

The Story of The Spaniards, Hammersmith

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Lieutenant Roderick Houston, of HMS *Sphinx*, had practically nothing beyond his pay, and he was beginning to be very tired of the West African station, when he received the pleasant intelligence that a relative had left him a legacy. This consisted of a satisfactory sum in ready money and a house in Hammersmith, which was rated at over £200 a year, and was said in addition to be comfortably furnished. Houston, therefore, counted on its rental to bring his income up to a fairly desirable figure. Further information from home, however, showed him that he had been rather premature in his expectations, whereupon, being a man of action, he applied for two months' leave, and came home to look after his affairs himself.

When he had been a week in London, he arrived at the conclusion that he could not possibly hope single-handed to tackle the difficulties which presented themselves. He accordingly wrote the following letter to his friend, Flaxman Low:

The Spaniards, Hammersmith, 23-3-1892.

DEAR LOW, since we parted some three years ago, I have heard very little of you. It was only yesterday that I met our mutual friend, Sammy Smith ('Silkworm' of our schooldays), who told me that your studies have developed in a new direction, and that you are now a good deal interested in psychical subjects. If this be so, I hope to induce you to come and stay with me here for a few days by promising to introduce you to a problem in your own line. I am just now living at 'The Spaniards', a house that has lately been left to me, and which in the first instance was built by an old fellow named Van Nuysen, who married a great-aunt of mine. It is a good house, but there is said to be 'something wrong' with it. It lets easily, but unluckily the tenants cannot be persuaded to remain above a week or two. They complain that the place is haunted by something—presumably a ghost—because its vagaries bear just that brand of inconsequence which stamps the common run of manifestations.

It occurs to me that you may care to investigate the matter with me. If so, send me a wire when to expect you.

Yours ever,
RODERICK HOUSTON

Houston waited in some anxiety for an answer. Low was the sort of man one could rely on in almost any emergency. Sammy Smith had told him a characteristic anecdote of Low's career at Oxford, where, although his intellectual triumphs may be forgotten, he will always be remembered by the story that when Sands, of Queen's, fell ill on the day before the 'Varsity sports, a telegram was sent to Low's rooms: 'Sands ill. You must do the hammer for us.' Low's reply was pithy: 'I'll be there.' Thereupon he finished the treatise upon which he was engaged, and next day his strong, lean figure was to be seen swinging the hammer amidst vociferous cheering, for that was the occasion on which he not only won the event, but beat the record.

On the fifth day Low's answer came from Vienna. As he read it, Houston recalled the high forehead, long neck—with its accompanying low collar—and thin moustache of his scholarly, athletic friend, and smiled. There was so much more in Flaxman Low than anyone gave him credit for.

MY DEAR HOUSTON, Very glad to hear of you again. In response to your kind invitation, I thank you for the opportunity of meeting the ghost, and still more for the pleasure of your companionship. I came here to enquire into a somewhat similar affair. I hope, however, to be able to leave tomorrow, and will be with you sometime on Friday evening.

Very sincerely yours,
FLAXMAN LOW

P.S. By the way, will it be convenient to give your servants a holiday during the term of my visit, as, if my investigations are to be of any value, not a grain of dust must be disturbed in your house, excepting by ourselves F. L.

'The Spaniards' was within some fifteen minutes' walk of Hammersmith Bridge. Set in the midst of a fairly respectable neighbourhood, it presented an odd contrast to the commonplace dullness of the narrow streets crowded about it. As Flaxman Low drove up in the evening light, he reflected that the house might have come from the back of beyond—it gave an impression of something old world and something exotic.

It was surrounded by a ten-foot wall, above which the upper storey

was visible, and Low decided that this intensely English house still gave some curious suggestion of the tropics. The interior of the house carried out the same idea, with its sense of space and air, cool tints and wide-matted passages.

‘So you have seen something yourself since you came?’ Low said, as they sat at dinner, for Houston had arranged that meals should be sent in for them from an hotel.

‘I’ve heard tapping up and down the passage upstairs. It is an uncarpeted landing which runs the whole length of the house. One night, when I was quicker than usual, I saw what looked like a bladder disappear into one of the bedrooms—your room it is to be, by the way—and the door closed behind it,’ replied Houston discontentedly. ‘The usual meaningless antics of a ghost.’

‘What had the tenants who lived here to say about it?’ went on Low.

