

# A Winged Malevolence

A young poet driven from his accursed lodgings by supernatural scratching sounds, two young barristers found clawed to death, and an anonymous investigation in the *Daily Mail*. **NINA ANTONIA** goes in search of the forgotten feathered fiend of Lincoln's Inn.

Beneath the bustle of city life, London's byways are steeped in secrets and mysteries. The capital's ghosts are particularly well catalogued, but 'The Bird of Lincoln's Inn' has long since fallen from favour despite being one of the strangest cases on record – one involving a haunted poet and a pair of violent, seemingly supernatural avian assaults at the same London address that reportedly left two people dead.

Perhaps the apparent lack of interest in these bizarre events has something to do with the paucity of available information, and the fact that the study of chimerical or folkloric entities – Nessie being the exception – is, generally speaking, a less popular pursuit than regular ghost hunting. The only other vaguely comparable relative of the Lincoln's Inn spook is Francis Bacon's spectral chicken, which is said to haunt Pond Square in Highgate, but bearing neither talons nor malice this avian spectre is far less sinister.

By default, the feathered fiend of Lincoln's Inn is usually referred to as a bird. However, when the *Daily Mail* first reported on the case in 1901, it noted only that it was *bird-like*, on account of the claw marks imprinted in the chalk dust left by the paper's shaken reporters. At least two deaths are directly associated with the entity, namely those of John Radlett and Charles Appleby, who were both young barristers. Furthermore, it was also believed that anyone who dwelt in the accursed chambers was doomed, as proved to be true in the case of the poet Lionel Johnson (pictured above), who first brought the story to the attention of the press.

## THE DARK ANGEL

The exact address where these strange events took place – 8 New Square, Lincoln's Inn – has never previously been disclosed and was only discovered accidentally by the author whilst researching the life and



*Claw marks were left imprinted in the chalk dust left by the paper's shaken reporters*

death of poet Lionel Johnson. Although Johnson may be considered a minor poet, he is of some cultural significance and influenced the work of WB Yeats and changed literary history when he introduced his pal Lord Alfred Douglas to Oscar Wilde. Prone to melancholia and an alcoholic, Johnson was to later regret bringing the two together, possibly because he had himself enjoyed a relationship with Lord Alfred. Rather unkindly, Wilde joked about Johnson's diminutive stature, asking if someone could "hail a passing perambulator" when Lionel needed a cab

home after a particularly boozy night on the town.

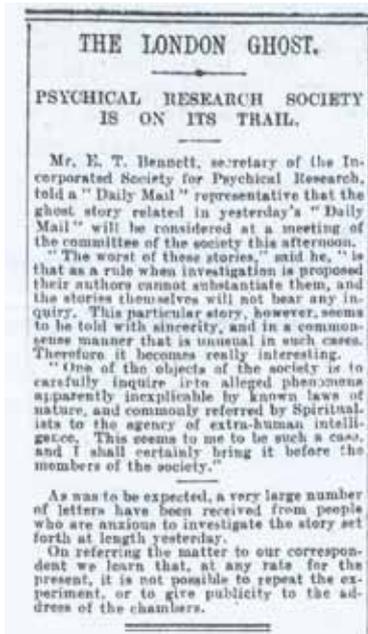
Johnson's biographer, Iain Fletcher, describes the poet during his time lodging at 8 New Square, in 1899, as having "a haunted face". Ironically, six years before moving to Lincoln's Inn, Johnson penned his mostly widely known poem 'The Dark Angel' which contains the following lines:

*Thou art the whisper in the gloom  
The hinting tone, the haunting laugh  
Thou art the adorning of my tomb  
The minstrel of mine epitaph*

Was there an element of precognition in the poet's words? Undoubtedly, Johnson's winged chimera, be it angel, demon or bird, was a harbinger of evil. Certain birds are considered unlucky, and the entity at Lincoln's Inn appears to have alighted direct from the pages of Lewis Spence's classic book *The Encyclopaedia of The Occult*: "And the night was troubled by evil and ominous winds blowing from the Netherworld, heavy with the beating of innumerable wings of the birds of ill-omen presaging woe." Since time immemorial, birds, especially black ones have been seen as death's couriers. As Spence concurs: "The South Sea Islanders bury their dead in coffins shaped like a bird to bear away their spirits, whilst the natives of Borneo represent Tempon-Telon's Ship of the Dead as having the form of a bird. The Indian tribes of North-West America have rattles shaped like ravens... the probable significance is that the raven is to carry the disembodied soul to the region of the Sun." Edgar Allan Poe's poetic tale of the "Ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering from the nightly shore" was well known by the time the *Daily Mail* first broke the story in 1901, but by 1913 the winged entity of Lincoln's Inn wasn't just death's emissary but death itself.

In February of that year, Charles Appleby was found dead with large claw marks on





ABOVE LEFT: The *Daily Mail* reported that the Society for Psychical Research was to 'consider' the case, although no investigation appears to have taken place.

