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7B CONEY COURT

A good many years ago the late Stephen Phillips, the poet and dramatist, got himself into a very queer piece of trouble. He had just left his house somewhere on the south coast, I think at Littlehampton or near it, and rumours had got abroad that he had done so because the place was haunted. The rumours penetrated to Fleet Street, and some paper sent down a reporter to interview the poet. Stephen Phillips told the newspaper man his experiences in his late residence, and they were, indeed, most remarkable. I have forgotten the detail, and cannot recall the manner of the noises or voices or apparitions that had vexed the late tenant; but there was no doubt that the house was haunted, and haunted very badly. A sensational “story” appeared in the paper - and then the landlord of the house sued everybody concerned for heavy damages. It had not occurred to Phillips or the newspaper that you could libel a house; but the owner of it pointed out that to call a house haunted made it unlettable, and that in consequence of the statements in the interview the place once occupied by the poet had been empty on his hands for the last eighteen months. How the matter ended has escaped my memory, but I believe somebody, the poet or the paper, had to pay, and I should think it was the paper. However, I am taking the affair as a warning, and so I declare that all names and places in the following history are fictitious. There is no such Inn of Court or Chancery as Curzon’s Inn; there is no such square as Coney Court, though South Square, Gray’s Inn, once bore that name. And therefore: no action will lie.

But assuming for the moment that names and places are as true as the tale, it may be said that Curzon’s Inn lies somewhere between Fleet Street and Holborn. It is approached by a maze of crooked courts and paved alleys, guarded by iron posts, and it consists of a small hall - note the very odd and elaborate “sham Gothic” work about the principal doorway, date 1755 - a huge and ancient and flourishing mulberry tree in a railed enclosure, a quadrangle called Assay Square, and another which is Coney Court. In Coney Court there are nine entrances in the buildings, which were rebuilt in 1670. All is of a dim red of ancient brickwork; the entrances are enriched with Corinthian pilasters, in the manner of the older doorways in King’s Bench Walk in the Temple; and the carved wooden penthouses over these doorways have been attributed to Grinling Gibbons; somewhat doubtfully, as I am told, and on a misreading of an allusion in a contemporary diary. But, at all events, there are nine doors in Coney Court, and no more than nine, and hence the perplexity of Mr.Hemmings, the Steward, when he received a cheque for £20, with a note to this effect:

DEAR SIR - Please receive the enclosed cheque for Twenty Pounds (£20 0 0), being the quarter’s rent due to you for my chambers at 7B Coney Court, Curzon’s Inn. I remain,

Yours faithfully, MICHAEL CARVER.

That was all. There was no address. There was no date. The postmark bore the letter N. The letter was delivered by the first post of November 11, 1913, and by immemorial custom, of unknown origin, rents in Curzon's Inn are payable not on the English, but on the Scottish Quarter days. Now, November 11 is Martinmas, and so far everything was in order, But there is no such entrance in Coney Court as 7B, and there was no such name as Michael Carver on the books of the Inn. Mr.Hemmings was bothered, and nobody seemed to have heard of Mr.Carver. The porter, who had been employed at the Inn for upwards of forty years, was quite positive that no such name had been on the doorposts during the time of his service. Of course, the Steward made all possible enquiries. He went round to the various tenants at 6, 7, and 8, but could get no information whatever. As is usual in the old Inns, the tenants were miscellaneous. The main substratum -also as usual - was legal. There was a publisher in a very small and young way of business, who thought that poetry could be made to pay. There were the offices of a few shy and queer companies and syndicates, with names such as "Trexel Development Company, Ltd.," "J.H.V.N. Syndicate," "Sargasso Salvage: G.Nash, Secretary," and so forth, and so forth. Then the private residents; some of these were initials on the doorposts, "A.D.S.," "F.X.S.," one "Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Sheldon," and names that were little more than names to the inhabitants of the Inn, since the owners of them were never seen during the day, but crept out at night, after the gates were shut, and prowled from Assay Square to Coney Court and back again, stealthily, silently, not looking at one another, never speaking a word. Among all these folk the Steward made his quest, but not one of them had heard of such a person as Michael Carver, and one or two had occupied their chambers for thirty years. The next day, "St.Martin's Morrow," being the day appointed for the quarterly meeting of the Society, the "Pension," as they called it, the puzzled Hemmings laid the matter before the President and the Ancients, with the result that they decided that there was nothing to be done. And from that date onward, quarter after quarter came the cheque for twenty pounds, with the formal note accompanying it. No date, no address, and the postmark still bearing the N. of the northern district, The matter was regularly laid before the Society: the Society as regularly decided that there was nothing to be done.

