavyside Layer

by LORD DUNSANY

ON A FARM OF FIFTY THOUSAND acres a farmer had been eking out a precarious livelihood from sheep in the Karoo, until one day among stunted bushes and bright brown rocks he discovered gold. This brought him to London, as though gold naturally gravitated there, dragging him with it.

But this is not his story. It is the story of his son, Jan Nietjens, who though born in the Karoo, was too young to remember its spaces, its springboks and its koraans, and had for his earliest memories London streets and the sound of motorbuses; and sometimes a glimpse of lilac, which London shared with hills and

valleys beyond, that he did not know. His mother died soon in London, missing something she could not explain, and finding the air there not of the kind that she was accustomed to breathe, which any chemist could have told her was an absurd belief. His father went on with the business into which his gold had dragged him, and a certain shrewdness he had in him prevented him from losing any of the wealth he had brought from Africa, though he never appreciably increased it, and never quite felt any more at home among streets than a lion feels in a zoo.

I think that the loss of the Karoo

must have embittered him, without his ever quite knowing what he had lost or that he had been embittered; and his bitterness took the form of inflicting upon his son the whole weight of what was oppressing him. So he made him a clerk, determining to teach him from the very beginning the ways of business in the City, determining, as he said, that his son should have the thorough knowledge of business that he himself had lacked; not seeming to know that his real lack, with which all his nerves were tingling, was for the far horizons, the flat-topped hills and the diamond air of the Karoo. And so young Jan came to know the insides of offices as his father had known the outside of the world, and learned all that his father planned that he should learn and did not imagine another kind of life; for imagination is only the brilliant reflection of things seen, and he had seen nothing but the streets and offices of a city. And though his father might have guessed the Karoo was calling him, young Jan, who had inherited the same far call with his bones and his blood, could not even guess what it was for which he was yearning, and thought that the world was drab, only because he could not picture anything beyond offices.

With his father's shrewdness, which he had inherited as well as those dim yearnings, combined with a knowledge of business from its foundations, which his father had

never had, he made himself useful in his father's lifetime; and, when the old man died, he attended so well to the half of his inheritance which the State allowed him to keep, that in ten years he was as rich as his father had been, and in ten years more he was so rich that there is almost nothing he might not have had, had he had the leisure to enjoy it; but he had no time for amusements. Nor had he had any time to marry. For besides being a member of the Stock Exchange and looking after the many investments his father had left him, he became a director of several companies. Sometimes he had planned trips to the country, and even dreamed of travel abroad; but the dates of board meetings were too close together, and his wealth with which he had hoped to take hold on affairs in the world's greatest city gripped him and held him there. And now he was in the forties.

Perhaps he would have remained in London as his father had done, had he not been sitting one bright Spring day at an open window of his club and seen a strange bird flying high over London, uttering a call that he did not know, and wondered where it was flying. More birds fly over London than Londoners know, and this one may have been a curlew flying eastwards to find some marshes. Whatever it was it started a wonder in Jan Nietjen's mind, and his thought followed the wonder. And what he thought was

that there was a note of happiness in the cry of the travelling bird; and turning, possibly for the first time, from a means of happiness, which his father had invested and left to him, to happiness itself, the idea came to him that he would follow the curlew. Without tenacity he would never have made the fortune he now possessed, and now that the idea had come he worked at it. He had never had such an idea before, but only the vague longing that was in his blood. The idea was that, having money enough, he could do without any more and give up all his directorships and turn his back on London and find some place where the wind was free to roam over trees and grasses, and be free himself like the wind. So he went down into Kent, as the curlew had gone, and looked about him. And one day he came to a hazel wood before the bluebells were over, and, looking at the old boles of the hazels all in the hush of the wood, he felt that this was where he might find content, when, raising his eyes, he saw over the tops of the hazels the battlements of a queer old flint-built tower. The swallows had just arrived, and some were sailing above it. A curlew flying and the sight of a ruined tower may seem small things upon which to plan the course of a life; but from such trifles our thoughts arise, and where our thoughts fly we follow if we can, and are dully discontent when we cannot.

