

The Haunting of Low Fennel

by Sax Rohmer, 1883-1959

Published: 1919

C. Arthur Pearson, Ltd., London



I

„There’s Low Fennel,” said Major Dale.

We pulled up short on the brow of the hill. Before me lay a little valley carpeted with heather, purple slopes hemming it in. A group of four tall firs guarded the house, which was couched in the hollow of the dip—a low, rambling building, in parts showing evidence of great age and in other parts of the modern improver.

„That’s the new wing,” continued the Major, raising his stick; „projecting out this way. It’s the only addition I’ve made to the house, which, as it stood, had insufficient accommodation for the servants.“

„It is a quaint old place.“

„It is, and I’m loath to part with it, especially as it means a big loss.“

„Ah! Have you formed any theories since wiring me?“

„None whatever. I’ve always been a sceptic, Addison, but if Low Fennel is not haunted, I’m a Dutchman, by the Lord Harry!“

I laughed reassuringly, and the two of us descended the slope to the white gate giving access to a trim gravel path flanked by standard roses. Mrs. Dale greeted us at the door. She was, as I had heard, much younger than the Major, and a distinctly pretty woman. In so far Dame Rumour was confirmed; other things I had heard of her, but I was not yet in a position to pass judgment.

She greeted me cordially enough, although women are usually natural actresses. I thought that she did not suspect the real object of my visit. Tea was served in a delightful little drawing-room which bore evidence of having but recently left the hands of London decorators, but when presently I found myself alone with my host in the Major’s peculiar sanctum, the real business afoot monopolised our conversation.

The room which Major Dale had appropriated as a study was on the ground floor of the new wing—the wing which he himself had had built on to Low Fennel. In regard to its outlook it was a charming apartment enough, with roses growing right up to the open window, so that their perfume filled the place, and beyond, a prospect of purple heather slopes and fir-clad hills.

Sporting prints decorated the walls, and the library was entirely, or almost entirely, made up of works on riding, hunting, shooting, racing, and golf, with a sprinkling of Whyte-Melville and Nat Gould novels and a Murray handbook or two. It was a most cosy room, probably because it was so untidy, or, as Mrs. Dale phrased it, „so manny“.

On a side table was ranked enough liquid refreshment to have inebriated a regiment, and, in one corner, cigar-boxes and tobacco-tins were stacked from the floor some two feet up against the wall. We were soon comfortably ensconced, then, the Major on a hard leather couch, and I in a deep saddle-bag chair.

„It’s an awkward sort of thing to explain,“ began Dale, puffing away at a cigar and staring through the open window; „because, if you’re to do anything, you will want full particulars.“

I nodded.

„Well,“ the Major continued, „you’ve heard how that blackguard Ellis let me down over those shares? The result?—I had to sell the Hall—Fennel Hall, where a Dale has been since the time of Elizabeth! But still, never mind! that’s not the story. This place, Low Fennel, is really part of the estate, and I have leased it from Meyers, who has bought the Hall. It was formerly the home farm, but since my father’s time it has not been used for that purpose. The New Farm is over the brow of the hill there, on the other side of the high road; my father built it.“

„Why?“

„Well,“—Dale shifted uneasily and a look of perplexity crossed his jolly, red face—„there were stories—uncomfortable stories. To cut a long story short, Seager—a man named Seager, who occupied it at the time I was at Sandhurst—was found dead here, or something; I never was clear as to the particulars, but there was an inquiry and a lot of fuss, and, in short, no one would occupy the property. Therefore the governor built the New Farm.“

„Low Fennel has been empty for many years then?“

„No, sir; only for one. Ord, the head gardener at the Hall, lived here up till last September. The old story about Seager was dying out, you see; but Ord must have got to hear about it—or I’ve always supposed so. At any rate, in September—a dam‘ hot September, too, almost if not quite as hot as this—Ord declined to live here any longer.“

„On what grounds?“

„He told me a cock-and-bull story about his wife having seen a horrible-looking man with a contorted face peering in at her bedroom window! I questioned the woman, of course, and she swore to it.“

He mopped his heated brow excitedly, and burnt several matches before he succeeded in relighting his cigar.

„She tried to make me believe that she woke up and saw this apparition, but I bullied the truth out of her, and, as I expected, the man Ord had come home the worse for drink. I made up my mind that the contorted face was the face of her drunken husband—whom she had declined to admit, and who therefore had climbed the ivy to get in at the open window.“

„She denied this?“

„Of course she denied it; they both did; but, from evidence obtained at the *Three Keys* in the village, I proved that Ord had returned home drunk that night. Still“—he shrugged his shoulders ponderously—„the people declined to remain in the place, so what could I do? Ord was a good gardener, and his drunken habits in no way interfered with his efficiency. He gained nothing out of the matter except that, instead of keeping Low Fennel, a fine house, I sent him to live in one of the Valley Cottages. He lives there now, for he’s still head gardener at the Hall.“

I made an entry in my notebook.

„I must see Ord,“ I said.

„I should,“ agreed the Major in his loud voice; „you’ll get nothing out of him. He’s the most pig-headed liar in the county! But to continue. The place proved unlettable. All the old stories were revived, and I’m told that people cheerfully went two miles out of their way in order to avoid passing Low Fennel at night! When I sold the Hall and decided to lease the place from the new proprietor, believe me it was almost hidden in a wilderness of weeds and bushes which had grown up around it. By the Lord Harry, I don’t think a living soul had approached within a hundred yards of the house since the day that the Ords quitted it! But it suited my purpose, being inexpensive to keep up; and by adding this new wing I was enabled to accommodate such servants as we required. The horses and the car had to go, of course, and with them a lot of my old people, but we brought the housekeeper and three servants, and when a London firm had rebuilt, renovated, decorated, and so forth, it began to look habitable.“

„It’s a charming place,“ I said with sincerity.

