

THE WEST AUSTRALIAN
PERTH, AUSTRALIA
2 May 1931

GHOSTS AND OTHER MYSTERIES

"Rooms of Mystery," by Elliott O'Donnell. Allan and Co., Ltd., London. 8/6. From the Publishers.

Houses which have the sinister reputation of being haunted possess a curious fascination for many persons, even though such persons would indignantly deny that they had any belief whatsoever in ghostly apparitions. Glamis Castle, the house in Berkeley Square, the famous mill at Willington on the Tyne, Epworth Parsonage, where, early in the 18th century, the Wesley family were half-perturbed, half-amused by certain supernatural manifestations, Brook House, on the south-east coast of England, the scene of extraordinary disturbances in the seventies of last century, are five only of innumerable instances which could be given, did space permit, of houses wherein inexplicable happenings are said to have taken place, and may—for all one knows to the contrary—still periodically occur.

In his entertaining book (although it is hardly a work that anyone who is troubled with nervous fears should read—especially just before going to bed) Mr. O'Donnell discourses interestingly concerning various cases of the kind which are more or less well-known. For example, he retells the strange story of Sir Richard Baker ("Bloody Baker"), of Cranbrook in Kent, who is popularly supposed to be the prototype of Bluebeard, of terrifying nursery lore. At the same time, it would appear on excellent authority that a good many purely imaginary crimes were fathered upon Sir Richard by malicious persons, for we read that he, "far from being a black sheep, was a most respectable personage. He twice officiated as High Sheriff of Kent. It is just possible that when acting in that capacity he did something to incur the animosity of the village people, who, unable to wreak vengeance on him in any other way, affixed the epithet 'Bloody' to his name." Sir Richard was honoured by Queen Elizabeth (his was one of the many country houses at which the Virgin Queen is reputed to have spent the night); and in view of these facts the tradition that describes

him as a wholesale murderer of women is not easy to understand: "One can only surmise again that his character was thus maligned and rendered odious in the eyes of posterity by people whom he had offended in his official capacity, and who acted thus out of spite."

Mr. O'Donnell describes mystery rooms in cottages, schools, manor-houses, and in the residences of ordinary peace-loving, ghost-abhorring citizens, who seem to have suffered from supernatural visitants much as other people have been afflicted in their homes with plagues of mice, or bugs, or cockroaches. Then there are inns of ill repute, torture chambers, rooms with dark, suspicious-looking stains on the floor, which will not wash out, scrub as one may, and even cellars of mystery, like the one in Leinster Terrace, Bayswater, the scene of a murder in 1926, where Mr. O'Donnell spent a solitary night vigil some three years later, and saw weird sights and heard uncanny sounds not traceable to any natural cause.

In one of his chapters the author relates his experiences at a "séance" conducted by Mr. Aleister Crowley at a studio in Chelsea—a piece of theatrical buffoonery, performed with appropriate gestures and incantations, and having some sort of vague reference to Satanism and the Black Art, concerning which Mr. O'Donnell dryly observes: "I have heard many accounts of the weird things that are alleged to occur at the ceremonies and services presided over by Mr. Aleister Crowley in Sicily, but if they are no more mystical or harrowing than those I and my friends witnessed in Chelsea, they are meat only for the most elementary type of thrill-hunter, the very rawest tyro in magic and occultism. We were looking for something more subtle and magical than the magic we had frequently seen at Chinese and Indian entertainment, but we certainly looked for it in vain in the much talked-of mystery room of Mr. Aleister Crowley." Among Mr. O'Donnell's most gruesome stories is that of the old house (since demolished) near Brighton, in Sussex, and of how, many years ago, an old piratical sea captain (retired) was carried off by an enormous phantom crab, "covered all over with seaweed, that used to enter the premises at night, crawl upstairs, and wander through all the rooms, as if in search of someone. It smelt horribly, and there was something so venomous and satanic in its appearance that those who saw it sometimes died of fright." The only thing is, the whole story reads rather like the nightmare of some indiscreet person who had supped too

liberally off the crustacean that subsequently haunted his uneasy slumbers.