And so Nietjens bought the ruined castle whose tower he had seen over the hazel wood, and the wood itself and the country all round for a mile, and employed an architect to plaster and strengthen the walls and to fill in gaps worn by time or by some old siege, and to put on a roof and to put in floors and some wooden staircases and to carpet the old spiral staircases of stone; and in little more than a year there was a comfortable house where only owls and jackdaws had lived for so long. And that winter he resigned from all his directorates, and furnished his new house and engaged a cook and several servants, and one snowy day of December he moved in. The outer walls were a good three feet thick and not easily removed, and the architect had kept their line intact. But not only did the old castle frown over the woods and fields as it had frowned in the time of King Stephen, but a certain austere gloom of its early days seemed still to haunt its interior, for the architect had rebuilt in keeping with those old walls and worked under the influence of the Twelfth Century. So when Jan Nietjens settled down into a deep armchair in the big drawing room on that snowy night and looked up into the dimness among the rafters, he wondered if, new though they were, those rafters might not shelter old invisible things that had haunted the ancient walls, and if so what.

He was smoking a cigar after an

early dinner, and the smoke as it wandered up sometimes seemed to be taking shapes. All he knew of ghosts was what his mother had told him of those that the Zulus knew, that drifted over the Karoo by night and that sometimes told of things that were to trouble the future, but only in whispers. In London there were no ghosts, but he did not know what they might have in the country. These were only wonderings, and were soon replaced in his mind by the logical reasoning of a level-headed financier. And yet they returned. Various influences were pulling at Nietjens: at one moment the house seemed damp with newness, at another clammy with whatever was weirdest of things that haunted the ages. And since the architect had evidently sided with those ancient things, and the walls all round him had watched the passage of eight centuries, there were two ancient influences pulling at him to one of modernity. Around him his carpet and chairs were of the reign of Elizabeth II; above, the high walls and the rafters hinted of Stephen. He tried to balance logic and wonder, and when he could not, realizing that he only knew London, he decided to have a talk with someone who had known the old castle before he ever laid hands on it. There was a man named Smidger, whom he called his gardener, but who was really a labourer whom he had employed to dig up the weeds from the

fields in which he had decided to have a garden. Smidger had lived there all his life, and forebears of his had probably lived there forever; so that he should know something, reasoned Nietjens, of things that came out of the past, if any such things there were.

When Nietjens threw away the butt of his cigar there did not seem so many ghosts in the rafters, or whatever the invisible things might be that had sometimes lured his wonder. But he kept to his idea of having a talk with Smidger, and next morning he went to the weedy patch that was to be his garden and spoke to Smidger about the past and old legends. And for a while Smidger said little but Yes and Oh, and seemed to Nietjens very dull-witted; but he was quietly finding out what Nietjens wanted, and suspicious at first that he was trying to make a fool of him. But when this suspicion faded slowly away he began to talk, and to tell Nietjens some of the things that the country people knew about the old castle, which was nothing they got from history books and was not of things dead and done with, but only of what lingered on among those old walls into their own time, or at least the time of their grandmothers, things that were there still and with which their elders had been familiar, in fact ghosts.

What had only been a vague wonder when Nietjens gazed into the great height of his principal room

on his first evening in the old castle became a definite fear of ghosts after his talk with Smidger. He came of a superstitious people, who in the great loneliness of the Karoo had sometimes found little other company than superstitions, and when he suddenly found himself in suitable surroundings, the superstitions that were in his blood flourished abundantly. That day the vicar called on him, and he was just the man that Nietjens wanted to see. They both talked at once of the history of the old castle, and it was very easy from that to turn the conversation to ghosts, and after a few minutes talk about them Nietjens came to the point. Could not the vicar exorcise a house?

"O yes," said the vicar. "Yes, certainly. The church can do that. At the same time, is it not possible that the queerness of this old place, and coming to it for the first time from London, and perhaps hearing the rather foolish tales that the country people tell round here, may have caused you, not to exaggerate the possibility of ghosts, but perhaps slightly to overestimate it?"

Then Nietjens saw that the cooperation of the vicar would be half-hearted and, whatever there might or might not be in exorcism, he knew enough about men's work to know that no half-hearted effort ever achieved anything.

