

The Story of Yand Manor House

By E. and H. Heron

Looking through the notes of Mr. Flaxman Low, one sometimes catches through the steel-blue hardness of facts, the pink flush of romance, or more often the black corner of a horror unnameable. The following story may serve as an instance of the latter. Mr. Low not only unravelled the mystery at Yand, but at the same time justified his life-work to M. Thierry, the well-known French critic and philosopher.

At the end of a long conversation, M. Thierry, arguing from his own standpoint as a materialist, had said:

“The factor in the human economy which you call ‘soul’ cannot be placed.”

“I admit that,” replied Low. “Yet, when a man dies, is there not one factor unaccounted for in the change that comes upon him? Yes! For though his body still exists, it rapidly falls to pieces, which proves that that has gone which held it together.”

The Frenchman laughed, and shifted his ground.

“Well, for my part, I don’t believe in ghosts! Spirit manifestations, occult phenomena—is not this the ashbin into which a certain clique shoot everything they cannot understand, or for which they fail to account?”

“Then what should you say to me, Monsieur, if I told you that I have passed a good portion of my life in investigating this particular ashbin, and have been lucky enough to sort a small part of its contents with tolerable success?” replied Flaxman Low.

“The subject is doubtless interesting—but I should like to have some personal experience in the matter,” said Thierry dubiously.

“I am at present investigating a most singular case,” said Low. “Have you a day or two to spare?”

Thierry thought for a minute or more.

“I am grateful,” he replied. “But, forgive me, is it a convincing ghost?”

“Come with me to Yand and see. I have been there once already, and came away for the purpose of procuring information from MSS. to which I have the privilege of access, for I confess that the phenomena at Yand lie altogether outside any former experience of mine.

Low sank back into his chair with his hands clasped behind his head—a favourite position of his—and the smoke of his long pipe curled up lazily into the golden face of an Isis, which stood behind him on a bracket. Thierry, glancing across, was struck by the strange likeness between the faces of the Egyptian goddess and this scientist of the nineteenth century. On both rested the calm, mysterious abstraction of some unfathomable thought. As he looked, he decided.

“I have three days to place at your disposal.”

“I thank you heartily,” replied Low. “To be associated with so brilliant a logician as yourself in an inquiry of this nature is more than I could have hoped for! The material with which I have to deal is so elusive, the whole subject is wrapped in such obscurity and hampered by so much prejudice, that I can find few really qualified persons who care to approach these investigations seriously. I go down to Yand this evening, and hope not to leave without clearing up the mystery. You will accompany me?”

“Most certainly. Meanwhile pray tell me something of the affair.”

“Briefly the story is as follows. Some weeks ago I went to Yand Manor House at the request of the owner, Sir George Blackburn, to see what I could make of the events which took place there. All they complain of is the impossibility of remaining in one room—the dining-room.”

“What then is he like, this M. le Spook?” asked the Frenchman, laughing.

“No one has ever seen him, or for that matter heard him.”

“Then how—”

“You can’t see him, nor hear him, nor smell him,” went on Low, “but you can feel him and—taste him!”

“Mon Dieu! But this is singular! Is he then of so bad a flavour?”

“You shall taste for yourself,” answered Flaxman Low smiling. “After a certain hour no one can remain in the room, they are simply crowded out.”

“But who crowds them out?” asked Thierry.

“That is just what I hope we may discover to-night or tomorrow.”

The last train that night dropped Mr. Flaxman Low and his companion at a little station near Yand. It was late, but a trap in waiting soon carried them to the Manor House. The big bulk of the building stood up in absolute blackness before them.

“Blackburton was to have met us, but I suppose he has not yet arrived,” said Low. “Hullo! the door is open,” he added as he stepped into the hall.

Beyond a dividing curtain they now perceived a light. Passing behind this curtain they found themselves at the end of the long hall, the wide staircase opening up in front of them.

“But who is this?” exclaimed Thierry.