‘Most of the people saw and heard just what I have told you, and promptly went away. The only one who stood out for a little while was old Filderg—you know the man? Twenty years ago he made an effort to cross the Australian deserts—he stopped for eight weeks. When he left he saw the house-agent, and said he was afraid he had done a little shooting practice in the upper passage, and he hoped it wouldn’t count against him in the bill, as it was done in defence of his life. He said something had jumped on to the bed and tried to strangle him. He described it as cold and glutinous, and he pursued it down the passage, firing at it. He advised the owner to have the house pulled down; but, of course, my cousin did nothing of the kind. It’s a very good house, and he did not see the sense of spoiling his property.’

‘That’s very true,’ replied Flaxman Low, looking round. ‘Mr Van Nuysen had been in the West Indies, and kept his liking for spacious rooms.’

‘Where did you hear anything about him?’ asked Houston in surprise.

‘I have heard nothing beyond what you told me in your letter; but I see a couple of bottles of Gulf weed and a lace-plant ornament, such as people used to bring from the West Indies in former days.’

‘Perhaps I should tell you the history of the old man,’ said Houston doubtfully; ‘but we aren’t proud of it!’ Flaxman Low considered a moment.

'When was the ghost seen for the first time?'

'When the first tenant took the house. It was let after old Van Nuysen's time.'

'Then it may clear the way if you will tell me something of him.'

'He owned sugar plantations in Trinidad, where he passed the greater part of his life, while his wife mostly remained in England—incompatibility of temper it was said. When he came home for good and built this house they still lived apart, my aunt declaring that nothing on earth would persuade her to return to him. In course of time he became a confirmed invalid, and he then insisted on my aunt joining him. She lived here for perhaps a year, when she was found dead in bed one morning—in your room.'

'What caused her death?'

'She had been in the habit of taking narcotics, and it was supposed that she smothered herself while under their influence.'

'That doesn't sound very satisfactory,' remarked Flaxman Low.

'Her husband was satisfied with it anyhow, and it was no one else's business. The family were only too glad to have the affair hushed up.'

'And what became of Mr Van Nuysen?'

'That I can't tell you. He disappeared a short time after. Search was made for him in the usual way, but nobody knows to this day what became of him.'

'Ah, that was strange, as he was such an invalid,' said Low, and straightway fell into a long fit of abstraction, from which he was roused by hearing Houston curse the incurable foolishness and imbecility of ghostly behaviour. Flaxman woke up at this. He was a man with an immense capacity for quiet enthusiasm. He broke a walnut thoughtfully and began in a gentle voice:

'My dear fellow, we are apt to be hasty in our condemnation of the general behaviour of ghosts. It may appear incalculably foolish in our eyes, and I admit there often seems to be a total absence of any apparent object or intelligent action. But remember that what appears to us to be foolishness may be wisdom in the spirit world, since our unready senses can only catch broken glimpses of what is, I have not the slightest doubt, a coherent whole, if we could trace the connection.'

'There may be something in that,' replied Houston indifferently. 'People naturally say that this ghost is the ghost of old Van Nuysen. But what connection can possibly exist between what I have told you

of him and the manifestations—a tapping up and down the passage and the drawing about of a bladder like a child at play? It sounds idiotic!’

‘Certainly. Yet it need not necessarily be so. These are isolated facts, we must look for the links which lie between. Suppose a saddle and a horseshoe were to be shown to a man who had never seen a horse, I doubt whether he, however intelligent, could evolve the connecting idea! The ways of spirits are strange to us simply because we need further data to help us to interpret them.’

‘It’s a new point of view,’ returned Houston, ‘but upon my word, you know, Low, I think you’re wasting your time!’

Flaxman Low smiled slowly; his grave, melancholy face brightened.

‘I have,’ said he, ‘gone somewhat deeply into the subject. In other sciences one reasons by analogy. Psychology is unfortunately a science with a future but without a past, or more probably it is a lost science of the ancients. However that may be, we stand today on the frontier of an unknown world, and progress is the result of individual effort; each solution of difficult phenomena forms a step towards the solution of the next problem. In this case, for example, the bladder-like object may be the key to the mystery.’

Houston yawned.

‘It all seems pretty senseless, but perhaps you may be able to read reason into it. If it were anything tangible, anything a man could meet with his fists, it would be easier.’

‘I entirely agree with you. But suppose we deal with this affair as it stands, on similar lines, I mean on prosaic, rational lines, as we should deal with a purely human mystery.’

‘My dear fellow,’ returned Houston pushing his chair back from the table wearily, ‘you shall do just as you like, only get rid of the ghost!’

For some time after Low’s arrival nothing very special happened. The tappings continued, and more than once Low had been in time to see the bladder disappear into the closing door of his bedroom, though, unluckily, he never chanced to be inside the room on these occasions, and however quickly he followed the bladder, he never succeeded in seeing anything further. He made a thorough examination of the house, and left no space unaccounted for in his careful measurements. There were no cellars, and the foundation of the house consisted of a thick layer of concrete.

