

Rhoda Broughton's "The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth"

This tale was first published in 1868, then republished in a Christmas collection in 1873.

For the possibility that Broughton's tales was based on a real haunting which occurred in London, and which may have been the basis for M. R. James' ghostly tale "A School Story," see [Rosemary Pardoe's essay "I've Seen It."](#)

For extexts of this work and other Broughton materials online, see The Literary Gothic's [Rhoda Broughton page](#).

Sources used in this StudyGuide:

"OED" = *Oxford English Dictionary*

FIRST LETTER:

MRS DE WYNT TO MRS MONTRESOR.

18, Eccleston Square, May 5th

Orestes and Pylades: from classical Greek mythology. Orestes was the son of the Greek king Agamemnon and his wife Clytemnestra. When Agamemnon returned from the Trojan war, Clytemnestra killed him. Orestes fled to his uncle's house, where he became fast friends with his cousin Pylades, who later helped him avenge his father's death. The two remained friends for life.

Julie and Claire: a reference to the deep friendship of two cousins in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Heloise* (1761), one of the more important novels of the Eighteenth Century.

ventre à terre: although this French phrase translates literally as "stomach to the ground" (i.e., lying prone on the ground), it usually refers, in reference to older (and not entirely accurate) paintings, to a horse's posture as it is portrayed when galloping at full speed (when the legs are not under the horse, but in front of and behind it). Hence it came to mean something like "at full speed," or "full throttle". (OED) Clearly Mrs De Wynt is, with characteristic facetiousness, portraying her house-hunting efforts on behalf of her friend as diligent on a mythic scale.

âme damnée: French for "damned soul;" it refers to a "devoted adherent" or a flunky. (OED) Again, this choice of terms illustrates Mrs De Wynt's whimsical character.

portièrre: again French, referring to a curtain or other hanging over a doorway. (OED)

meed: measure

Apollo Belvedere: marble statue of the Greek god Apollo, one of the most famous representations of Apollo. Named for the Vatican courtyard in which the statue (a Roman copy of a Greek original) was placed after its discovery in the C15.

Miss Biffin: Sarah Biffin (1784-1850), British painter, born without limbs, who painted with her mouth. She painted miniatures, and was patronized by King George III and Queen Victoria among other notables. Biffin is mentioned in several of Dickens' works as well as in other C19 literary texts.
[[Portrait.](#)] [[Self-Portrait.](#)]

demi-monde: "the class of women of doubtful reputation and social standing, upon the outskirts of 'society'" (OED)

Indian officer: not a person from India but a British military officer who served in India, which at the time was the pre-eminent colony of the British Empire.

St Brigitta: there are 2 Sts Bridget, one associated w/ Ireland, the other w/ Sweden
St Gengulpha: perhaps a reference to St. Genulfus, 3rd century French saint
St. Catherine of Siena: 14th century Italian saint

SECOND LETTER

MRS MONTRESOR TO MRS DE WYNT.

32,—Street, May Fair, May 14th.

Notice the absence of a street name. "Mayfair" was and is a real district in London – a rather snooty one, right next to Buckingham Palace – so Broughton is being careful not to offend anyone.

my first ride in the Row this morning: a reference to the fashionable and upscale Saville Row, an exclusive shopping street in the Mayfair district.

brougham: "A one-horse closed carriage, with two or four wheels, for two or four persons" (OED). Not quite as large as (or with as many windows as) a coach, broughams could still be substantial vehicles, especially in their more common 4-wheeled version. They were popular among both aristocrats and the upper middle class. When Mrs Montresor says "one young woman alone in a brougham, or with only a dog beside her, does not look good," she's referring to the fact an unaccompanied young woman out riding around town would not look "proper;" young women were expected, when they were out and about, to have a companion of some sort.

hussars: lightly armed cavalry regiments, originally Hungarian but widely used in European armies by the 19th century. That Ralph Gordon is a soldier – a man of discipline and courage – is important to Broughton's purpose here.