„Is it!“ snapped the Major, tossing his half-smoked cigar on to a side table and selecting a fresh one from a large box at his elbow. „Help yourself, the bottle’s near you. Is it! ... Hullo! what have we here?“

He broke off, cigar in hand, as the sound of footsteps upon the gravel path immediately outside the window became audible. Through the cluster of roses peered a handsome face, that of a dark man, whose soft-grey hat and loose tie lent him a sort of artistic appearance.

„Oh, it's you, Wales!“ cried the Major, but without cordiality. „See you in half an hour or so; little bit of business in hand at the moment, Marjorie's somewhere about.“

„All right!“ called the new arrival, and, waving his hand, passed on.

„It's young Aubrey Wales,“ explained Dale, almost savagely biting the end from his cigar, „son of Sir Frederick Wales, and one of my neighbours. He often drops in.“

Mentally considering the Major's attitude, certain rumours which had reached me, and the youth and beauty of Mrs. Dale, I concluded that the visits of Aubrey Wales were not too welcome to my old friend. But he resumed in a louder voice than ever:

„It was last night that the fun began. I can make neither head nor tail of it. If the blessed place is haunted, why have we seen nothing of the ghost during the two months or so we have lived at Low Fennel? The fact remains that nothing unusual happened until last night. It came about owing to the infernal heat.

„Mrs. Alson, the housekeeper, came down about two o'clock, intending, so I understand, to get a glass of cider from the barrel in the cellar. She could not sleep owing to the heat, and felt extremely thirsty. There's a queer sort of bend in the stair—I'll show you in a minute; and as she came down and reached this bend she met a man, or a thing, who was going up! The moonlight was streaming in through the window right upon that corner of the stair, and the apparition stood fully revealed.

„I gather that it was that of an almost naked man. Mrs. Alson naturally is rather reticent on the point, but I gather that the apparition was inadequately clothed. Regarding the face of the thing she supplies more details. Addison“—the Major leant forward across the table—„it was the face of a demon, a contorted devilish face, the eyes crossed, and glaring like the eyes of a mad dog!

„Of course the poor woman fainted dead away on the spot. She might have died there if it hadn't been for the amazing heat of the night. This certainly was the cause of her trouble, but it also saved her. About three o'clock I woke up in a perfect bath of perspiration. I never remember such a night, not even in India, and, as Mrs. Alson had done an hour earlier, I also started to find a drink. Addison! I nearly fell over her as she lay swooning on the stair!“

He helped himself to a liberal tot of whisky, then squirted soda into the glass.

„For once in a way I did the right thing, Addison. Not wishing to alarm Marjorie, I knocked up one of the maids, and when Mrs. Alson had somewhat recovered, gave her into the girl's charge. I sat downstairs here in this room until she could see me, and then got the particulars which I've given you. I wired you as soon as the office was open; for I said to myself, 'Dale, the devilry has begun again. If Marjorie gets to hear of it there'll be hell to pay. She won't live in the place.'“

He stood up abruptly, as a ripple of laughter reached us from the garden.

„Suppose we explore the scene of the trouble?“ he suggested, moving toward the door.

I thought in the circumstance our inspection might be a hurried one; therefore:

„Should you mind very much if I sought it out for myself?“ I said. „It is my custom in cases of the kind to be alone if possible.“

„My dear fellow, certainly!“

„My ramble concluded, I will rejoin Mrs. Dale and yourself—say on the lawn?“

„Good, good!“ cried the Major, throwing open the door. „An opening has been made on the floor above corresponding with this, and communicating with the old stair. Go where you like; find out what you can; but remember—not a word to Marjorie.“

II

Filled with the liveliest curiosity, I set out to explore Low Fennel. First I directed my attention to the exterior, commencing my investigations from the front. That part of the building on either side of the door was evidently of Tudor date, with a Jacobean wing to the west containing apartments overlooking the lawn—the latter a Georgian addition; whilst the new east wing, built by Major Dale, carried the building out almost level with the clump of fir-trees, and into the very heart of the ferns and bushes which here grew densely.

There was no way around on this side, and not desiring to cross the lawn at present, I passed in through the house to the garden at the back. This led me through the northern part of the building and the servants' quarters, which appeared to be of even greater age than the front of the house. The fine old kitchen in particular was suggestive of the days when roasting was done upon a grand scale.

Beyond the flower garden lay the kitchen garden, and beyond that the orchard. The latter showed evidences of neglect, bearing out the Major's story that the place had been unoccupied for twelve months; but it was evident, nevertheless, that the soil had been cultivated for many generations. Thus far I had discovered nothing calculated to assist me in my peculiar investigation, and entering the house I began a room-to-room quest, which, beyond confirming most of my earlier impressions, afforded little data.

The tortuous stairway, which had been the scene of the event described by my host, occupied me for some time, and I carefully examined the time-blackened panels, and tested each separate stair, for in houses like Low Fennel secret passages and „priest-holes“ were to be looked for. However, I discovered nothing, but descending again to the hall I made a small discovery.

There were rooms in Low Fennel which one entered by descending or ascending two or three steps, but this was entirely characteristic of the architectural methods of the period represented. I was surprised, however, to find that one mounted three steps in order to obtain access to the passage leading to the new wing. I had overlooked this peculiarity hitherto, but now it struck me as worthy of attention. Why should a modern architect introduce such a device? It could only mean that the ground was higher on the east side of the building, and that, for some reason, it had proved more convenient to adopt the existing foundations than to level the site.

I returned to the hall-way and stood there deep in thought, when the contact of a rough tongue with my hand drew my attention to a young Airedale terrier who was anxious to make my acquaintance. I patted his head encouragingly, and,

having reviewed the notes made during my tour of inspection, determined to repeat the tour in order to check them.

