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THE HAUNTING OF ALMA FIELDING

Written by **Kate Summerscales**

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THE HAUNTING OF ALMA FIELDING

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THE HAUNTING OF ALMA FIELDING

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O plunge your hands in water,
Plunge them in up to the wrist;
Stare, stare in the basin
And wonder what you've missed.

The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

W. H. Auden, 'As I Walked Out One Evening' (1940)

Alma Fielding

PROLOGUE

In January 2017 I visited the Society for Psychical Research archive in Cambridge to look up some references to the ghost hunter Nandor Fodor, a Hungarian emigré who had been a pioneer of supernatural study in London between the wars. I wanted to know more about Fodor's investigation of a housewife called Alma Fielding, a poltergeist case from which he deduced, to the horror of his colleagues, that repressed traumatic experiences could generate terrifying physical events.

I had seen several references to Fodor in the catalogue to the SPR archive, but I didn't expect to find anything directly relevant in its files: he had investigated Alma for a rival organisation, the International Institute for Psychical Research, whose papers were said to have been destroyed by German bombs. But when the documents were delivered to the university library's manuscripts room, I discovered that they were Fodor's original International Institute papers. The SPR must have acquired the smaller organisation's archive when it was disbanded in the 1940s. To my delight, one of the files turned out to be Fodor's dossier on Alma, mistakenly catalogued as a holding on 'Mr' Fielding.

The manila folder contained the documents that the Institute had confiscated when it expelled Fodor in the autumn of 1938: transcripts of Alma's seances and of his interviews with her, lab reports, X-rays, copies of her contracts, scribbled notes, sketches, photographs of the damage wrought by her poltergeist in her house and on her body. The pages were dense with facts and figures: measurements, times, dates, weights. This fat folder of evidence seemed a wonderful object: a documentary account of fictional and magical events, a historical record of the imagination. I hoped it would explain the radical link that Fodor had made between suffering and the supernatural.

In the taxi from Cambridge railway station to the library the next day, my driver asked me what I was researching. I told him that I was studying psychical material from the 1930s. Was I an expert? he asked. No, I replied, I was new to it. He told me that, as it happened, psychical research was his speciality. He had read widely in the subject and had become pretty good at the clairvoyant skill of 'remote viewing'. Sometimes he annoyed his girlfriend by calling her at work and telling her what she was doing, or which sandwiches she had chosen for lunch. I asked the driver when this started. He said that his great-grandmother had been a medium. He said that I wouldn't believe the things that he had seen in the spirit world: dragons, monsters – everything that I had read about in stories. We drew up outside the library and he turned in his seat to face me.

'In fact I've got one with me right now,' he smiled, 'hanging round my neck.' It was an amphisbaena, he said, a two-headed snake. According to Greek myth, the amphisbaena is the spawn of blood dripped from the Medusa's head. It feeds on corpses and its two mouths spew poison.

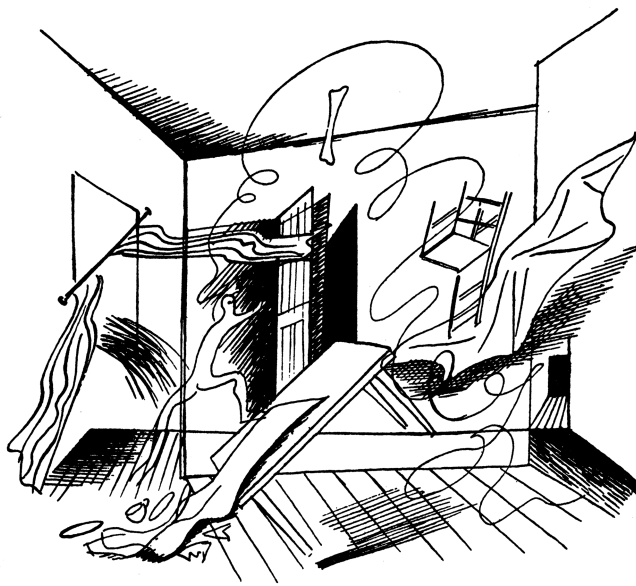
Why's it there? I asked, looking at the cab driver's bare neck and laughing a little uneasily. Protection? 'Yes,' he said. 'Healing.'