At length, on the sixth night, an event took place, which, as Flaxman Low remarked, came very near to putting an end to the investigations as far as he was concerned. For the preceding two nights he and Houston had kept watch in the hope of getting a glimpse of the person or thing which tapped so persistently up and down the passage. But they were disappointed, for there were no manifestations. On the third evening, therefore, Low went off to his room a little earlier than usual, and fell asleep almost immediately.

He says he was awakened by feeling a heavy weight upon his feet, something that seemed inert and motionless. He recollected that he had left the gas burning, but the room was now in darkness.

Next he was aware that the thing on the bed had slowly shifted, and was gradually travelling up towards his chest. How it came on the bed he had no idea. Had it leaped or climbed? The sensation he experienced as it moved was of some ponderous, pulpy body, not crawling or creeping, but spreading! It was horrible! He tried to move his lower limbs, but could not because of the deadening weight. A feeling of drowsiness began to overpower him, and a deadly cold, such as he said he had before felt at sea when in the neighbourhood of icebergs, chilled upon the air.

With a violent struggle he managed to free his arms, but the thing grew more irresistible as it spread upwards. Then he became conscious of a pair of glassy eyes, with livid, everted lids, looking into his own. Whether they were human eyes or beast eyes, he could not tell, but they were watery, like the eyes of a dead fish, and gleamed with a pale, internal lustre.

Then he owns he grew afraid. But he was still cool enough to notice one peculiarity about this ghastly visitant—although the head was within a few inches of his own, he could detect no breathing. It dawned upon him that he was about to be suffocated, for, by the same method of extension, the thing was now coming over his face! It felt cold and clammy, like a mass of mucilage or a monstrous snail. And every instant the weight became greater. He is a powerful man, and he struck with his fists again and again at the head. Some substance yielded under the blows with a sickening sensation of bruised flesh.

With a lucky twist he raised himself in the bed and battered away with all the force he was capable of in his cramped position. The only effect was an occasional shudder or quake than ran through the mass

as his half-arm blows rained upon it. At last, by chance, his hand knocked against the candle beside him. In a moment he recollected the matches. He seized the box, and struck a light.

As he did so, the lump slid to the floor. He sprang out of bed, and lit the candle. He felt a cold touch upon his leg, but when he looked down there was nothing to be seen. The door, which he had locked overnight, was now open, and he rushed out into the passage. All was still and silent with the throbbing vacancy of night time.

After searching round, he returned to his room. The bed still gave ample proof of the struggle that had taken place, and by his watch he saw the hour to be between two and three.

As there seemed nothing more to be done, he put on his dressing-gown, lit his pipe, and sat down to write an account of the experience he had just passed through for the *Psychical Research Society*—from which paper the above is an abstract.

He is a man of strong nerves, but he could not disguise from himself that he had been at handgrips with some grotesque form of death. What might be the nature of his assailant he could not determine, but his experience was supported by the attack which had been made on Filderg, and also—it was impossible to avoid the conclusion—by the manner of Mrs Van Nuysen's death.

He thought the whole situation over carefully in connection with the tapping and the disappearing bladder, but, turn these events how he would, he could make nothing of them. They were entirely incongruous. A little later he went and made a shakedown in Houston's room.

'What was the thing?' asked Houston, when Low had ended his story of the encounter.

Low shrugged his shoulders.

'At least it proves that Filderg did not dream,' he said.

'But this is monstrous! We are more in the dark than ever. There's nothing for it but to have the house pulled down. Let us leave today.'

'Don't be in a hurry, my dear fellow. You would rob me of a very great pleasure; besides, we may be on the verge of some valuable discovery. This series of manifestations is even more interesting than the Vienna mystery I was telling you of.'

'Discovery or not,' replied the other, 'I don't like it.'

The first thing next morning Low went out for a quarter of an hour. Before breakfast a man with a barrowful of sand came into the

garden. Low looked up from his paper, leant out of the window, and gave some order.

When Houston came down a few minutes later he saw the yellowish heap on the lawn with some surprise.

'Hullo! What's this?' he asked.

'I ordered it,' replied Low.

'All right. What's it for?'

'To help us in our investigations. Our visitor is capable of being felt, and he or it left a very distinct impression on the bed. Hence I gather it can also leave an impression on sand. It would be an immense advance if we could arrive at any correct notion of what sort of feet the ghost walks on. I propose to spread a layer of this sand in the upper passage, and the result should be footmarks if the tapping comes tonight.'

