

JOHN DAVYS BERESFORD

THE PSYCHICAL
RESEARCHER'S TALE - THE
SCEPTICAL POLTERGEIST

John Davys Beresford
The Psychical Researcher's
Tale - The Sceptical Poltergeist

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*The Psychical Researcher's Tale - The Sceptical Poltergeist / From «The New
Decameron», Volume III.:*

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From "The New
Decameron"—Volume III

There was once a time (he began) when I decided that I was a fraud; that I could not be a psychological researcher any longer. I determined to give it all up, to investigate no more phenomena nor attend another séance, nor read a word about psychological research for the remainder of my life. On the contrary, I planned an intensive study of the works of the later Victorians, of that blissful period in the history of Europe when we could believe in the comforting doctrine of materialism. "Oh!" I thought, "that one had a Haeckel or a Huxley living now to console us with their

beautiful faith in the mortality of the soul!" The Neo-Darwinians failed to convince me; the works of H. G. Wells left me cold.

I will tell you the events that brought me to this evil pass.

It is not likely that anyone here will remember the Slipperton case. It attracted little attention at the time. In 1905 there was still a little sanity left in the world. A few even of the London dailies were nearly sane then, and refused to report ghost stories unless they were known to be untrue. And the Slipperton case had hardly any publicity—an inch in the *Daily Mail*, headed "Family Evicted by Ghosts," was the only newspaper report that I saw; though there may have been others. In these days the story would be given a couple of columns opposite the leader page; and the Sunday papers...

I was connected with the thing because Edgar Slipperton and his wife were friends of mine; quiet, old-fashioned people who believed that when you were dead you *were* dead, and that that was the end of it.

The phenomena that drove them out of their house at last were of the ordinary poltergeist type that date back to the days of John Wesley. The Slippertons had a fat and very stupid cook, whom I suspected of being an unconscious medium; but they were so attached to her that they refused to give her notice, as I strongly advised them to do. They told me that although she was constitutionally unable to grasp a new idea, such as the idea of a different pudding, she was entirely dependable, always doing the same things in the same way and with the same results. And

while this confirmed my suspicions that she was a spiritualistic medium, I recognised that she might have useful qualities as a cook.

The Slippertons stood it pretty well for a time. At first they were only mildly inconvenienced. Things used to disappear mysteriously, and turn up in unexpected places. Slipperton's pince-nez, for example, were lost, and found inside the piano. And Mrs. Slipperton's "false front" would be moved in the night from the dressing-table to the brass knob of the bed-post, even after she took to pinning it to the toilet cover. Things like that; irritating, but not really serious.

But the trouble increased, grew to be beyond endurance in the end. The poltergeists, with that lack of imagination which always characterises them, started to play the old trick of pulling off the Slippertons' bed-clothes in the middle of the night—one of the most annoying of the spirits' antics. And they followed that by experimenting with the heavy furniture.

I was out of England when the trouble came to a head, and I heard nothing of the later developments until after the Slippertons had left the house. I happened to meet Slipperton by accident in the Haymarket, and he took me into his club and gave me the whole story. Naturally, I was glad of the chance to investigate, although I thought it very probable that the phenomena would cease with the departure of the cook. I determined, however, to go down and spend a week in the house, alone. I was not dismayed by the fact that I should be unable

to get any help with my domestic arrangements, owing to the superstitious fears of the villagers. I rather enjoyed cooking my own meals in those days.

It was fine weather in late May when I went down, and I regarded the visit as a kind of holiday rather than as a serious investigation. Nevertheless, from force of habit I carried out my inquiry in the scientific spirit that is so absolutely essential in these matters. The Slippertons' house was on the outskirts of a small town in Buckinghamshire. The shell of the house dated from the early seventeenth century. (You will find it described in the *Inventory of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments*—the second volume of the Buckinghamshire survey.) But the inside had been gutted and replanned to suit our modern requirements, such as the need for making each bedroom accessible without passing through other bedrooms, the necessity for a fitted bathroom, and so on.

I found the house as Slipperton had warned me that I should, in a chaotic condition inside. Everything movable seemed to have been moved—without any definite intention, so far as I could see, but just for the sake of upsetting the decent order of the household. I found a frying-pan, for instance, hung on the hook that was designed for the dinner-gong, and the gong inside one of the beds. A complete set of bedroom ware had been arranged on the drawing-room table; and apparently some witticism had been contemplated with a chest of drawers, which had become firmly wedged into the angle of the back staircase. In short, the

usual strange feats that characterise poltergeist phenomena.

I touched none of these misplaced things with the exception of the frying-pan, which I needed to cook the sausages I had brought with me; but after I had had my meal, I went through all the rooms and entered the position of every article in a large note-book, making plans of each room, besides a full list of the furniture and ornaments it contained. Later, I went up into the roof and disconnected the water supply, afterwards emptying the cistern and all the pipes. And before I went to bed I turned off the electric light at the main switch. All these precautions, as I need hardly tell you, were absolutely essential. It might appear difficult to explain the moving of a large chest of drawers by the sound of water-pipes or the fusing of an electric wire; but the critics of psychical research have essayed far more difficult tasks than that, to their own entire satisfaction.

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