That evening alone with his cigar in the big high room Nietjens imagined the ghosts among the rafters

more clearly. He did not see them, or expect to, for he had learned as a child that spirits were invisible, not even to be seen when they whispered quite close by red campfires. But he felt they were there. He had hoped to feel what home was in this old castle, as he had never known it in a London flat. But he only felt an intruder among the ages, whose influences, whatever they were, were at home where he was a stranger. As the long evenings went by, he felt more and more sure of this, and though carefully noting what was cigar-smoke and what was imagination, he saw every now and then something in between the two that made him think that the spirits were taking visible shapes. It was only rarely he saw such things, and they vanished in less than a second; but they served to remind him. He readily understood it might all be imagination; but Christmas was drawing near, when the things that he feared, if there really were such things, were certain to be abroad, so far as all tales he had ever heard had told. Sitting in his armchair one evening he wondered what he should do. Should he ask a bishop to help where the vicar had failed? He did not know any bishop, but could surely get introduced. And then the idea came to him. Why not give science a chance? He had offered the job at first to the church, and the church had not seemed very keen. It was science's turn. He knew several scientists, and he got on to one

on the telephone there and then; for the old castle was on the telephone. And he asked him to come and stay the night with him, to see his castle, and persuaded him to come the following day.

And the scientist arrived the next afternoon. Glayde was his name. Nietjens met him at the station and greeted him warmly, for the weight of imponderable things had increased their oppression of him the night before, and Glayde seemed to him something of what a search-party seems to one lost in untravelled lands. Yet he did not speak to him of his vague fear that inhabitants of the ages were peering at his intrusion upon their ancient haunt. He showed him instead his rooms, with their pictures and furniture, and his system of central heating, until it was time for dinner. And then he gave Glayde champagne and port, and later over the coffee forced a liqueur upon him, when they had gone to the big high room and were comfortable in their chairs, for he feared the scientist's scepticism. But when he hoped that the wine and liqueur had done their mellow work, Nietjens told some of the tales that his gardener had told him of those who had once lived where they now sat, and that haunted the old walls still. He told the tales as amusing examples of what country people believed, and as less and less amusing as he went on; till, perhaps without noticing it himself, he was telling the tales

of Smidger as though they were local news. And from the tales of Smidger Nietjens came to an account of his talk with the vicar. Glayde had not spoken yet, but sat quietly listening, smoking a cigar as Nietjens was doing. And encouraged by his silence and perhaps emboldened by the champagne and port, which he also had had, he told Glayde how the vicar had disappointed him and, when his guest looked sympathetic, he blurted out, "Can science not help?"

"Certainly," replied Glayde. "Science can do everything he can. What is it you want exorcised?"

Then Nietjens spoke openly of the consciousness that he had that up among those rafters near the top of the high walls, to which puffs of smoke were wandering slowly from their cigars, there lurked invisible to the eye, but only too vivid to the imagination, some of those things that were so familiar to Smidger. The vicar seemed slow to exorcise them. What could science do?

"All that he can do," repeated Glayde. "And as a matter of fact we have an apparatus now, though it has not yet been put on the market, that can entirely expel all foreign objects from air."

"It can create a vacuum?" said Nietjens.

"No, no," said Glayde. "It does not do that. It does not drive out the air. You could not live if it did. What it does is to desiccate the air,

to drive out every particle of moisture, also odour or dust, in fact everything."

"And spirits?" enquired Nietjens.

"Everything," said Glayde. "I do not know what you may have up among those rafters, or if there is nothing there. But whatever there is will go. This apparatus will leave it completely void, except for the air: smoke will go too."

"And how long will it last?" asked Nietjens.

"You can turn the thing on whenever things worry you," said Glayde. "It is not unlike a wireless transmitting set. A blast from it will expel everything."

"But spirits," said Nietjens, "if there are any there; I didn't know you could affect spirits."

The remark roused Glayde, for there had always been a certain rivalry between science and spiritual things.

"Certainly we can," he replied. "Certainly. We can drift spirits about as easily as anything else. If there are no spirits there the air will remain void. If there are, we can drive them out. Good lord! We can send a man's words to Tokyo without his raising his voice, and in the twenty thousandth part of a second. If we can throw sound about like that, do you think we can't move spirits?" He took another gulp of his benedictine and added, "We have actually changed elements. We have shown what we can do with solid things: don't think that

we can't stand up to spirits. We can beat them as we have beaten matter."

It was the best benedictine that could be got in the City, and Nietjens had told his butler to serve it in wine glasses. "The thing is quite new," Glayde went on. "Not yet on the market. But I can let you have a set. It is quite easy to work. You turn a knob and it emits a blast that is active for several yards, quite as far as the top of your roof, and will expel everything from the air and leave it void. Everything. I will get it down here tomorrow."