That evening the two men made a fire in Houston's bedroom, and sat there smoking and talking, to leave the ghost 'a free run for once', as Houston phrased it. The tapping was heard at the usual hour, and presently the accustomed pause at the other end of the passage and the quiet closing of the door.

Low heaved a long sigh of satisfaction as he listened.

'That's my bedroom door,' he said; 'I know the sound of it perfectly. In the morning, and with the help of daylight, we shall see what we shall see.'

As soon as there was light enough for the purpose of examining the footprints, Low roused Houston.

Houston was as full of excitement as a boy, but his spirits fell by the time he had passed from end to end of the passage.

'There are marks,' he said, 'but they are as perplexing as everything else about this haunting brute, whatever it is. I suppose you think this is the print left by the thing which attacked you the night before last?'

'I fancy it is,' said Low, who was still bending over the floor eagerly. 'What do you make of it, Houston?'

'The brute has only one leg, to start with,' replied Houston, 'and that leaves the mark of a large, clawless pad! It's some animal—some ghoulish monster!'

'On the contrary,' said Low, 'I think we have now every reason to conclude that it is a man.'

'A man? What man ever left footmarks like these?'

'Look at these hollows and streaks at the sides; they are the traces of the sticks we have heard tapping.'

'You don't convince me,' returned Houston doggedly.

'Let us wait another twenty-four hours, and tomorrow night, if nothing further occurs, I will give you my conclusions. Think it over. The tapping, the bladder, and the fact that Mr Van Nuysen had lived in Trinidad. Add to these things this single pad-like print. Does nothing strike you by way of a solution?'

Houston shook his head.

'Nothing. And I fail to connect any of these things with what happened both to you and Filderg.'

'Ah! now,' said Flaxman Low, his face clouding a little, 'I confess you lead me into a somewhat different region, though to me the connection is perfect.'

Houston raised his eyebrows and laughed.

'If you can unravel this tangle of hints and events and diagnose the ghost, I shall be extremely astonished,' he said. 'What can you make of the footless impression?'

'Something, I hope. In fact, that mark may be a clue—an outrageous one, perhaps, but still a clue.'

That evening the weather broke, and by night the storm had risen to a gale, accompanied by sharp bursts of rain.

'It's a noisy night,' remarked Houston; 'I don't suppose we'll hear the ghost, supposing it does turn up.'

This was after dinner, as they were about to go into the smoking-room. Houston, finding the gas low in the hall, stopped to turn it higher, at the same time asking Low to see if the jet on the upper landing was also alight.

Flaxman Low glanced up and uttered a slight exclamation, which brought Houston to his side.

Looking down at them from over the banisters was a face—a blotched, yellowish face, flanked by two swollen, protruding ears, the whole aspect being strangely leonine. It was but a glimpse, a clash of meeting glances, as it were, a glare of defiance, and the face was quickly withdrawn as the two men literally leapt up the stairs.

'There's nothing here,' exclaimed Houston, after a search had been carried out through every room above.

'I didn't suppose we'd find anything,' returned Low.

'This fairly knots up the thread,' said Houston. 'You can't pretend to unravel it now.'

'Come down,' said Low briefly; 'I'm ready to give you my opinion, such as it is.'

Once in the smoking-room, Houston busied himself in turning on all the light he could procure, then he saw to securing the windows, and piled up an immense fire, while Flaxman Low, who, as usual, had a cigarette in his mouth, sat on the edge of the table and watched him with some amusement.

'You saw that abominable face?' cried Houston, as he threw himself into a chair. 'It was as material as yours or mine. But where did he go to? He must be somewhere about.'

'We saw him clearly. That is sufficient for our purpose.'

'You are very good at enumerating points, Low. Now just listen to my list. The difficulties grow with every fresh discovery. We're at a deadlock now, I take it? The sticks and the tapping point to an old man, the playing with a bladder to a child; the footmark might be the pad of a tiger minus claws, yet the thing that attacked you at night was cold and pulpy. And, lastly, by way of a wind-up, we see a lion-like, human face! If you can make all these items square with each other, I'll be happy to hear what you have got to say.'

'You must first allow me to ask you a question. I understood you to say that no blood relationship existed between you and old Mr Van Nuysen?'

'Certainly not. He was quite an outsider,' answered Houston brusquely.

'In that case you are welcome to my conclusions. All the things you have mentioned point to one explanation. This house is haunted by the ghost of Mr Van Nuysen, and he was a leper.'

Houston stood up and stared at his companion.

'What a horrible notion! I must say I fail to see how you have arrived at such a conclusion.'

'Take the chain of evidence in rather different order,' said Low. 'Why should a man tap with a stick?'

'Generally because he's blind.'