ABOVE RIGHT: Charles Dickens once noted the neighbourhood's peculiar fogginess. BELOW: Ralph Blumenfeld, author of the anonymous *Daily Mail* article of 1901.

his arms and neck, the door and windows apparently locked from the inside. Witnesses said that they had seen "a man fighting a shadowy bird-like creature". Both the victim and the winged assailant were described as being of about the same height. Although there were no eyewitnesses in the second attack, John Radlett's equally sorry demise appears to have been largely identical to that of Appleby, except for the scratch marks found upon the door. That both of the men were barristers has more to do with the location than the assailant, Lincoln's Inn having long been popular with those working in the legal profession.

The rooms were in a particularly desirable spot, yet the high turnover of lodgers suggests that something was not quite right. Charles Dickens, who had once worked there in a solicitor's office, commented upon a peculiar fogginess about the area, and his *Bleak House* features a sinister solicitor with a Lincoln's Inn practice. Rumours have long persisted that the square of Lincoln's Inn Fields was laid out by Inigo Jones to be exactly the size of the base of the Great Pyramid (although Walter Thornbury, in his *Old and New London*, debunked the idea in 1878, pointing out that "the fanciful idea is untrue, the Fields measuring 821 feet by 625, while the Great Pyramid covers a space of 764 feet square". Noble blood, too, had been spilled on Lincoln's Inns Fields, Lord Anthony Babington having been hung, drawn and quartered on its leafy bosom in 1586; he was said to have been still conscious while eviscerated. A century later, William, Lord Russell went to the chopping block there, accused of treason, despite cries for clemency. Russell's executioner, the notoriously

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cack-handed Jack Ketch, would later apologise for his clumsiness in carrying out the sentence. Thus Lincoln's Inn was an ideal setting for a winged and vengeful elemental to take roost.

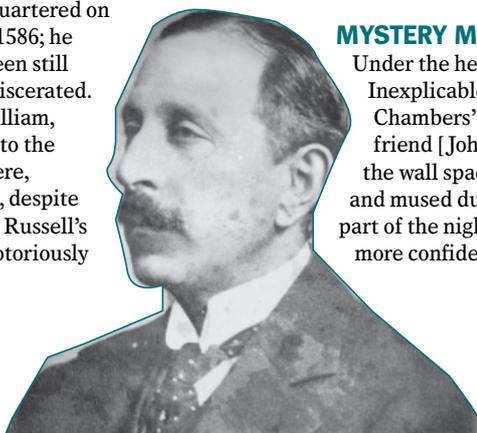
Given his keen interest in history and solitary nature, the neighbourhood's antiquity and privacy would have suited the increasingly withdrawn Lionel Johnson. As he would later confide, in anonymity, to the *Daily Mail*, the surprisingly low rent also appealed, securing him comfortable chambers on the third floor, which were accessible by a separate staircase and sealed off from the rest of the house by a solid door. At night, the building was empty save for a caretaker, who had a basement room. It was not until Lionel had fled the property, however, and the journalists had validated his bizarre claims, that the story broke on 16 May 1901.

### MYSTERY MAN OF LETTERS

Under the headline "A London Ghost: Inexplicable Happenings In Old Chambers", the *Mail* reported: "My friend [Johnson] filled up most of the wall space with books; read, wrote and mused during most of the day and part of the night, and admitted in his more confidential moments that 'things

happened'. He did not specify exactly what occurred, but after a time he became nervous and fidgety. Last month he left the chambers rather suddenly, declaring 'He could stand it no longer'. He cleared away all his belongings and once more the rooms were empty." The article also disclosed that: "There had been at least seven or eight tenants in two years. They had one and all left in a hurry, and the agents were anxious to let at almost any rent."

Throughout the article, Johnson is identified only as a 'man of letters'. However, the *Daily Mail* reporters didn't provide their names either, and thus "one of the major mysteries of the ghost-hunters world" becomes stranger still. Further details emerged in 1960, when East Anglian bird enthusiast, ghost hunter and author James Wentworth Day reported on the story in *The Age*. He seems to have been the first to mention the deaths of Radlett (no date given) and Appleby, who he suggests perished on 25 February 1913. In 1966, a writer called Tony Parker, revived and re-investigated the story, under the title "The Bird of Lincoln's Inn". Parker's article appeared in the popular anthology *50 Great Ghost Stories*, edited by John Canning and published by Odhams. It was Parker who revealed that the main author of the anonymous *Daily Mail* piece was the paper's very own news editor, Ralph D Blumenfeld. His accomplice was Max Pemberton, then editor of *Cassell's Magazine* and later a director of Northcliffe newspapers, knighted in 1928. Both were eminent journalists of good character who had befriended Lionel Johnson. However, the fact that the story went out with no known author ensured its falling into obscurity. As Tony Parker was to note: "When Blumenfeld finally did admit authorship, well over 20 years afterwards, he was adamant that the story as he had written it was true in every





ABOVE: 8 New Square as it appears today. BELOW: In his account of the story in the 1966 book *50 Great Ghosts*, Tony Parker is told that the Lincoln's Inn haunted house was long ago pulled down.

detail. 'I've heard a lot of ghost stories in my life... and I've sent a lot of reporters out on assignments to haunted houses. I don't believe in ghosts one way or the other-but I do know that thing happened. We both heard what we heard, felt what we felt, and saw what we saw, but don't ask for an explanation.' Parker didn't ask, and in his telling of the story he simply yet eloquently relayed the facts as given in the *Mail* report.