Part One

THE GHOST HUNTER

'Nowadays, we find that nearly everything comes from within – from our subconscious self'

Agatha Christie, 'The Red Signal' (1933)



Nandor Fodor

ONE

The crack in the teacup

At his office in South Kensington on Monday 21 February 1938, Nandor Fodor opened a letter from an East End clergyman of his acquaintance. The Reverend Francis Nicolle wanted to alert him to a poltergeist attack in the suburb of Thornton Heath, just south of London, which had been the subject of a report in that weekend's *Sunday Pictorial*.

'I wonder whether you have seen it?' wrote Nicolle. 'Unfortunately the actual address is not given.' The minister thought that the haunting sounded even more remarkable than a similar case in east London that he had helped Fodor to investigate that month.

Fodor, a Jewish-Hungarian journalist, had for four years been chief ghost hunter at the International Institute for Psychical Research. He loved his job, which required him to investigate and verify weird events, but the spiritualist press had recently turned against him. The bestselling weekly *Psychic News* accused him of being cynical about the supernatural and unkind to mediums, charges that were so damaging to his reputation as a psychical researcher – and his future in England – that in January he had sued for

libel. He was now desperate to prove his sincerity and his aptitude: he needed to find a ghost.

Fodor obtained a copy of the latest *Pictorial*. The paper had run the poltergeist story next to a giant cut-out photograph of Adolf Hitler, who was poised to invade Austria, so that the news of the haunting seemed to issue from the Führer's shouting mouth. '"GHOST" WRECKS HOME,' ran the headline, 'FAMILY TERRORISED.'

According to the *Pictorial*'s report, the disturbance emanated from Alma Fielding, a thirty-four-year-old housewife who lived in Thornton Heath, in the borough of Croydon, with her husband, their son and a lodger. A week earlier, on Sunday 13 February, Alma had been seized by a pain in her pelvis while she was visiting friends in the neighbourhood. She hurried home, trembling and burning, and took herself to bed. Having suffered from kidney complaints since she was a girl, she had a stock of antibacterial medicine to fight infection and sedatives to help her sleep. She dosed herself with both. As she shivered and sweated in her bedroom, a strong wind swept across south-east England, driving sheets of rain, sleet and snow through the streets of Croydon at eighty miles an hour.

Alma was laid up for days. In the middle of the week, she was joined in bed by her husband, Leslie, who usually worked as a builder and decorator. His gums were bleeding heavily, his teeth having been pulled so that he could be fitted with dentures. Through Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, reported the *Sunday Pictorial*, Les and Alma lay together, his mouth leaking blood,

her abdomen pulsing with pain, a bright frost lining the trees and walls outside their twin windows. The storms died down, but the air remained wintry and sharp. Alma noticed a peculiar, six-digit handprint on the mirror above the bedroom fireplace. Perhaps her fever or the drugs were inducing hallucinations.

Towards midnight on Friday, Alma and Les were trying to sleep when they heard something shatter nearby. Alma turned on her bedside lamp. She and Les saw the shards of a broken tumbler on the floor and then, suddenly, another glass flew past and splintered against the wall. They waited, terrified. The room fell quiet. 'Put the light out,' said Les. 'Let's see what happens.' When Alma turned off her lamp a dank wind moved through the room, lifting the eiderdown so that it swam up at them and fell over their faces. 'Switch on the light,' said Les. 'Quickly.' Alma tried to turn on the lamp, but nothing happened. Nor did the light come on when Les reached over and pressed the switch himself. Alma shouted for help. Their sixteen-year-old son, Donald, crossed the landing from his bedroom, but as he opened the door he had to duck to dodge a flying pot of face cream. George, the lodger, edged in after him, and was hit by two coins – a shilling and a penny. The pair of them drew back, and Don hurried downstairs to fetch matches. When he returned he struck a match and made his way by its flame to the lamp at his mother's bedside. The bulb had vanished from the socket. It was found, unbroken and still hot to the touch, on a chair on the other side of the room.

Everyone was shaken, but after half an hour things seemed to have calmed down. At about twenty to one Don and George went to their beds. They all eventually fell asleep.