Swaying and stumbling at every step, there tottered slowly down the stairs the figure of a man. He looked as if he had been drinking, his face was livid, and his eyes sunk into his head.

“Thank Heaven you’ve come! I heard you outside,” he said in a weak voice.

“It’s Sir George Blackburn,” said Low, as the man lurched forward and pitched into his arms.

They laid him down on the rugs and tried to restore consciousness.

“He has the air of being drunk, but it is not so,” remarked Thierry. “Monsieur has had a bad shock of the nerves. See the pulses drumming in his throat.”

In a few minutes Blackburn opened his eyes and staggered to his feet.

“Come. I could not remain there alone. Come quickly.”

They went rapidly across the hall, Blackburn leading the way down a wide passage to a double-leaved door, which, after a perceptible pause, he threw open, and they all entered together.

On the great table in the centre stood an extinguished lamp, some scattered food, and a big, lighted candle. But the eyes of all three men passed at once to a dark recess beside the heavy, carved chimney-piece, where a rigid shape sat perched on the back of a huge, oak chair.

Flaxman Low snatched up the candle and crossed the room towards it.

On the top of the chair, with his feet upon the arms, sat a powerfully-built young man huddled up. His mouth was open, and his eyes twisted upwards. Nothing further could be seen from below but the ghastly pallor of cheek and throat.

“Who is this?” cried Low. Then he laid his hand gently on the man’s knee.

At the touch the figure collapsed in a heap upon the floor, the gaping, set, terrified face turned up to theirs.

“He’s dead!” said Low after a hasty examination. “I should say he’s been dead some hours.”

“Oh, Lord! Poor Batty!” groaned Sir George, who was entirely unnerved. “I’m glad you’ve come.”

“Who is he?” said Thierry, “and what was he doing here?”

“He’s a gamekeeper of mine. He was always anxious to try conclusions with the ghost, and last night he begged me to lock him in here with food for twenty-four hours. I refused at first, but then I thought if anything happened while he was in here alone, it would interest you. Who could imagine it would end like this?”

“When did you find him?” asked Low.

“I only got here from my mother’s half an hour ago. I turned on the light in the hall and came in here with a candle. As I entered the room, the candle went out, and—and—I think I must be going mad.”

“Tell us everything you saw,” urged Low.

“You will think I am beside myself; but as the light went out and I sank almost paralysed into an armchair, I saw two barred eyes looking at me!”

“Barred eyes? What do you mean?”

“Eyes that looked at me through thin vertical bars, like the bars of a cage. What’s that?”

With a smothered yell Sir George sprang back. He had approached the dead man and declared something had brushed his face.

“You were standing on this spot under the overmantel. I will remain here. Meantime, my dear Thierry, I feel sure you will help Sir George to carry this poor fellow to some more suitable place,” said Flaxman Low.

When the dead body of the young gamekeeper had been carried out, Low passed slowly round and about the room. At length he stood under the old carved overmantel, which reached to the ceiling and projected bodily forward in quaint heads of satyrs and animals. One of these on the side nearest the recess represented a griffin with a flanged mouth. Sir George had been standing directly below this at the moment when he felt the touch on his face. Now alone in the dim, wide room, Flaxman Low stood on the same spot and waited. The candle threw its dull yellow rays on the shadows which seemed to gather closer and wait also. Presently a distant door banged, and Low, leaning forward to listen, distinctly felt something on the back of his neck!

He swung round. There was nothing! He searched carefully on all sides, then put his hand up to the griffin’s head. Again came the same soft touch, this time upon his hand, as if something had floated past on the air.

This was definite. The griffin’s head located it. Taking the candle to examine more closely, Low found four long black hairs depending from the jagged fangs. He was detaching them when Thierry reappeared.

“We must get Sir George away as soon as possible,” he said.

“Yes, we must take him away, I fear,” agreed Low. “Our investigation must be put off till tomorrow.”

