

Eyes For The Blind

by

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‘What I can never understand about your Church,’ said Doctor Taylor, ‘is the manner in which it so uncompromisingly condemns spiritualism. I will grant you that there is a lot of quackery about the average spiritualistic séance, but I do think that some of the results prove that there is something in the serious study of the subject.’

'Then you would have the Church risk immortal souls for the sake of the grain of truth there may be in what, you yourself admit, is a tissue of trickery?' replied the Bishop.

'Not at all,' answered the doctor. 'What I object to is a wholesale condemnation of the researches of many people who are inspired by the highest motives. You cannot say there is nothing in spiritualism when it has been definitely proved that some kind of manifestations have been witnessed in circumstances that preclude trickery.'

'The Church does not deny such manifestations, but she does declare that the spirits of the just are in the hands of God and cannot be raised at the whim of any neurotic medium at a séance. Those who have studied the subject (and there are many who have) agree that certain evil spirits can assume appearances to suit their purpose when souls are to be ensnared. For example: a man who hears his dead mother speaking to him at a séance is really being deceived by an evil spirit who is able to imitate the mother's voice.'

'A very thin argument, my lord, if I may say so. What about ghosts that haunt old castles or ruined abbeys?'

'I have never seen any,' smiled the Bishop, 'and if there are such things I should think they are really thought forms associated with the place. But the haunting of such houses is something apart from spiritualism. In that case the things are actually there and are seen, or are said to be seen, without the assistance of mediumistic agency. In spiritualism the ghosts are raised through a medium—there must be a human agent in the matter. The raising of spirits in this way is such a severe strain upon the medium that many of these people have been known to go mad.'

'I will not deny that, but what drives them mad? Has it ever been proved that the evil spirits, which you say appear at séances, have actually taken possession of the faculties of a medium?'

'I think I can answer that question, my lord, if you will give me permission,' interpolated Father Placid. 'Perhaps the doctor may be interested in the tale of Sydney Jackson.'

'Of course,' answered the Bishop. 'I had forgotten that case and, as you had the handling of it, you should certainly know all the facts.'

The little Benedictine lit his pipe and puffed away at it for a few moments. Then he began his story.

'It was nearly twenty years ago that Sydney Jackson first came

to see me. He was then a boy of nineteen and wished to be received into the Church. He struck me as being the ideal type of convert—serious and keen to know all the facts before he made his final decision. I remember that I was particularly impressed by his frank blue eyes, and his delicate, artistic hands.

I instructed him for over three months and then he suddenly stopped coming to me. Naturally I wrote to inquire what had happened, and he replied saying he had decided against joining the Church as he had been convinced of the truth of spiritualism.

I discovered that he had been brought into contact with Austin Lloyd, who, you may remember, was a famous medium just before the War. Lloyd had persuaded the youth that he possessed mediumistic powers, and the next thing I heard of Sydney was that he was giving séances in Mayfair. I wrote and warned him of the dangers he was courting, but received no reply to my letter. Then war was declared and he joined the forces. Lloyd was killed at Mons, but Sydney came safely through and was the head of some spiritualistic church in London in 1919.

In 1921 I was appointed chaplain to the prison at ——. The Governor was a Catholic and he and I became very friendly. One day he called me into his office and said, "Father, we have a very curious case coming in tomorrow. Have you ever heard of John Dangerfield?"

I shuddered. Who had not heard of John Dangerfield? This monster had been convicted of the most vile crimes. His mania was to attack unsuspecting persons, often children, and gouge out their eyes. He had blinded five people in this manner, three of his victims being little children. He was also suspected of attacking quite a number of others. He had been proved guilty of these revolting crimes, but sentence had been suspended as there were doubts regarding his sanity.

"I see you know of him," went on the Governor. "Well, he is coming here tomorrow, and the doctor is going to have a lively time trying to discover whether he is sane or not. According to the report it seems to be a case of dual identity. At times the man is a low, gross villain answering to the name of Dangerfield. At others he is a very bewildered gentleman who claims to be Sydney Jackson."

I must have given a start of surprise, which the Governor noticed, and I had to tell him that I had once known a Sidney Jackson.

“Perhaps it is the same man,” he said. “Many people have come forward to swear that he is Jackson, a well-known spiritualistic medium, and not Dangerfield at all. Yet, when the witnesses declare him to be Jackson, he vows that he is Dangerfield. Clearly the man is insane and I don’t know why he should be sent here at all.”

“The Governor willingly gave me permission to see the prisoner as soon as he arrived, and the following afternoon one of the warders conducted me to Dangerfield’s cell.

“One glance was enough. It was Sydney Jackson, but the eyes and hands seemed to be those of another man. Instead of the well-remembered blue eyes and thin delicate hands, this man’s eyes were greenish-brown in colour and his hands were coarse and ugly. Yet he was certainly Sydney Jackson.

“Do you remember me, Sydney Jackson?” I asked.

“He jumped to his feet with an oath, and, mouthing many foul curses and blasphemies, declared that his name was John Dangerfield. Undoubtedly he was quite mad, and the warder led me quickly out of the cell. We looked back through the grille. The man was still shouting curses, and those cruel hands were clawing the air as if the fingers were itching to tear something to pieces.

“The next morning I heard that he had actually attacked one of the warders and endeavoured to push his fingers into the poor chap’s eyes. Within two days he was removed to one of the criminal lunatic asylums.

“The case rather preyed upon my nerves and I could not dismiss it from my mind. With my superior’s permission I travelled up to London and visited the spiritualistic church where Sydney Jackson had officiated. The man in charge was suspicious of me at first, but when I told him the reason for my coming he was more communicative. He told me that Jackson had been approached, some twelve months before that date, by the owner of some property in Scotland, who had invited him to conduct a séance in a haunted castle. Jackson had gone to Scotland, and it was after his return that the change in him had become evident. My informant gave me the name of the place in Scotland and I went north on the following day.