The Airedale accompanied me, behaving himself with admirable propriety as we passed around the house and then out through the kitchens into the garden. It was not until my journey led me back to the three steps, communicating with the new wing, that my companion seemed disposed to desert me.

At first I ascribed his attitude to mere canine caprice. But when he persistently refused to be encouraged, I began to ascribe it to something else.

Suddenly grasping him by the collar, I dragged him up the steps, along the corridor, and into the Major's study. The result was extraordinary. I think I have never seen a dog in quite the same condition; he whimpered and whined most piteously. At the door he struggled furiously, and even tried to snap at my hand. Then, as I still kept a firm grip upon him, he set out upon a series of howls which must have been audible for miles around. Finally I released him, having first closed the study door, and lowered the window. What followed was really amazing.

The Airedale hurled himself upon the closed door, scratching at it furiously, with intermittent howling; then, crouching down, he turned his eyes upon me with a look in them, not savage, but truly piteous. Seeing that I did not move, the dog began to whimper again; when, suddenly making up his mind, as it seemed, he bounded across the room and went crashing through the glass of the closed window into the rose bushes, leaving me standing looking after him in blank wonderment.

III

Aubrey Wales stayed to dinner, and since he had no opportunity of dressing, his presence afforded a welcome excuse for the other members of the party. The night was appallingly hot; the temperature being such as to preclude the slightest exertion. The Major was an excellent host, but I could see that the presence of the younger man irritated him, and at times the conversation grew strained; there was an uncomfortable tension. So that altogether I was not sorry when Mrs. Dale left the table and the quartet was broken up. On closer acquaintance I perceived that Wales was even younger than I had supposed, and therefore I was the more inclined to condone his infatuation for the society of Mrs. Dale, although I felt less sympathetically disposed toward her for offering him the encouragement which rather openly she did.

Ere long, Wales left Major Dale and myself for the more congenial society of the hostess; so that shortly afterwards, when the Major, who took at least as much wine as was good for him, began to doze in his chair, I found myself left to my own devices. I quitted the room quietly, without disturbing my host, and strolled around on to the lawn smoking a cigarette, and turning over in my mind the matters responsible for my presence at Low Fennel.

With no definite object in view, I had wandered towards the orchard, when I became aware of a whispered conversation taking place somewhere near me, punctuated with little peals of laughter. I detected the words „Aubrey“ and

„Marjorie“ (Mrs. Dale’s name), and, impatiently tossing my cigarette away, I returned to the house, intent upon arousing the Major and terminating this tête-à-tête. That it was more, on Mrs. Dale’s part, than a harmless flirtation, I did not believe; but young Wales was not a safe type of man for that sort of amusement.

The Major, sunk deep in his favourite chair in the study, was snoring loudly, and as I stood contemplating him in the dusk, I changed my mind, and retracing my steps, joined the two in the orchard, proclaiming my arrival by humming a popular melody.

„Has he fallen asleep?“ asked Mrs. Dale, turning laughing eyes upon me.

I studied the piquant face ere replying. Her tone and her expression had reassured me, if further assurance were necessary, that my old friend’s heart was in safe keeping; but she was young and gay; it was a case for diplomatic handling.

„India leaves its mark on all men,“ I replied lightly; „but I have no doubt that the Major is wide-awake enough now.“

My words were an invitation; to which, I was glad to note, she responded readily enough.

„Let’s come and dig him out of that cavern of his!“ she said, and linking her right arm in that of Wales, and her left with mine, she turned us about toward the house.

Dusk was now fallen, and lights shone out from several windows of Low Fennel. Suddenly, an upper window became illuminated, and Mrs. Dale pointed to this.

„That is my room,“ she said to me; „isn’t it delightfully situated? The view from the window is glorious.“

„I consider Low Fennel charming in every way,“ I replied.

Clearly she knew nothing of the place’s sinister reputation, which seemed to indicate that she employed herself little with the domestic side of the household; otherwise she must undoubtedly have learnt of the episode of the man with the contorted face, if not from the housekeeper, from the maid. It was a tribute to the reticence of the servants that the story had spread no further; but the broken study window and the sadly damaged Airedale already afforded matter for whispered debate among them, as I had noted with displeasure.

The „digging out“ of the Major did not prove to be an entire success. He was in one of his peculiar moods, which I knew of old, and rather surly, being pointedly rude on more than one occasion to Wales. He had some accounts to look into, or professed to have, and the three of us presently left him alone. It was now about ten o’clock, and Aubrey Wales made his departure, shaking me warmly by the hand and expressing the hope that we should see more of one another. He could not foresee that the wish was to be realised in a curious fashion.

Mrs. Dale informed me that the Major in all probability would remain immured in his study until a late hour, which I took to be an intimation that she wished to retire. I therefore pleaded weariness as a result of my journey, and went up to my room, although I had no intention of turning-in. I opened the two windows widely, and the heavy perfume of some kind of tobacco plant growing in the beds below grew almost oppressive. The heat of the night was truly phenomenal; I might have been, not in an English home county, but in the Soudan. An absolute stillness reigned throughout Low Fennel, and, my hearing being peculiarly acute, I could detect the chirping of the bats which flitted restlessly past my windows.

It was difficult to decide how to act. My experience of so-called supernatural appearances had strengthened my faith in the theory set forth in the paper *Chemistry of Psychic Phenomena*—which had attracted unexpected attention a year before. Therein I classified hauntings under several heads, basing my conclusions upon the fact that such apparitions are invariably localised; often being confined, not merely to a particular room, for instance, but to a certain wall, door, or window. I had been privileged to visit most of the famous haunted homes of Great Britain, and this paper was the result; but in the case of Low Fennel I found myself nonplussed, largely owing to lack of data. I hoped on the morrow to make certain inquiries along lines suggested by oddities in the structure of the house itself and by the nature of the little valley in which it stood.