On the following day they returned to Yand. It was a large country-house, pretty and old-fashioned, with lattice windows and deep gables, that looked out between tall shrubs and across lawns set with beaupots, where peacocks sunned themselves on the velvet turf. The church spire peered over the trees on one side; and an old wall covered with ivy and creeping plants, and pierced at intervals with arches, alone separated the gardens from the churchyard.

The haunted room lay at the back of the house. It was square and handsome, and furnished in the style of the last century. The oak overmantel reached to the ceiling, and a wide window, which almost filled one side of the room, gave a view of the west door of the church.

Low stood for a moment at the open window looking out at the level sunlight which flooded the lawns and parterres.

“See that door sunk in the church wall to the left?” said Sir George’s voice at his elbow. “That is the door of the family vault. Cheerful outlook, isn’t it?”

“I should like to walk across there presently,” remarked Low.

“What! Into the vault?” asked Sir George, with a harsh laugh. “I’ll take you if you like. Anything else I can show you or tell you?”

“Yes. Last night I found this hanging from the griffin’s head,” said Low, producing the thin wisp of black hair. “It must have touched your cheek as you stood below. Do you know to whom it can belong?”

“It’s a woman’s hair! No, the only woman who has been in this room to my knowledge for months is an old servant with grey hair, who cleans it,” returned Blackburn. “I’m sure it was not here when I locked Batty in.”

“It is human hair, exceedingly coarse and long uncut,” said Low; “but it is not necessarily a woman’s.”

“It is not mine at any rate, for I’m sandy; and poor Batty was fair. Good-night; I’ll come round for you in the morning.”

Presently, when the night closed in, Thierry and Low settled down in the haunted room to await developments. They smoked and talked deep into the night. A big lamp burned brightly on the table, and the surroundings looked homely and desirable.

Thierry made a remark to that effect, adding that perhaps the ghost might see fit to omit his usual visit.

“Experience goes to prove that ghosts have a cunning habit of choosing persons either credulous or excitable to experiment upon,” he added.

To M. Thierry’s surprise, Flaxman Low agreed with him.

“They certainly choose suitable persons,” he said, “that is, not credulous persons, but those whose senses are sufficiently keen to detect the presence of a spirit. In my own investigations, I try to eliminate what you would call the supernatural element. I deal with these mysterious affairs as far as possible on material lines.”

“Then what do you say of Batty’s death? He died of fright— simply.”

“I hardly think so. The manner of his death agrees in a peculiar manner with what we know of the terrible history of this room. He died of fright and pressure combined. Did you hear the doctor’s remark? It was significant. He said: ‘The indications are precisely those I have observed in persons who have been crushed and killed in a crowd!’ ”

“That is sufficiently curious, I allow. I see that it is already past two o’clock. I am thirsty; I will have a little seltzer.” Thierry rose from his chair, and, going to the side-board, drew a tumblerful from the syphon. “Pah! What an abominable taste!”

“What? The seltzer?”

“Not at all?” returned the Frenchman irritably. “I have not touched it yet. Some horrible fly has flown into my mouth, I suppose. Pah! Disgusting!”

“What is it like?” asked Flaxman Low, who was at the moment wiping his own mouth with his handkerchief.

“Like? As if some repulsive fungus had burst in the mouth.”

“Exactly. I perceive it also. I hope you are about to be convinced.”

“What?” exclaimed Thierry, turning his big figure round and staring at Low. “You don’t mean As he spoke the lamp suddenly went out.

“Why, then, have you put the lamp out at such a moment?” cried Thierry,

“I have not put it out. Light the candle beside you on the table.”

Low heard the Frenchman's grunt of satisfaction as he found the candle, then the scratch of a match. It sputtered and went out. Another match and another behaved in the same manner, while Thierry swore freely under his breath.

"Let me have your matches, Monsieur Flaxman; mine are, no doubt damp," he said at last.

Low rose to feel his way across the room. The darkness was dense.

"It is the darkness of Egypt—it may be felt. Where then are you, my dear friend?" he heard Thierry saying, but the voice seemed a long way off.