The next morning Alma was feeling well enough to go downstairs, but an egg smashed when she was in the kitchen; a saucer snapped. She didn't know what to do – a ghost hardly seemed a matter for the police – so she placed a call to the offices of the *Sunday Pictorial*. The newspaper was running a series on the supernatural and had invited readers to write in with their experiences.

'Come to my house,' Alma implored the *Pictorial*'s news desk. 'There are things going on here I cannot explain.'

The *Sunday Pic*, as it was known to its readers, despatched two reporters to Thornton Heath.

As Alma opened the front door to the *Pictorial* men that afternoon, they saw an egg fly down the corridor to land a yard from their feet. As she led them to the kitchen, a pink china dog rattled to the floor and a sharp-bladed tin opener cut through the air at head height. In the front parlour, a teacup and saucer lifted out of Alma's hands as she sat with her guests, the saucer spinning and splintering as if shot in mid-air. She screamed as a second saucer exploded in her fingers and sliced into her thumb. While the gash was being bandaged, the reporters heard smashing in the kitchen: a wine glass had apparently escaped a locked cabinet and shattered on the floor. They saw an egg whirl in through the living-room door to crack against the

sideboard. A giant chunk of coal rose from the grate, sailed across the room, inches from the head of one of the reporters, and smacked into the wall. The house seemed to be under siege from itself.

Les, Don and George were at home but, as far as the *Pictorial* men could tell, none of them was responsible for the phenomena: the objects were propelled by an unseen force.

A crowd had gathered in the street outside. Among the bystanders, the reporters found a palm reader who went by the name of Professor Morisone (otherwise Mr Morrison), and invited him in to the house. The clairvoyant advised Alma that she was a very strong 'carrier' of ectoplasm, the floating filmy substance with which some mediums materialised spirits. He said that the tumult in her home was a message of warning, and that her son was in danger.

The *Pictorial* published its piece the next morning, under the slogan: 'This is the most curious front page story we have ever printed.' In an ordinary terrace in Thornton Heath, it declared, 'some malevolent, ghostly force is working miracles. Poltergeist… That's what the scientists call it. The Spiritualists? They say it's all caused by a mischievous earth-bound spirit.'

On an inside page, the paper ran a photograph of Alma, Don and George – 'the occupants of the house of fear' – gazing warily at a large lump of coal.

Fodor was gripped by the *Pictorial*'s story. He hoped that this poltergeist would provide him with the proof

of the supernatural that he needed. It might also help him to develop his more daring ideas about the occult. The word 'poltergeist', from the German for 'noisy spirit', had been popularised in Britain in the 1920s, but no one knew what poltergeists really were: hoaxes by the living; hauntings by the dead; spontaneous discharges of electrical energy. Fodor, having read the work of Sigmund Freud, wondered if they might be kinetic forces unleashed by the unconscious mind. He noticed that the Thornton Heath poltergeist centred on one woman. It had sparked into life in the bedroom, and seemed at first to direct its violence at the men of the house.

Fodor knew that he must act quickly. The International Institute was one of several psychical research bodies in London, and other ghost hunters would be sure to take an interest in this haunting. Poltergeist attacks were in any case usually short-lived, sometimes lasting for only a few days. He composed a letter to the *Sunday Pictorial*'s new editor, the twenty-four-year-old wunderkind Hugh Cudlipp, asking if he could 'come in' on the case. Would Cudlipp be good enough to give him the haunted family's address in Thornton Heath? Reminding Cudlipp that he had already submitted several articles about uncanny events to the *Pictorial*, Fodor promised to report back on anything that he found.

Like everyone in Britain, Fodor was also following the political news with disquiet. The *Pictorial* reported that the prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, had

called an emergency Cabinet meeting to address the threat posed by the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini; and that Adolf Hitler had massed 80,000 troops on the Austrian border, ready to invade. That Sunday, Hitler made a defiant three-hour speech in which he demanded the return of German land surrendered in the Treaty of Versailles.