When meditating I never sit still, and whilst marshalling my ideas I paced the room from end to end, smoking the whole time. Both windows and also the door, were widely opened. The amazing heat-wave which we were then experiencing promised to afford me a valuable clue, for I had proved to my own satisfaction that the apparitions variously known as „controls“ and „elementals“, not infrequently coincided with abrupt climatic changes, thunder-storms, or heat waves, or with natural phenomena, such as landslides and the like.

This pacing led me from end to end of the room, then, between the open door and the large dressing-table facing it. It was as I returned from the door towards the dressing-table that I became aware of the presence of the contorted face.

My peculiar studies had brought me into contact with many horrible apparitions, and if familiarity had failed to breed contempt, at least it had served to train my nerves for the reception of such sudden and ghastly appearances. I should be avoiding the truth, however, if I claimed to have been unmoved by the vision which now met me in the mirror. I drew up short, with one sibilant breath, and then stood transfixed.

Before me was a reflection of the open door, and of part of the landing and stairs beyond it. The landing lights were extinguished, and therefore the place beyond the door lay in comparative darkness. But, crawling in, serpent-fashion, inch by inch, silently, intently, so that the head, throat, and hands were actually across the threshold, came a creature which seemed to be entirely naked! It had the form of a man, but the face, the dreadful face which was being pushed forward slowly across the carpet with head held sideways so that one ear all but touched the floor, was the face, not of a man, but of a ghoul!

I clenched my teeth hard, staring into the mirror and trying to force myself to turn and confront, not the reflection, but the reality. Yet for many seconds I was unable to accomplish this. The baleful, protruding eyes glared straight into mine from the glass. The chin and lower lip of this awful face seemed to be drawn up so as almost to meet the nose, entirely covering the upper lip, and the nostrils were distended to an incredible degree, whilst the skin had a sort of purple tinge unlike anything I had seen before. The effect was grotesque in the true sense of the word; for the thing was clearly grimacing at me, yet God knows there was nothing humorous in that grimace!

Nearer it came and nearer. I could hear the heavy body being drawn across the floor; I could hear the beating of my own heart ... and I could hear a whispered

conversation which seemed to be taking place somewhere immediately outside my room.

At the moment that I detected the latter sound, it seemed that the apparition detected it also. The protruding eyes twisted in the head, rolling around ridiculously but horribly. Despite the dread which held me, I identified the whisperers and located their situation. Mrs. Dale was at her open window and Aubrey Wales was in the garden below.

The thought crossed my mind and was gone—but gone no quicker than the contorted face. By a sort of backward, serpentine movement, the thing which had been crawling into my room suddenly retired and was swallowed up in the shadows of the landing.

I turned and sprang toward the open door, the fever of research hot upon me, and my nerves in hand again. At the door I paused and listened intently. No sound came to guide me from the darkened stair, and when, stepping quietly forward and leaning over the rail, I peered down into the hall below, nothing stirred, no shadow of the many there moved to tell of the passage of any living thing. I paused irresolute, unable to doubt that I was in the presence of an authentic apparition. But how to classify it?

Slowly I returned to my room, and stood there, thinking hard, and all the while listening for the slightest sound from within or without the house.

The whispered conversation continued, and I stole quietly to one of the windows and leant out, looking to the left, in the direction of the new wing. A light burnt in the Major's study, whereby I concluded that he was still engaged with his accounts, if he had not fallen asleep. Between my window and the new wing, and on a level with my eyes, was the window of Mrs. Dale's room; and in the bright moonlight I could see her leaning out, her elbows on the ledge. Her bare arms gleamed like marble in the cold light, and she looked statuesquely beautiful. Wales I could not see, for a thick, square-clipped hedge obstructed my view ... but I saw something else.

Lizard fashion, a hideous unclad shape crawled past beneath me amongst the tangle of ivy and low plants about the foot of the fir trees. The moonlight touched it for a moment, and then it was gone into denser shadows...

A consciousness of impending disaster came to me, but, because of its very vagueness, found me unprepared. Then suddenly I saw young Wales. He sprang into view above the hedge, against which, I presume, he had been crouching; he leapt high in the air as though from some menace on the ground beneath him. I have never heard a more horrifying scream than that which he uttered.

„My God!“ he cried, „Marjorie! Marjorie!“ and yet again: „Marjorie! save me!“

Then he was down, still screaming horribly, and calling on the woman for aid—as though she could have aided him. The crawling thing made no sound, but the dreadful screams of Wales sank slowly into a sort of sobbing, and then into a significant panting which told of his dire extremity.

I raced out of the room, and down the dark stair into the hall. Everywhere I was met by locked doors which baffled me. I had hoped to reach the garden by way of the kitchens, but now I changed my plan and turned my attention to the front-door. It was bolted, but I drew the bolts one after the other, and got the door open.

Outside, the landscape was bathed in glorious moonlight, and a sort of grey mist hovered over the valley like smoke. I ran around the angle of the house on to the lawn, and went plunging through flower-beds heedlessly to the scene of the incredible conflict.

I almost fell over Wales as he lay inert upon the gravel path. The shadows veiled him so that I could not see his face; but when, groping with my hands, I sought to learn if his heart still pulsed, I failed to discover any evidence that it did. With my hand thrust against his breast and my ear lowered anxiously, I listened, but he gave no sign of life, lying as still as all else around me.

Now this stillness was broken. Excited voices became audible, and doors were being unlocked here and there. First of all the household, Mrs. Dale appeared, enveloped in a lace dressing-gown.

„Aubrey!“ she cried tremulously, „what is it? where are you?“

„He is here, Mrs. Dale,“ I answered, standing up, „and in a bad way, I fear.“

„For Heaven’s sake, what has happened to him? Did you hear his awful cries?“

„I did,“ I said shortly.