"But it is very kind of you to take all this trouble," said Nietjens.

"Not at all," said Glayde. "Glad to help you. If anything's there it will drive it away all right."

"How far?" asked Nietjens.

"With the force with which our new apparatus will drive it," said Glayde, "it will go a long way; right outside the earth's atmosphere anyhow. Experiments have been made."

They talked a little longer, then went to bed. And Nietjens slept well, partly perhaps because he had got confidence at last that he would be adequately defended against the powers of the past. Next morning Glayde went back to London, and that afternoon the strange box arrived at the station and was brought by car to the castle, where Nietjens unpacked it and read the instructions.

That night Nietjens dined alone. And in his high room afterwards he

sat with the queer set on the floor beside him, knowing that he only had to lean over and turn a knob to remove from the air about him and right up to the high rafters anything that might oppress his imagination. So comforted was he by the knowledge that he had by his side the powerful help of science, that it was long before he had any feeling at all that the past had got any hold upon those old walls. But at length a fancy, growing stronger and stronger, began to assure him that among shadows and cornices there lurked those things that were so familiar to Smidger and in which the vicar was so slow to believe. He leaned from his armchair and found the right knob on the set beside him: he turned it and they were all gone. That he could feel at once: nothing haunted the air any more in that new high room among those ancient walls. Of this he felt as certain as a man who is followed knows when he is followed no more. He gave a smoky sigh of relief and sat in deep content in his chair for as long as his cigar lasted, and went then to bed.

That night he often tells of. At what moment he got to sleep, or if ever he did, is not clear, nor is anything in his story entirely clear. He has too much to tell, and in different clubs, and at different times in them, he tells it differently. What seems to have happened is that all the generations of spirits that ever have haunted those walls came that

night into his bedroom; and not only that, but spirits that, from his description, must have come from remoter times before that castle was built, and from remote lands. Nobody blames him for giving different accounts of that awful night; for there seem to have been thousands of spirits there, all mouthing at him and mowing at him, and whatever spirits do, and they spoke to him with their shrill bat-like voices, complaining that he was disturbing the past, and the owls and the jackdaws that were watching it in the old castle whose serenity he had troubled, and they all hooted at him for doing so. Old villagers were there in smocks that were queer to him, and old parsons, and people of whom he could give no clear account at all. Once he attempted to run from them, but they all swirled after him and he hurried back to his bed and thought it better to stay there, even though the air was as full of them as bees above a hive that has been disturbed. Sleep, he said, was impossible. He clearly identified one as the ghost of Elizabeth I, from which I suppose that she once stayed there. Henry VIII he said, he saw too, looking very angrily at him, as though he would do something terrible, though he did not know what. And old owners of the castle with their servants and men-at-arms poured in and looked at him, all clearly wondering what he was doing there. There was no keeping them out, for they were

coming in, he says, under the double doors and through chinks at the sides and between them, and down the chimney and up between the oak planks in the floor, all the people that had ever been there in the eight hundred years through which the castle had stood. And he says that he identified Mahomet, and a Roman soldier, and Khubla Khan or somebody very like him. So that it could not have been only the ghosts of those who had had anything to do with the castle. He tried pulling the sheets and blankets over his head. But they only came nearer then, as he could tell from their gibbering, which he could hear through the blankets, and he was afraid they would get into his bed. So he sat up and faced them; and more and more came pouring into the room through every crack and crevice by which ever a wisp of smoke could pass or an odour of cooking. The dark of the room was pale gray with them. It was a long time, he says, before he realized that they could not hurt him; but he points out to all who listen to his strange story that it is no pleasant experience to be surrounded by angry unfriendly faces packed close together. He calls it the longest night that he ever knew. And then he tells how at last there came creeping-in the earliest light through a chink between the curtains, and fell on the ghosts and did not make their gray brighter, and as that welcome light slowly increased,

their shapes grew dimmer and dimmer. More than one London club knows that story well, and can make little of it. But Jan Nietjens was determined to get to the bottom of it himself, even if he has never made it clear to others, and he telephoned early next morning to Glayde, asking him to come down at once. And Glayde came that evening, and they talked the whole thing over. To the scientist it was at once perfectly clear what had happened, although he had never thought of it before, and he apologized heartily to Nietjens for his oversight.