Britain was braced for war. Twenty-five million gas masks had been manufactured by late February, schools were being commandeered for air-raid training, and trial blackouts were being staged throughout the land. The town of Jarrow in north-eastern England was seized with panic when an oxygen works went up in flames that month, reported the *Pictorial*. As exploding metal canisters shot across the River Tyne, the residents fled their homes in terror, convinced that enemy planes were bombing the munitions factories. 'It was an amazing scene,' said the paper. 'Cripples, frantic women pushing prams, aged people, all scantily dressed, massed in a terrified throng.' Several war veterans collapsed, apparently with symptoms of shell shock.

'Ordinary chaps that I meet everywhere,' says the narrator of George Orwell's *Coming Up For Air*, 'chaps that I run across in pubs, bus drivers, and travelling salesmen for hardware firms, have a feeling that the world's gone wrong. They can feel things cracking and collapsing under their feet.' They have a 'kind of prophetic feeling', he says, 'that war's just around the corner and that war's the end of all things'. For many,

the dread was sharpened with flashbacks – 'mental pictures of the shellbursts and the mud'. If the first world war of the century had been devastating, the next was expected to be apocalyptic.

The ghosts of Britain, meanwhile, were livelier than ever. Almost a thousand people had written to the *Pictorial* in February to describe their encounters with wraiths and revenants, while other papers reported on a spirit vandalising a house in Stornoway, in the Outer Hebrides, and on a white-draped figure seen gliding through the Hawker aircraft factory in Kingston upon Thames. The nation's phantoms were distractions from anxiety, expressions of anxiety, symptoms of a nervous age. Fodor had been in Britain for less than a decade, but as a ghost hunter he had already become intimate with his new country's fantasies and fears.

While Fodor waited he gleaned a few further details about the Thornton Heath poltergeist. The *Daily Mirror*, the *Pictorial*'s weekday sister paper, disclosed that it had sent three men to the Fieldings' house on Sunday: they had seen a book slide from the bookcase when Alma was in the dining room, a glass leap from the table and a mirror drop from the wall. She was frail and hollow-eyed, the reporters observed, and no wonder.

The *Mirror* also reported that Anthony Eden had resigned as foreign secretary of Chamberlain's coalition government, having failed to persuade the prime minister to stand up to Mussolini. When Eden emerged

from 10 Downing Street after their meeting, said the *Mirror,* he looked like a ghost.

On Wednesday, Hugh Cudlipp replied to Fodor with the Fieldings' address. Fodor couldn't make it to Croydon that afternoon, so he despatched his assistant, a young film technician called Laurence Evans, to check out the story. Laurie had been an investigator at the Institute for just three months, but he was keen, enterprising and personable. At only twenty-five, he had already squandered his inheritance in Hollywood and been married twice. He now had a day job as a sound recordist at Twickenham Studios, near London, and lived in Surrey with his girlfriend, a film actress. He was a 'brilliant young inventor', according to Fodor, as well as an enthusiastic ghost hunter. Fodor told Laurie to let him know at once if the Thornton Heath case seemed genuine, so that they could stake a claim before any of the other psychical research organisations in London.

Laurie stayed late at Beverstone Road and reported back to Fodor early the next morning. He had witnessed amazing things, he told him. In the living room, he saw a wine glass jump from Alma Fielding's hand, shattering in mid-air and falling to the wooden floor. A second glass did the same, this time landing on a rug. A third hit the electric light fixture on the ceiling. Alma was shaking violently and her heart was racing, said Laurie. He put his fingers to her wrist and felt her pulse leap. Upstairs, he was shown a wardrobe that the poltergeist had thrown on the sixteen-year-old Don Fielding's bed. Luckily, Don had been sleeping at a neighbour's house

at the time, being already so alarmed by the weird events that he had decided to stay away from home. Laurie noticed a broken white china cat lying between two blue vases on the far side of the boy's room. He was downstairs in the hall a few minutes later when he heard a smash, and turned to see the pieces of a blue vase lying by the grandfather clock at the foot of the stairs. He ran up to Don's room and saw that one of the pair had vanished.

Laurie told Fodor that no one could have smuggled the vase out of the bedroom. Alma had been in the kitchen when it hit the hall floor. He had never known anything like it, he said. 'I unhesitatingly label it as supernormal.'

Fodor couldn't wait to meet Alma. He immediately set out for Thornton Heath himself.