"I am coming," he answered, "but it's so hard to get along." After Low had spoken the words, their meaning struck him.

He paused and tried to realise in what part of the room he was. The silence was profound, and the growing sense of oppression seemed like a nightmare. Thierry's voice sounded again, faint and receding.

"I am suffocating, Monsieur Flaxman, where are you? I am near the door. Ach!"

A strangling bellow of pain and fear followed, that scarcely reached Low through the thickening atmosphere.

"Thierry, what is the matter with you?" he shouted. "Open the door."

But there was no answer. What had become of Thierry in that hideous, clogging gloom! Was he also dead, crushed in some ghastly fashion against the wall? What was this?

The air had become palpable to the touch, heavy, repulsive, with the sensation of cold humid flesh!

Low pushed out his hands with a mad longing to touch a table, a chair, anything but this clammy, swelling softness that thrust itself upon him from every side, baffling him and filling his grasp.

He knew now that he was absolutely alone—struggling against what?

His feet were slipping in his wild efforts to feel the floor—the dank flesh was creeping upon his neck, his cheek—his breath came short and labouring as the pressure swung him gently to and fro, helpless, nauseated!

The clammy flesh crowded upon him like the bulk of some fat, horrible creature; then came a stinging pain on the cheek. Low clutched at something—there was a crash and a rush of air—The next sensation of which Mr. Flaxman Low was conscious was one of deathly sickness. He was lying on wet grass, the wind blowing over him, and all the clean, wholesome smells of the open air in his nostrils.

He sat up and looked about him. Dawn was breaking windily in the east, and by its light he saw that he was on the lawn of Yand Manor House. The latticed window of the haunted room above him was open. He tried to remember what had happened. He took stock of himself, in fact, and slowly felt that he still held something clutched in his right hand—something dark-coloured, slender, and twisted. It might have been a long shred of bark or the cast skin of an adder—it was impossible to see in the dim light.

After an interval the recollection of Thierry recurred to him. Scrambling to his feet, he raised himself to the window-sill and looked in. Contrary to his expectation, there was no upsetting of furniture; everything remained in position as when the lamp went out. His own chair and the one Thierry had occupied were just as when they had arisen from them. But there was no sign of Thierry.

Low jumped in by the window. There was the tumbler full of seltzer, and the litter of matches about it. He took up Thierry's box of matches and struck a light. It flared, and he lit the candle

with ease. In fact, everything about the room was perfectly normal; all the horrible conditions prevailing but a couple of hours ago had disappeared.

But where was Thierry? Carrying the lighted candle, he passed out of the door, and searched in the adjoining rooms. In one of them, to his relief, he found the Frenchman sleeping profoundly in an armchair.

Low touched his arm. Thierry leapt to his feet, fending off an imaginary blow with his arm. Then he turned his scared face on Low.

“What! You, Monsieur Flaxman! How have you escaped?”

“I should rather ask you how you escaped,” said Low, smiling at the havoc the night’s experiences had worked on his friend’s looks and spirits.

“I was crowded out of the room against the door. That infernal thing—what was it?—with its damp, swelling flesh, inclosed me!” A shudder of disgust stopped him. “I was a fly in an aspic. I could not move. I sank into the stifling pulp. The air grew thick. I called to you, but your answers became inaudible. Then I was suddenly thrust against the door by a huge hand—it felt like one, at least. I had a struggle for my life, I was all but crushed, and then, I do not know how, I found myself outside the door. I shouted to you in vain. Therefore, as I could not help you, I came here, and—I will confess it, my dear friend—I locked and bolted the door. After some time I went again into the hall and listened; but, as I heard nothing, I resolved to wait until daylight and the return of Sir George.”

“That’s all right,” said Low. “It was an experience worth having.”

“But, no! Not for me! I do not envy you your researches into mysteries of this abominable description. I now comprehend perfectly that Sir George has lost his nerve if he has had to do with this horror. Besides, it is entirely impossible to explain these things.”

