

The Claw

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

Many members of the theatrical profession have told me of strange experiences they have met with on tour. They sometimes stay in very old houses in country towns, many of which are undoubtedly haunted; and one lady told me a story (which is already in print, so I will not repeat it here) of a terrible night she had in some theatrical lodgings, during which she had a gruesome nightmare, and on searching the room found an open coffin under her bed, containing the corpse of the last occupant!

Miss Frances Dillon, the well-known London actress, has most kindly given me leave to use in this book the following horrible experience she once had in the provinces.

“I was on tour, playing for three nights at Buxton,” said Miss Dillon, “when something happened to me which I shall never forget.

“I had rooms in a very old house, but they were clean and comfortable, and I liked my landlady very much. The first night I stayed there I got home from the theatre at the usual time and went to bed. I always lock my door on tour, and this particular night I had done so as usual. Of that I am quite sure, for in the morning it was shut and locked quite fast.

“I was just dozing off to sleep, or might have been already asleep, when I heard a noise, and, turning my head, saw the locked door, which faced the foot of the bed, opened slowly and a hunchbacked man come in. He was dressed in modern clothes, with a tweed cap pulled well down over the most unhappy and tragic eyes that I ever saw.

“He leant on the foot of the bed and stared at me. I seemed under a spell, and was too frightened to move or even to scream. Then when, making a violent effort, I struggled up, feeling simply terrified, he disappeared, and I think I must have fainted.

“Next morning I was inclined at first to think it had been all a dream, but on my throat were four long red raised marks, close together—just the kind of marks that an animal’s claw would make.

“The episode made such an impression on me that I told several members of the company at the theatre about it, and showed them the marks.

“On the second night the same thing occurred again. Once more I was roused by hearing the hunchback come through the locked door and lean over the foot of my bed, and next morning the throat-marks had almost faded away, but lower down, on my neck, were four long narrow fresh marks, the distinct trace of an animal’s claw.

“The third night nothing happened.

“I asked my landlady if the house was supposed to be haunted, and, after looking queerly at me for a moment, she answered no. I can quite understand her point of view. If lodgings get the reputation of being haunted, who will stay in them? Therefore I will ask you not to make public the address of the house, though I will give it to you in confidence.

“You say you think I was brave to stay in the house after the first night. The reason I did so was to make quite sure that I had not been dreaming. The first four marks might, by the barest possibility, have been made by a pin or brooch in my dressing-room. The second marks and the reappearance of the ghost proved that such was not the case. I stayed the third night out of real curiosity to see it again. Yes, I think it *was* rather

courageous of me, but then I am not naturally timid, and my curiosity was greater than my fear. Anyhow, the ghost failed to appear, but the expression of its eyes will haunt me all the rest of my life. They were like those of a lost soul.”