Standing with the moonlight fully upon her, Mrs. Dale sought him in the shadows of the hedge—and I knew that by the manner of his frightened outcry the man lying unconscious at my feet had forfeited whatever of her regard he had enjoyed. She was dreadfully alarmed, not so much on his behalf, as by the mystery of the attack upon him. But now she composed herself, though not without visible effort.

„Where is he, Mr. Addison?“ she said firmly, „and what has happened to him?“

A man, who proved to be a gardener, now appeared upon the scene.

„Help me to carry him in,“ I said to this new arrival; „perhaps he has only fainted.“

We gathered up the recumbent body and carried it through the kitchens into the breakfast-room, where there was a deep couch. All the servants were gathered at the foot of the stairs, frightened and useless, but the outcry did not seem to have aroused Major Dale.

Mrs. Dale and I bent over Wales. His face was frightfully congested, whilst his tongue protruded hideously; and it was evident, from the great discoloured weals which now were coming up upon his throat, that he had been strangled, or nearly so. I glanced at the white face of my hostess and then bent over the victim, examining him more carefully. I stood upright again.

„Do you know first aid, Mrs. Dale?“ I asked abruptly.

She nodded, her eyes fixed intently upon me.

„Then help to employ artificial respiration,“ I said, „and let one of the girls get ammonia, if you have any, and a bowl of hot water. We can patch him up, I think, without medical aid—which might be undesirable.“

Mrs. Dale seemed fully to appreciate the point, and in business-like fashion set to work to assist me. Wales had just opened his eyes and begun to clutch at his agonized throat, when I heard a heavy step descending from the new wing—and Major Dale, in his dressing-gown, joined us. His red face was more red than usual, and his eyes were round with wonder.

„What the devil’s the matter?“ he cried; „what’s everybody up for?“

„There has been an accident, Major,“ I said, glancing around at the servants, who stood in a group by the door of the breakfast-room; „I can explain more fully later.“

Major Dale stepped forward and looked down at Wales.

„Good God!“ he said hoarsely, „it’s young Wales, by the Lord Harry!—what’s he doing here?“

Mrs. Dale, standing just behind me, laid her hand upon my arm; and, unseen by the Major, I turned and pressed it reassuringly.

IV

The following day I lunched alone with the Major, Mrs. Dale being absent on a visit. It had been impossible to keep the truth from her (or what we knew of it) and at present I could not quite foresee the issue of last night’s affair. Young Wales, who had been driven home in a car sent from his place at a late hour, had not since put in an appearance; and it was sufficiently evident that Mrs. Dale would not welcome him should he do so, the hysterical panic which he had exhibited on the previous night having disgusted her. She had not said so in as many words, but I did not doubt it.

„Well, Addison?“ said the Major as I entered, „have you got the facts you were looking for?“

„Some of them,“ I replied, and opening my notebook I turned to the pages containing notes made that morning.

The Major watched me with intense curiosity, and almost impatiently awaited my next words. The servant having left the room:

„In the first place,“ I began, glancing at the notes, „I have been consulting certain local records in the town, and I find that in the year 1646 a certain Dame Pryce occupied a cabin which, according to one record, *stood close beside unto ye Lowe Fennel.*“

„That is, close beside this house?“ interjected the Major excitedly.

„Exactly,“ I said. „She attracted the attention of one of the many infamous wretches who disfigure the history of that period: Matthew Hopkins, the self-styled Witch-Finder General. This was a witch-ridden age, and the man Hopkins was one of those who fattened on the credulity of his fellows, receiving a fee of twenty shillings for every unhappy woman discovered and convicted of witchcraft. Poor Pryce was *swum* in a local pond (a test whereby the villain Hopkins professed to discover if the woman were one of Satan’s band, or otherwise) and burnt alive in Reigate market-place on September 23, 1646.“

„By God!“ said the Major, who had not attempted to commence his lunch, „that’s a horrible story!“

„It is one of the many to the credit of Matthew Hopkins,“ I replied; „but, without boring you with the details of this woman’s examination and so forth, I may say that what interests me most in the case is the date—September 23.“

„Why? I don’t follow you.“

„Well,“ I said, “there’s a hiatus in the history of the place after that, except that even in those early days it evidently suffered from the reputation of being haunted; but without troubling about the interval, consider the case of Seager, which you yourself related to me. Was it not in the month of August that he was done to death here?”

„By Gad!“ cried the Major, his face growing redder than ever, „you’re right!—and hang it all, Addison! it was in September—last September—that the Ords cleared out!”

„I remember your mentioning,“ I continued, smiling at his excitement, „that it was a very hot month?”

„It was.“

„From a mere word dropped by one of the witnesses at the trial of poor Pryce I have gathered that the month in which she was convicted of practising witchcraft in her cabin adjoining Low Fennel (as it stood in those days) was a tropically hot month also.“

Major Dale stared at me uncomprehendingly.

„I’m out of my depth, Addison—wading hopelessly. What the devil has the heat to do with the haunting?”

„To my mind everything. I may be wrong, but I think that if the glass were to fall to-night, there would be no repetition of the trouble.“

„You mean that it’s only in very hot weather—“

„In phenomenally hot weather, Major—the sort that we only get in England perhaps once in every ten years. For the glass to reach the altitude at which it stands at present, in two successive summers, is quite phenomenal, as you know.“

„It’s phenomenal for it to reach that point at all,“ said the Major, mopping his perspiring forehead; „it’s simply Indian, simply Indian, sir, by the Lord Harry!”

„Another inquiry,“ I continued, turning over a leaf of my book, „I have been unable to complete, since, in order to interview the people who built your new wing, I should have to run up to London.“

„What the blazes have they to do with it?”