### THE HAUNTED CHAMBERS

Except for two chairs and a table, the apartment was completely empty when Blumenfeld and Pemberton arrived shortly before midnight on Saturday, 11 May 1901. After locking the front door behind them, the two men carried out a thorough search of the premises. "There was absolutely no possibility of anyone being hidden anywhere in the rooms. There were no cupboards, no recesses, no dark corners, and no sliding panels. Even a beetle could not have escaped unobserved. The walls were entirely naked. There were no blinds or curtains." Having scattered chalk dust on the floors, the two men returned to the main room and seated themselves at the table. "We were both very wide-awake, entirely calm, self-possessed and sober, expectant and receptive but in no way excited or nervous." The room seemed a little brighter than it might usually have done, as is often the case in empty apartments. For close on an hour nothing untoward occurred until the handle of the door closest to them turned, as if someone or something was trying the latch. Ten minutes later, the door to their left swung wide open, as did the original door. Finding no resistance, the reporters closed the doors tight and resumed their watch but feeling less easy, the atmosphere having become tense. Blumenfeld began noting the times of the occurrences, which took place with increasing rapidity: "At 1.40 both

doors closed simultaneously of their own accord, swinging slowly and gently to about eight inches of the lock, when they slammed with a slight jar; and both latches clicked loudly." No matter how many times the men got up to close them, the doors would swing open once again, of their own accord. This continued for a further two hours. Whatever the presence was, it was clearly unabashed by company. At a quarter to three, the two reporters could stand it no longer, but it wasn't until they made ready to leave the apartment that they discovered claw marks in the chalk dust: "There were three toes and a short spur behind. The footprints converged diagonally towards the doors of the big room and each one was clearly and sharply defined. This broke up our sitting." Who knows what perils they might have faced had they stayed longer?

Upon publication in the *Daily Mail*, the story raised considerable interest, garnering numerous enquiries and letters. The public wished to know the address but, for legal reasons, as the paper noted in a follow-up feature, it was not given. Perhaps, if the address had been made public knowledge rather than merely being alluded to when the paper ran the article, then Appleby and Radlett might have been spared their terrible fates.

However, the most significant response came from the Society for Psychical Research. The society's secretary, Mr ET Bennett, contacted the paper, stating: "One of the objects of the society is to carefully enquire into the alleged phenomena apparently inexplicable by known laws of nature and commonly referred by

Spiritualists to the agency of extra-human intelligence. This seems to me to be such a case and I shall certainly bring it before the members of the society." Unfortunately, it seems the SPR failed to follow through, and as Tony Parker notes in his 1966 recap this means there is a lack of further information regarding the case. However, though a writer of some repute, Parker failed to realise that that "The man of letters" referred to in the *Mail* feature was in fact Lionel Johnson. Johnson passed away on 4 October 1902, at the age of 35, succumbing to years of poor health. In some accounts, he is said to have died a drunkard's death after falling from a Fleet Street barstool; other sources note that he suffered a stroke and collapsed on the pavement outside.

Sadly, then, the next reference to the avian horror was to be found in Johnson's obituary, with the *Daily Mail* noting the deleterious effect of the accursed rooms upon all who stayed in them. Once again, the newspaper implored the SPR to act, but other than a passing mention in 1906, the story slipped from view until Wentworth Day and Tony Parker revived it in the 1960s.

There's a further mystery, though. According to Tony Parker, when Ralph Blumenfeld eventually confessed to being the author of the 1901 *Daily Mail* report, some 20 years after the event, he was still remarkably cagey concerning the location of the haunted rooms, being prepared to say that it was actually in Lincoln's Inn. But he could or would give no more details than that: and anyway, he said, it would be impossible to find as the house had been pulled down after the First World War and another building erected on its site". Perhaps Blumenfeld was still trying to protect the identity and reputation of his old friend Lionel Johnson, and Parker didn't catch on. Blumenfeld reassured him that there had been no hauntings in the new building.

But the fact is that 8 New Square still stands, and while no further sightings of the winged and clawed entity have been reported, perhaps its evil presence lingers still. Whatever the truth, the story of the 'Bird of Lincoln's Inn' carries a spectral resonance that appealed to none other than the Reverend of the Supernatural, Montague Summers (see FT349:42-46). In his volume of memoirs, *The Galant Show*, Summers recalled the case, being particularly sympathetic to Lionel Johnson... whose frail spectre he believed now haunted the area.

● **NINA ANTONIA** is a music journalist who has written for *Mojo*, *Uncut* and *Classic Rock*. Her first book *Johnny Thunders: In Cold Blood* (1987) is currently being adapted as a film directed by Jonas Akerlund. Her first love was always the supernatural, and her uncanny novel *The Greenwood Faun*, featuring Lionel Johnson, is due for publication this Autumn.