"It's not that the thing has failed," he said to him. "It has evidently succeeded, but only too well."

"Succeeded!" exclaimed Nietjens. "Why! I never saw a ghost before. I only knew they were there. And now I assure you there wasn't room in my bedroom last night through which a mouse could have moved between them. They were thick as clouds, I tell you."

"Yes," said the scientist, "I see all that now. I ought to have thought of it, and I am very sorry. What has happened is that the set that I gave you shot them all right out of the atmosphere, just as I told you it would."

"Then why did they all come back?" asked Nietjens. "And worse than ever before."

"That's just it," said Glayde. "You see, I told you it was like wire-

less. Well, it shot all those spirits up, just as wireless does with sound."

"And what then?" asked Nietjens.

"Why, then, you see," said Glayde, "they hit the Heaviside layer."

"What's that?" asked Nietjens.

"That is what is known," said Glayde, "to everyone who knows anything whatever of wireless. And that's what I do apologise to you for, for not thinking of that."

"What does it do?" asked Nietjens.

"It just bounces everything back," said Glayde. "And I was a fool not to think of it. Without the Heaviside layer we should hear nothing whatever on any wireless set. Everything the transmitting stations send up hits the Heaviside layer and bounces back from it. Of course it was just the same with those spirits. I told you that we could drive them out. And that set of mine did. But I never thought of the Heaviside layer. I am very sorry. Of course they all came back. You must have had an awful time."

"I'd never have thought there could be so many," said Nietjens.

"But look at all the time they have had to grow," replied Glayde. "And this set that I lent you is very powerful: it would have driven the whole lot of them out. And then unfortunately they came back."

"But look here," said Nietjens. "I saw Mahomet there, or somebody very like him, and one of those

Roman soldiers. How could they have got here?"

Glayde thought for a moment. "I'm afraid," he said after a while, "those rays that we used were altogether too strong, and I really do apologise. They must have stirred up the Heaviside layer, and brought a lot of things back with the ones that were driven from here."

"But what sort of things?" asked Nietjens.

"Well, Mahomet for one," said Glayde. "They're all there. Have you ever read Milton?"

"I've read *Paradise Lost*," said Nietjens.

"Exactly," said Glayde.

"But does Milton mention your Heaviside layer?" Nietjens asked.

"Not by name," replied Glayde. "But he describes it. Milton calls it Limbo. A waste place at the back of earth, just where the Heaviside layer would be, full of vain spirits. I am afraid that our discharge of radioelectric waves was too strong and it has disturbed them. Once more I apologise. It must have stirred them all up, and the whole lot of them must have come here with the ghosts driven out of the castle. They must have brought all the others with them on their way back. I'm really very sorry."

"Don't mention it," said Nietjens. "But what are we to do now? I don't want another night like that. I really don't think I could stand it. And anyhow I must get some sleep. What are we to do?"

"Let sleeping dogs lie," said Glayde.

"Let them lie?" muttered Nietjens.

"Yes, they weren't really doing you any harm," said Glayde. "You merely knew they were there, and that was all. They weren't hurting you. Leave them alone. Those unfortunate rays of mine stirred them all up, and they must have been wandering the night like wasps, if you put gunpowder into their nest without killing them. I've known men to sleep comfortably, night after night for years, with hornets' nests in their bedrooms. And the hornets gave them no trouble. But leave them alone. That's my advice to you."

They had dined, and now they were back in their chairs in the high room. Taking advice from Glayde had given Nietjens the most miserable night he had ever had, but he listened to Glayde still. "All

right," said Nietjens. "We'll leave them alone."

For a while both men sat silent over their coffee. And then a yearning came over Jan Nietjens for the sound of the streets, for the frequent meeting with friends, for the clubs, for London.

"I want you to promise me one thing," he said to Glayde.

"Yes?" said Glayde.

"I want you to promise," said Nietjens, "never to say a word about this to anyone."

"Well, yes," replied Glayde. "But it's a pity. I'd have liked to talk it over with one or two men. It's interesting."

"Well, not for a few weeks," said Nietjens. "Will you promise me?"

"Very well," said Glayde. "If you like. Why?"

Nietjens glanced for a moment up at the high rafters.

"Because I was thinking of selling the place," he said.