„Nothing at all, but I should have liked to learn their reasons for raising the wing three feet above the level of the hall-way.“

Between the heat and his growing excitement, Major Dale found himself at a temporary loss for words. Then:

„They told me,“ he shouted at the top of his voice, „they told me at the time that it was something about—that it was due to the plan—that it was—“

„I can imagine that they had some ready explanation,“ I said, „but it may not have been the true one.“

„Then what the—what the—is the true one?”

„The true one is that the new wing covers a former mound.“

„Quite right; it does.“

„If my theory is correct, it was upon this mound that the cabin of Dame Pryce formerly stood.“

„It’s quite possible; they used to allow dirty hovels to be erected alongside one’s very walls in those days—quite possible.“

„Moreover, from what I’ve learnt from Ord—whom I interviewed at the Hall—and from such accounts as are obtainable of the death of Seager, this mound, and not the interior of Low Fennel as it then stood, was the scene of the apparitions.“

„You’ve got me out of my depth again, Addison. What d’you mean?“

„Seager was strangled outside the house, not inside.“

„I believe that’s true,“ agreed the Major, still shouting at the top of his voice, but gradually growing hoarser; „I remember they found him lying on the step, or something.“

„Then again, the apparition with the contorted face which peered in at Mrs. Ord—“

„Lies, all lies!“

„I don’t agree with you, Major. She was trying to shield her husband, but I think she saw the contorted face right enough. At any rate it’s interesting to note that the visitant came from outside the house again.“

„But,“ cried the Major, banging his fist upon the table, „it wanders about inside the house, and—and—damn it all!—it goes outside as well!“

„Where it goes,“ I interrupted quietly, „is not the point. The point is, where it comes from.“

„Then where do you believe it comes from?“

„I believe the trouble arises, in the strictest sense of the word, from the same spot whence it arose in the days of Matthew Hopkins, and from which it had probably arisen ages before Low Fennel was built.“

„What the—“

„I believe it to arise from the ancient barrow, or tumulus, above which you have had your new wing erected.“

Major Dale fell back in his chair, temporarily speechless, but breathing noisily; then:

„Tumulus!“ he said hoarsely; „d’you mean to tell me the house is built on a dam’ burial ground?“

„Not the whole house,“ I corrected him; „only the new wing.“

„Then is the place haunted by the spirit of some uneasy Ancient Briton or something of that sort, Addison? Hang it all! you can’t tell me a fairy tale like that! A ghost going back to pre-Roman days is a bit too ancient for me, my boy—too hoary, by the Lord Harry!“

„I have said nothing about an Ancient British ghost—you’re flying off at a tangent!“

„Hang it all, Addison! I don’t know what you’re talking about at all, but nevertheless your hints are sufficiently unpleasant. A tumulus! No man likes to know he’s sleeping in a graveyard, not even if it is two or three thousand years old. D’you think the chap who surveyed the ground for me knew of it?“

„By the fact that he planned the new wing so as to avoid excavation, I think probably he did. He was wise enough to surmise that the order might be cancelled altogether and the job lost if you learnt the history of the mound adjoining your walls.“

„A barrow under the study floor!“ groaned the Major—„damn it all! I’ll have the place pulled down—I won’t live in it. Gad! if Marjorie knew, she would never close her eyes under the roof of Low Fennel again—I’m sure she wouldn’t, I know she

wouldn't. But what's more, Addison, the thing, whatever it is, is dangerous—infernally dangerous. It nearly killed young Wales!" he added, with a complacency which was significant.

„It was the fright that nearly killed him," I said shortly.

Major Dale stared across the table at me.

„For God's sake, Addison," he said, „what does it mean? What unholy thing haunts Low Fennel? You've studied these beastly subjects, and I rely upon you to make the place clean and good to live in again."

„Major," I replied, „I doubt if Low Fennel will ever be fit to live in. At any time an abnormal rise of temperature might produce the most dreadful results."

„You don't mean to tell me—"

„If you care to have the new wing pulled down and the wall bricked up again, if you care to keep all your doors and windows fastened securely whenever the thermometer begins to exhibit signs of rising, if you avoid going out on hot nights after dusk, as you would avoid the plague—yes, it may be possible to live in Low Fennel."

Again the Major became speechless, but finally:

„What d'you mean, Addison?" he whispered; „for God's sake, tell me. What is it?—what is it?"

„It is what some students have labelled an *elemental* and some a *control*," I replied; „it is something older than the house, older, perhaps, than the very hills, something which may never be classified, something as old as the root of all evil, and it dwells in the Ancient British tumulus."

V

As I had hoped, for my plans were dependent upon it, the mercury towered steadily throughout that day, and showed no signs of falling at night; the phenomenal heat-wave continued uninterruptedly. The household was late retiring, for the grey lord—Fear—had imposed his will upon all within it. Every shadow in the rambling old building became a cavern of horrors, every sound that disturbed the ancient timbers a portent and a warning.

That the servants proposed to leave en masse at the earliest possible moment was perfectly evident to me; in a word, all the dark old stories which had grown up around Low Fennel were revived and garnished, and new ones added to them. The horror of the night before had left its mark upon every one, and the coming of dusk brought with it such a dread as could almost be felt in the very atmosphere of the place. Ghostly figures seemed to stir the hangings, ghostly sighs to sound from every nook of the old hall and stairway; baleful eyes looked in at the open windows, and the shrubberies were peopled with hosts of nameless things who whispered together in evil counsel.

Mrs. Dale was as loath to retire as were the servants, more especially since the Major and I were unable to disguise from her our intention of watching for the strange visitant that night. But finally we prevailed upon her to depart, and she

ran upstairs as though the legions of the lost pursued her, slamming and locking her door so that the sound echoed all over the house.

We had told her nothing, of course, of my discoveries and theories, but nevertheless the cat was out of the bag; the affair of the night before had spoilt our scheme of secrecy.