At this moment they heard Sir George’s arrival, and went out to meet him.

“I could not sleep all night for thinking of you!” exclaimed Blackburton on seeing them; “and I came along as soon as it was light. Something has happened.”

“But certainly something has happened,” cried M. Thierry shaking his head solemnly; “something of the most bizarre, of the most horrible! Monsieur Flaxman, you shall tell Sir George this story. You have been in that accursed room all night, and remain alive to tell the tale!”

As Low came to the conclusion of the story Sir George suddenly exclaimed:

“You have met with some injury to your face, Mr. Low.”

Low turned to the mirror. In the now strong light three parallel weals from eye to mouth could be seen.

“I remember a stinging pain like a lash on my cheek. What would you say these marks were caused by, Thierry?” asked Low.

Thierry looked at them and shook his head.

“No one in their senses would venture to offer any explanation of the occurrences of last night,” he replied.

“Something of this sort, do you think?” asked Low again, putting down the object he held in his hand on the table.

Thierry took it up and described it aloud.

“A long and thin object of a brown and yellow colour and twisted like a sabre-bladed corkscrew,” then he started slightly and glanced at Low.

“It’s a human nail, I imagine,” suggested Low.

“But no human being has talons of this kind—except, perhaps, a Chinaman of high rank.”

“There are no Chinamen about here, nor ever have been, to my knowledge,” said Blackburnton shortly. “I’m very much afraid that, in spite of all you have so bravely faced, we are no nearer to any rational explanation.”

“On the contrary, I fancy I begin to see my way. I believe, after all, that I may be able to convert you, Thierry,” said Flaxman Low.

“Convert me?”

“To a belief in the definite aim of my work. But you shall judge for yourself. What do you make of it so far? I claim that you know as much of the matter as I do.”

“My dear good friend, I make nothing of it,” returned Thierry, shrugging his shoulders and spreading out his hands. “Here we have a tissue of unprecedented incidents that can be explained on no theory whatever.”

“But this is definite,” and Flaxman Low held up the blackened nail.

“And how do you propose to connect that nail with the black hairs—with the eyes that looked through the bars of a cage—the fate of Batty, with its symptoms of death by pressure and suffocation—our experience of swelling flesh, that something which filled and filled the room to the exclusion of all else? How are you going to account for these things by any kind of connected hypothesis?” asked Thierry, with a shade of irony.

“I mean to try,” replied Low.

At lunch time Thierry inquired how the theory was getting on.

“It progresses,” answered Low. “By the way, Sir George, who lived in this house for some time prior to, say, 1840? He was a man—it may have been a woman, but, from the nature of his studies, I am inclined to think it was a man—who was deeply read in ancient necromancy, Eastern magic, mesmerism, and subjects of a kindred nature. And was he not buried in the vault you pointed out?”

“Do you know anything more about him?” asked Sir George in surprise.

“He was I imagine,” went on Flaxman Low reflectively, “hirsute and swarthy, probably a recluse, and suffered from a morbid and extravagant fear of death.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I only asked about it. Am I right?”

“You have described my cousin, Sir Gilbert Blackburnton, in every particular. I can show you his portrait in another room.”

As they stood looking at the painting of Sir Gilbert Blackburnton, with his long, melancholy, olive face and thick, black beard, Sir George went on. “My grandfather succeeded him at Yand. I have often heard my father speak of Sir Gilbert, and his strange studies and extraordinary fear of death. Oddly enough, in the end he died rather suddenly, while he was still hale and strong. He predicted his own approaching death, and had a doctor in attendance for a week or two before he died. He was placed in a coffin he had had made on some plan of his own and buried in the vault. His death occurred in 1842 or 1843. If you care to see them I can show you some of his papers, which may interest you.”

Mr. Flaxman Low spent the afternoon over the papers. When evening came, he rose from his work with a sigh of content, stretched himself, and joined Thierry and Sir George in the garden.