“Ecclefechin is off the beaten track and I had to hire a car to take me there from Fort William. I found a tiny village with a grim old castle on the moors above. I was told that the castle was deserted but the laird lived in a house about a mile from the village.

“He turned out to be a dour old fellow and not at all friendly. I asked him if he had been Sydney Jackson’s host about a year ago. He admitted that he had, and I could see that he was mortally afraid of something.

““Would you like to tell me about it?” I asked. “Jackson is now in a criminal lunatic asylum, and declares that he is really John Dangerfield.”

““John Dangerfield,” he exclaimed. “Oh, God! Has it come to that?”

““Now tell me the meaning of it all,” I suggested.

““It was no fault of mine,” the man groaned. “I would never have asked him if I had even guessed at the consequences. I only wanted a chance to rid the old castle of its ghost. Three generations ago my family had to abandon it, and it’s a poor thing when the laird of Ecclefaïn has to live in a pigsty like this whilst his own house is given over to a ghost.”

“I agreed that it was, and he went on to tell me the story of the haunting and the attempted séance. I cannot imitate his broad Scots dialect so shall have to tell the tale in plain English.

“It seems that about 1694 the district around Ecclefaïn had been terrorized by a wizard. This man had practised black magic in an attempt to discover hidden treasure, and human eyes had figured largely in his experiments. To obtain these he had gouged the eyes out of little children, and had even gone to graveyards and taken the eyes from newly-buried corpses. At last the district had risen against him and he had been haled before the laird. With primitive justice the laird had directed that the wizard’s eyes be burned out of their sockets, and the man then thrown from the top of the castle tower. This sentence had been carried out to the letter. The name of the wizard, as you may have guessed, was John Dangerfield.

“From that day the castle was haunted by the ghost of a man without eyes—a ghost that endeavoured to scratch the eyes out of any human being who crossed its path. Things were brought to a head when the infant son of the reigning laird, some time in the eighteenth century, had been found dead with his eyes torn from their sockets. From that day the castle had been abandoned.

“By chance the present laird had heard of Sydney Jackson, and in a rash moment had invited him to Scotland hoping that, in some way, he could discover how to lay the ghost. Jackson had decided to spend a night in the haunted castle. He left Ecclefaïn the next morning without saying a word to anyone.

'I returned to my monastery convinced that, instead of laying the ghost of John Dangerfield, Sydney Jackson had become possessed by the evil spirit of the wizard. For over two months I grappled with the problem, and then, one morning, there came a telephone call from my friend the Prison Governor asking if I could go over to the — Criminal Lunatic Asylum at once, and see the man who called himself John Dangerfield.

'The asylum is about fourteen miles from the abbey, but I soon covered the distance on my motor-bike. A doctor was there to meet me and he told me all the facts of the case. After two months of continual madness Jackson had suddenly become quiet, and had answered to his own name. That very morning he had asked the authorities to get into touch with me and to say it was a matter of life and death.

'The doctor took me along to the cell where Jackson was confined. The blaspheming wretch I had interviewed two months before had changed into a cultured gentleman. Blue eyes looked into mine, and the hands were the delicate, white hands I used to admire so long ago.

'He greeted me eagerly. "Father," he exclaimed, "it is good of you to have come. Please keep him away from me. If he comes back I shall be doomed for ever. If only I had taken your advice and had nothing to do with spiritualism!"

'We talked for some time, and it was obvious that he knew little of what had happened whilst he had acted as John Dangerfield. He expressed his desire to be received into the Church and I agreed to perform the ceremony that evening and to bring him the Blessed Sacrament in the morning.

'He hated my leaving him, but I had to return to the monastery for the necessary things. I was only away for a few hours and fortunately he was still the same when I got back. I gave him a short instruction, went through the order of reception, administered conditional Baptism, and heard his confession. Dusk had already fallen by then and only a dim light filtered in from the corridor. Suddenly, as he was kneeling before me, I noticed a shadow on the wall. It was the silhouette of a bearded man, and he seemed to be creeping nearer and nearer to Jackson. The poor fellow noticed the shadow almost as soon as I did.

'"Save me from him, Father," he screamed. "He will not let me go."

'Even as I looked it seemed that a second pair of hands were

forming over Jackson's. I lifted the crucifix and cried out, "In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, I bid you return to the place from whence you have come." As I uttered the words I was hurled across the cell by a powerful hand, and I distinctly saw two green eyes look balefully into mine. But I had won. Jackson was sobbing gently, but he was still Jackson, and the confession was finished without further incident.

'In the morning I rode over with the Blessed Sacrament and was relieved to hear that Jackson had passed a quiet night. He knelt reverently to receive the Host, but, just as I was about to place it on his tongue, a hand gripped my wrist and held it back. I managed to make the sign of the Cross with the Holy Sacrament and, as I did so, my wrist was set free from the grip and a most unholy howl echoed through the cell. But I, through the grace of God, had won. I knew it with absolute certainty and I also knew that the foul thing from the grave could never approach Sydney Jackson again.

'And what happened to Jackson after he had been restored to his normal self?' asked the doctor.

'The asylum authorities kept a very careful eye upon him and, after three years, he was released. He is now a lay-brother in a community of enclosed monks in the Austrian Tyrol.'

'An astounding story,' exclaimed the doctor, 'and it only goes to prove the existence of such things as disembodied spirits.'

'Ah, yes!' said the Bishop quietly, 'but I think you will agree that it also proves the wisdom of the Church in refusing to allow her children to dabble in the thing called spiritualism.'

'I think it does,' the doctor agreed.