In the Major's study we made our preparations. The windows were widely opened, and the door was ajar. Not a breath of wind disturbed the stillness of the night, and although Major Dale had agreed to act exactly as I might direct, he stared in almost comic surprise when he learnt the nature of these directions.

Placing two large silk handkerchiefs upon the table, I saturated them with the contents of a bottle which I had brought in my pocket, and handed one of the handkerchiefs to him.

„Tie that over your mouth and nostrils,“ I said, „and whatever happens don't remove it unless I tell you.“

„But, Addison...“

„You know the compact, Major? If you aren't prepared to assist I must ask you to retire. To-night might be the last chance, perhaps, for years.“

Growling beneath his breath, Major Dale obeyed, and, a humorous figure enough, stretched himself upon the couch, staring at me round-eyed. I also fastened a handkerchief about my head.

„It would perhaps be better,“ I said, my voice dimmed by the wet silk, „if we avoided conversation as much as possible.“

Standing up, I rolled back a corner of the carpet, exposing the floor-planks, and with a brace-and-bit, which I had in my pocket, I bored a round hole in one of these. Into it I screwed the tube, attached to a little watch-like contrivance, twisting the face of the dial so that I could study it from where I proposed to sit. Then I took up my post, smothering a laugh as I noted the expression upon that part of the Major's red face which was visible to me.

Thus began the business of that strange night. Half an hour passed in almost complete silence, save for the audible breathing of the Major—by no means an ideal companion for such an investigation. But, having agreed to assist me, in justice to my old friend I must say that he did his best to stick to the bargain, and to play his part in what obviously he regarded as an insane comedy.

At about the expiration of this thirty minutes, I thought I heard a door open somewhere in the house. Listening intently, and glancing at my companion, I received no confirmation of the idea. Evidently the Major had heard nothing. Again I thought I heard a sound—as of the rustling of silk upon the stair, or in an upper corridor; finally I was almost certain that the floor of the room above (viz. the Major's bedroom) creaked very slightly.

At that I saw my companion glance upward, then across at me, with a question in his eyes. But not desiring to disturb the silence, I merely shook my head.

An hour passed. There had been no repetition of the slight sounds to which I have referred, and the stillness of Low Fennel was really extraordinary. A thermometer, which I had placed upon the table near to my elbow, recorded the fact that the temperature of the room had not abated a fraction of a point since sunset, and, sitting still though I was, I found myself bathed in perspiration. Despite the open door and windows, not a breath of air stirred in the place, but

the room was laden with the oppressive perfume of those night-scented flowers which I have mentioned elsewhere, for it was faintly perceptible to me, despite the wet silk.

Once, a bat flew half in at one of the windows, striking its wings upon the glass, but almost immediately it flew out again. A big moth fluttered around the room, persistently banging its wings against the lamp-shade. But nothing else within or without the house stirred, if I except the occasional restless movements of the Major.

Then all at once—and not gradually as I had anticipated—the meter at my feet began to register. Instantly, I looked to the thermometer. It had begun to fall.

I glanced across at Major Dale. He was staring at something which seemed to have attracted his attention in a distant corner of the room. Glancing away from the meter, the indicator of which was still moving upward, I looked in the same direction. There was much shadow there, but nevertheless I could not doubt that a very faint vapour was forming in that corner ... rising—rising—rising—slowly higher and higher.

It proceeded from some part of the floor concealed by the big saddle-bag chair—the Major's favourite dozing-place (probably from a faulty floor-board), and it was rising visibly, inch upon inch, as I watched, until it touched the ceiling above. Then, like a column of smoke, it spread out, mushroom fashion; it crept in ghostly coils along the cornices, spreading, a dim grey haze, until it obscured a great part of the ceiling.

Again I looked across at the Major. He was staring at the phenomenon with eyes which were glassy with amazement. I could see that momentarily he expected the vapour to take shape, to form into some ghoulish thing with a contorted face and clutching, outstretched fingers.

But this did not happen. The vapour, which was growing more fine and imperceptible, began to disperse. I glanced from corner to corner of the room, then down to the meter on the floor. The indicator was falling again.

Still I made no move, although I could hear Major Dale fidgeting nervously, but I looked across at him ... and a dreadful change had come over his face.

He was sitting upright upon the couch, the edge of which he clutched with one hand, whilst with the other he combed the air in a gesture evidently meant to attract my attention. He was trying to speak, but only a guttural sound issued from his throat. His staring eyes were set in a glare of stark horror upon the door of the study.

Swiftly I turned—to see the door slowly opening; to see, low down upon the bare floor—for I had removed the carpet from that corner of the room—a ghastly, contorted face, held sideways with one ear almost touching the ground, and with the lower lip and the chin drawn up as though they were of rubber, almost to the tip of the nose!

The eyes glared up balefully into mine, the hair hung a dishevelled mass about the face, and I had a glimpse of one bare shoulder pressed upon the floor.

Wider and wider opened the door; and further into the room crept the horrible apparition...

The light gleamed equally upon the hideous, contorted face and upon the rounded shoulders and slim, white arms, on one of which a heavy gold Oriental bangle was clasped.

It was a woman!

In a flash of inspiration—at sight of the bangle—my doubts were resolved; I understood. Leaning across the table, I extinguished the lamp ... in the same instant that Major Dale, uttering an inarticulate, choking cry, sprang to his feet and toppled forward, senseless, upon the floor!

The study became plunged in darkness, but into the long corridor, beyond the open door, poured the cold illumination of the moon. Framed in the portal, uprose a slim figure, seeming like a black silhouette upon a silvern background, or a wondrous statue in ebony. Elfin, dishevelled locks crowned the head; the pose of the form was as that of a startled dryad or a young Bacchante poised for a joyous leap...

Thus, for an instant, like some exquisite dream of Phidias visualised, the figure stood ... then had fled away down the corridor and was gone!

VI

Close upon a month had elapsed. Major Dale and I sat in my study in London.