They dined at Lady Blackburnton’s, and it was late before Sir George found himself alone with Mr. Flaxman Low and his friend.

“Have you formed any opinion about the thing which haunts the Manor House?” he asked anxiously.

Thierry elaborated a cigarette, crossed his legs, and added:

“If you have in truth come to any definite conclusion, pray let us hear it, my dear Monsieur Flaxman.”

“I have reached a very definite and satisfactory conclusion,” replied Low. “The Manor House is haunted by Sir Gilbert Blackburn, who died, or, rather, who seemed to die, on the 15th of August, 1842.”

“Nonsense! The nail fifteen inches long at the least—how do you connect it with Sir Gilbert?” asked Blackburn testily.

“I am convinced that it belonged to Sir Gilbert,” Low answered.

“But the long black hair like a woman’s?”

“Dissolution in the case of Sir Gilbert was not complete—not consummated, so to speak—as I hope to show you later. Even in the case of dead persons the hair and nails have been known to grow. By a rough calculation as to the growth of nails in such cases, I was enabled to indicate approximately the date of Sir Gilbert’s death. The hair too grew on his head.”

“But the barred eyes? I saw them myself!” exclaimed the young man.

“The eyelashes grow also. You follow me?”

“You have, I presume, some theory in connection with this?” observed Thierry. “It must be a very curious one.”

“Sir Gilbert in his fear of death appears to have mastered and elaborated a strange and ancient formula by which the grosser factors of the body being eliminated, the more ethereal portions continue to retain the spirit, and the body is thus preserved from absolute disintegration. In this manner true death may be indefinitely deferred. Secure from the ordinary chances and changes of existence, this spiritualised body could retain a modified life practically for ever.”

“This is a most extraordinary idea, my dear fellow,” remarked Thierry.

“But why should Sir Gilbert haunt the Manor House, and one special room?”

“The tendency of spirits to return to the old haunts of bodily life is almost universal. We cannot yet explain the reason of this attraction of environment.”

“But the expansion—the crowding substance which we ourselves felt? You cannot meet that difficulty,” said Thierry persistently.

“Not as fully as I could wish, perhaps. But the power of expanding and contracting to a degree far beyond our comprehension is a well-known attribute of spiritualised matter.”

“Wait one little moment, my dear Monsieur Flaxman,” broke in Thierry’s voice after an interval; “this is very clever and ingenious indeed. As a theory I give it my sincere admiration. But proof—proof is what we now demand.”

Flaxman Low looked steadily at the two incredulous faces.

“This,” he said slowly, “is the hair of Sir Gilbert Blackburn, and this nail is from the little finger of his left hand. You can prove my assertion by opening the coffin.”

Sir George, who was pacing up and down the room impatiently, drew up.

“I don’t like it at all, Mr. Low, I tell you frankly. I don’t like it at all. I see no object in violating the coffin. I am not concerned to verify this unpleasant theory of yours. I have only one desire; I want to get rid of this haunting presence, whatever it is.”

“If I am right,” replied Low, “the opening of the coffin and exposure of the remains to strong sunshine for a short time will free you for ever from this presence.”

In the early morning, when the summer sun struck warmly on the lawns of Yand, the three men carried the coffin from the vault to a quiet spot among the shrubs where, secure from observation, they raised the lid.

Within the coffin lay the semblance of Gilbert Blackburn, maned to the ears with long and coarse black hair. Matted eyelashes swept the fallen cheeks, and beside the body stretched the bony hands, each with its dependent sheaf of switch-like nails. Low bent over and raised the left hand gingerly.

The little finger was without a nail!

Two hours later they came back and looked again. The sun had in the meantime done its work; nothing remained but a fleshless skeleton and a few half-rotten shreds of clothing.

The ghost of Yand Manor House has never since been heard of.

When Thiery bade Flaxman Low good-bye, he said:

“In time, my dear Monsieur Flaxman, you will add another to our sciences. You establish your facts too well for my peace of mind.”