'In cases of blindness, one stick is used for guidance. Here we have two for support.'

'A man who has lost the use of his feet.'

'Exactly; a man who has from some cause partially lost the use of his feet.'

'But the bladder and the lion-like face?' went on Houston.

'The bladder, or what seemed to us to resemble a bladder, was one

of his feet, contorted by the disease and probably swathed in linen, which foot he dragged rather than used; consequently, in passing through a door, for example, he would be in the habit of drawing it in after him. Now, as regards the single footmark we saw. In one form of leprosy, the smaller bones of the extremities frequently fall away. The pad-like impression was, as I believe, the mark of the other foot—a toeless foot which he used, because in a more advanced stage of the disease the maimed hand or foot heals and becomes callous.'

'Go on,' said Houston; 'it sounds as if it might be true. And the lion-like face I can account for myself. I have been in China, and have seen it before in lepers.'

'Mr Van Nuysen had been in Trinidad for many years, as we know, and while there he probably contracted the disease.'

'I suppose so. After his return,' added Houston, 'he shut himself up almost entirely, and gave out that he was a martyr to rheumatic gout, this awful thing being the true explanation.'

'It also accounts for Mrs Van Nuysen's determination not to return to her husband.'

Houston appeared much disturbed.

'We can't drop it here, Low,' he said, in a constrained voice. 'There is a good deal more to be cleared up yet. Can you tell me more?'

'From this point I find myself on less certain ground,' replied Low unwillingly. 'I merely offer a suggestion, remember—I don't ask you to accept it. I believe Mrs Van Nuysen was murdered!'

'What?' exclaimed Houston. 'By her husband?'

'Indications tend that way.'

'But, my good fellow——'

'He suffocated her and then made away with himself. It is a pity that his body was not recovered. The condition of the remains would be the only really satisfactory test of my theory. If the skeleton could even now be found, the fact that he was a leper would be finally settled.'

There was a prolonged pause until Houston put another question.

'Wait a minute, Low,' he said. 'Ghosts are admittedly immaterial. In this instance our spook has an extremely palpable body. Surely this is rather unusual? You have made everything else more or less plain. Can you tell me why this dead leper should have tried to murder you

and old Filderg? And also how he came to have the actual physical power to do so?

Low removed his cigarette to look thoughtfully at the end of it. 'Now I lapse into the purely theoretical,' he answered. 'Cases have been known where the assumption of diabolical agency is apparently justifiable.'

'Diabolical agency?—I don't follow you.'

'I will try to make myself clear, though the subject is still in a stage of vagueness and immaturity. Van Nuysen committed a murder of exceptional atrocity, and afterwards killed himself. Now, bodies of suicides are known to be peculiarly susceptible to spiritual influences, even to the point of arrested corruption. Add to this our knowledge that the highest aim of an evil spirit is to achieve incarnation. If I carried out my theory to its logical conclusion, I should say that Van Nuysen's body is hidden somewhere on these premises—that this body is intermittently animated by some spirit, which at certain periods is forced to re-enact the gruesome tragedy of the Van Nuysens. Should any living person chance to occupy the position of the first victim, so much the worse for him!'

For some minutes Houston made no remark on this singular expression of opinion.

'But have you ever met with anything of the sort before?' he said at last.

'I can recall,' replied Flaxman Low thoughtfully, 'quite a number of cases which would seem to bear out this hypothesis. Among them a curious problem of haunting exhaustively examined by Busner in the early part of 1888, at which I was myself lucky enough to assist. Indeed, I may add that the affair which I have recently been engaged upon in Vienna offers some rather similar features. There, however, we had to stop short of excavation, by which alone any specific results might have been attained.'

'Then you are of opinion,' said Houston, 'that pulling the house to pieces might cast some further light upon this affair?'

'I cannot see any better course,' said Mr Low.

Then Houston closed the discussion by a very definite declaration.

'This house shall come down!'

So 'The Spaniards' was pulled down.

Such is the story of 'The Spaniards', Hammersmith, and it has been given the first place in this series because, although it may not

be of so strange a nature as some that will follow it, yet it seems to us to embody in a high degree the peculiar methods by which Mr Flaxman Low is wont to approach these cases.

The work of demolition, begun at the earliest possible moment, did not occupy very long, and during its early stages, under the boarding at an angle of the landing was found a skeleton. Several of the phalanges were missing, and other indications also established beyond a doubt the fact that the remains were the remains of a leper.

The skeleton is now in the museum of one of our city hospitals. It bears a scientific ticket, and is the only evidence extant of the correctness of Mr Flaxman Low's methods and the possible truth of his extraordinary theories.