„Young Aubrey Wales has gone abroad,“ I said. „He’s ashamed to show up again, I suppose.“

„H’m!“ growled the Major—„I’ve got nothing to crow about, myself, by the Lord Harry! There’s courage and courage, sir! I’ve led more than one bayonet attack, but I’d never qualify for the D.S.O. as a ghost-hunter!—never, by Gad!—never!“

He reached out for the decanter; then withdrew his hand. „Doctor’s orders,“ he muttered. „Discipline must be maintained!“

„It was the sudden excitement which precipitated the seizure,“ I said, glancing at the altered face of my old friend. „I was wrong to expose you to it; but of course I did not know that the doctor had warned you.“

„And now,“ said the Major, sighing loudly as he filled his tumbler with plain soda-water—„what have you to tell me?“

„In the first place—have you definitely decided to leave Low Fennel, for good?“

„Certainly—not a doubt on the point! We’re leasing a flat in town here whilst we look around.“

„Good! Because I very much doubt if the place could ever be rendered tenable...“

„Then it’s really haunted?“

„Undoubtedly.“

„By what, Addison? Tell me that!—by what?“

„By a grey vapour.“

Major Dale’s eyes began to protrude, and:

„Addison,“ he said hoarsely—„don’t joke about it!—don’t joke. It was not a grey vapour that strangled Seager...“

„Certainly it was not. Seager was strangled by some wholly inoffensive person—we shall probably never know his identity—who had fallen asleep amongst the bushes on the mound, close beside the house...“

„But man alive! I’ve seen the beastly thing, with my own eyes! You’ve seen it! Wales saw it! Mrs. Ord saw it!...“

„Mrs. Ord saw her husband.“

„Ah! you’re coming round to my belief about the Ords!“

„Decidedly I am.“

„But what did Wales see—eh? And what did I see!“

„You saw the vapour in operation.“

The Major fell back in his chair with an expression upon his face which I cannot hope to describe. Words failed him altogether.

„I had come prepared for something of the sort,“ I continued rapidly; “for I have investigated several cases of haunting—notably in the Peak district—which have proved to be due to an emanation from the soil—a vapour. But the effect of such vapour, in the other cases, was to induce delusions of sight, in nearly every instance (although, in two, the delusions were of hearing).

„In other words, the person affected by this vapour was drugged, and, during the drugged state, perceived certain visions. I made the mistake, at first, of supposing that Low Fennel came within the same category. The classical analogy, of course, is that of the Sibyls, who delivered the oracular responses from the tripod, under the afflatus of a vapour said to arise from the sacred subterranean stream called Kassotis. The theory is, therefore, by no means a new one!“

Major Dale stared dully, but made no attempt to interrupt me.

„There are probably many spots, in England alone,“ I continued, „thus affected; but, fortunately, few of them have been chosen as building-sites. Barrows and tumuli of the stone and bronze age, and also Roman shrines, seem frequently to be productive of such emanations. The barrow beside Low Fennel (and now under the new wing) is a case in point.

„Sudden atmospheric changes seem to be favourable to the formation of the vapour. The barrow in Peel Castle, Isle of Man, is peculiarly susceptible to thunder-storms, for instance, whilst that at Low Fennel emits a vapour only after a spell of intense heat, and at the exact moment when the temperature begins to fall again. In the case of a sustained heat-wave, this would take place at some time during each night.

„And now for the particular in which the vapour at Low Fennel differs from other, similar emanations. It is not productive of delusions of sight; it induces a definite and unvarying form of transient insanity!“

Major Dale moved slightly, but still did not speak.

„Dame Pryce was the first recorded victim of the vapour. She was accused of witchcraft by a neighbour who testified to having seen her transform herself into a hideous and unrecognizable hag—whereas, in her proper person, she seems to have been a comely old lady. Lack of evidence compels us to dismiss the case of Seager, but consider that of the Ords. The man Ord, on his own confession, had fallen asleep outside the house. He became a victim of the vapour—and his own wife failed to recognize him.

„To what extent the mania so produced is homicidal remains to be proved; the gas is rare and difficult to procure, so that hitherto analysis has not been attempted. My own theory is that the subject remains harmless provided that, whilst under the mysterious influence, he does not encounter any person distasteful to him. Thus, Seager may have met his death at the hands of some tramp who had been turned away from the house.

„As to the symptoms: they seem to be quite unvarying. The subject strips, contorts his face out of all semblance to humanity (and always in a particular fashion) and crawls, lizard-like upon the ground, with the head held low, in an attitude of listening. That it is possible so to contort the face as to render it unrecognizable is seen in some cases of angina pectoris, of course.

„The subject apparently returns to the spot from whence he started and sinks into profound sleep, as is seen in some cases of somnambulism; and—like the somnambulist, again—he acquires incredible agility. How you yourself came, twice, under the influence of the vapour, is easily explained. The first time—when the housekeeper saw you—you had actually been in bed; and the second time, as you have told me, you had gone upstairs, undressed, and then slipped on your dressing-gown in order to complete some work in the study. Instead of completing the work, you dozed in your chair—and we know what followed! In the case of—Mrs. Dale...”

„God! Addison,” said the Major huskily, and stood up, clutching the chair-arms—„Addison! You are trying to tell me that—what I saw was ... *Marjorie!* ...”

I nodded gravely.

„Without letting her suspect my reason for making the inquiries, I learnt that on that last night at Low Fennel, feeling dreadfully lonely and frightened, she determined to run along to the new wing—which seemed a safer place—and to wait in your room until you came up. She fell asleep, and...”

„Addison ... can a mere *vapour* produce such...”

„You mean, is the vapour directed or animated, by some discarnate, evil intelligence? My dear Major, you are taking us back to the theory of Elemental spirits, and I blankly refuse to follow you!”