This went on till the Martinmas of November, 1918. The usual cheque was received; but the formal letter varied. It ran thus:

DEAR SIR Please receive the enclosed cheque for Twenty Pounds (£20 0 0), being the quarter's rent due to you for my Chambers at 7B Coney Court, Curzon's Inn. There is a bad patch of damp on the ceiling of my sitting room; arising, I should think, from a defective tile. I shall be obliged if you will have this seen to at once.I remain, Yours faithfullyMICHAEL CARVER.

The Steward was stupefied. There was no such number in Coney Court, or the Inn, as 7B; how, then, could there be a leak in the roof! How could the Society see to a roof

which did not exist? Next day, Mr.Hemmings laid the letter before the Pension in silence: there was nothing to say. The President read it attentively; the ten Ancients read it attentively. Then one of them, who happened to be a solicitor, suggested that enquiries should be made at Mr.Carver's bank.

"Sometimes you can bluff a bank," he said hopefully. But Mr. Carver banked at Tellson's, and the ancient should have known better. Hemmings received the curtest of letters from the House, informing him that Messrs. Tellson were not in the habit of discussing their client's affairs with outsiders; and so, for the time being, the matter dropped. Next quarter day the usual Carver cheque was received, and with it an extremely stiff letter, pointing out that no notice had been taken of the writer's request, and that, in consequence the damp had spread all over the ceiling, and threatened to drip on the carpet. "I shall be obliged if you will remedy the defect immediately," the letter ended. The President and the Ancients again considered the matter. One suggested that the whole thing was the work of a practical joker, and another uttered the word "Mad," but these explanations were considered unsatisfactory, and the society, in the circumstances, resolved that there was nothing to be done.

The next quarter day brought no cheque. There was a letter, declaring that the tenant's furniture was covered with mould, and that in wet weather he was obliged to put a bowl on the floor to catch the water. Mr.Carver said finally that he had determined to cease all payment of rent until the necessary repairs were seen to. And then something still queerer happened, and this is the point at which the history would have become libellous - if there were such a place as Curzon's Inn, or if there were such a court as Coney Court. The third pair chambers (right) of No. 7, Coney Court, had just been vacated by the tenants, solicitors or agents, and a widow lady and her daughter had moved in - "dingy, but so quiet," as the lady told her friends. And now she found her chambers very far from quiet. Night after night, at twelve, one, two, or three o'clock, she and her daughter were awoke by thunderous piano music, always the same music, which rendered sleep out of the question. The widow complained to the Steward, and he came round, with the Inn carpenter, and said he couldn't understand it at all.

"We never had any complaints from Jackson and Dowling," he declared, and the lady pointed out that Jackson and Dowling left the Inn every night at six. The Steward went over the set carefully. He noticed a sort of crazy flight of steps, leading out of one of the rooms.

"What's that?" he asked the carpenter, and the man said it was a sort of lumber place, used by tenants for odds and ends.

They went up, and found themselves in a garret, lighted by one pane of glass in the roof. Here was a broken-down old piano with hardly a dozen notes sounding, a mouldy

gladstone bag, two odd men's socks, a pair of trousers, and some ragged copies of Bach's Fugues, in paper wrappers. There was a leak in the roof, and all reeked with damp.

The rubbish was removed, the place was turned out and whitewashed. There were no more disturbances. But a year later, the widow lady, being at a concert with a friend, suddenly gasped and choked, and whispered to the friend:

"That is the awful music I told you about."

The distinguished pianist had just sounded the opening notes of John Sebastian Bach's Fugue in C Major.

Neither the Principal, the Ancients, nor the Steward heard any more of the tenant of 7B Coney Court.