the Calais boat: passenger ship from the French port of Calais.

the wind that behaved so violently to the corners of Job's house was a mere zephyr: a reference to Job 1:18-19 "While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" A *zephyr* is a mild breeze; from Zephyrus, Greek god of the west wind.

require more daring perseverance than ever Wolfe displayed, with his paltry heights of Abraham: In 1759 General James Wolfe led the British attack on the heights of Abraham, a plain outside of Quebec. This successful attack against the French helped pave the way for British domination of Canada.

chalk-cliffs of Albion: a reference to the white chalk cliffs at Dover, on the southeast coast of England. "Albion" is an old poetic name for England, one that specifically refers to the white cliffs of Dover (compare to "albino").

billet: a short, informal letter

...*Madame de Staël* have sighed for Paris from among the shades of *Coppet*. de Staël (1766-1817) was the foremost French woman of letters of her time. Banished from France by Napoleon, she took up residence in the Swiss city of Coppet, by Lake Geneva.

THIRD LETTER

MRS MONTRESOR TO MRS DE WYNT.
32, —Street, May Fair, May 27th.

bodiless dead: the phrase is from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous Gothic poem "Christabel": "Alas! what ails poor Geraldine? / Why stares she with unsettled eye? / Can she the bodiless dead espy?" (Part One: 207-209). The poem was written in 1797 but not published until 1816.

FOURTH LETTER

MRS DE WYNT TO MRS MONTRESOR.
The Lord Warden, Dover, May 28th.

Note the change of address, "The Lord Warden" being the hotel in which Mrs DeWynt and her ill son are staying in Dover. The following letter also marks a change of address as the Montresor family abandons the haunted house.

Cock Lane Ghost: a famous ghost hoax perpetrated in London in 1762.

be on wires: to be "on pins and needles," i.e., in a state of anxious anticipation

Observe that the number of literary and cultural allusions in the letters has dropped dramatically, indicating a much more serious tone as the events the letters recount become more and more disturbing.

FIFTH LETTER

MRS MONTRESOR TO MRS DE WYNT.
No. 5, Bolton Street, Piccadilly, June 12th.

with the gas lit: Ralph Gordon's bravado is based, in part, on a fairly new technology. Although gas had been used in public facilities (such as theaters) in London since 1800 and streets began to be lit with gas in 1807, it wasn't until the 1860s that gas was commonly found in houses; the fact the haunted house was in the upscale Mayfair district means it might have had gas installed sooner, although much of the resistance to the residential use of gas lighting had more to do with safety concerns than money. The lighting of Parliament buildings in 1859 helped ease that concern significantly.

Seven white ghostisses / Sitting on seven white postisses: unknown source, though it seems to be from a child's rhyme, which would be appropriate given Ralph Gordon's disdainful attitude toward the mysterious thing in the bedroom.

with the old gentleman at their head: the "old gentleman" is of course the devil – another example of Ralph Gordon's bravado.

'Fare thee well, and if for ever / Then for ever, fare thee well': slightly misquoted from Lord Byron's "Fare Thee Well" (1816), which runs "Fare thee well! and if for ever, / *Still* for ever, fare thee well" (1-2). Byron wrote this poem shortly after separating from his wife. Broughton's substitution of "Then" for "Still" may well be intentional, given what happens to Ralph.

Final Considerations:

Broughton may of course simply be writing a story that attempts to capitalize on the popularity of a "real-life" haunting (see the Rosemary Pardoe essay cited at the beginning of this StudyGuide); she'd be neither the first nor last writer to be motivated by commercial considerations.

But there may be more to this story than mere commercialism. Look closely at the discussion of the house in the first couple of letters, taking careful note of the language used by Mrs. Montresor and Mrs. De Wynt. This language points in the direction of widespread Victorian assumptions about the role of women, their capabilities and limits – what the Victorians widely referred to as "The Woman Question." Then consider the final sentence of the story, a sentence that some readers of the story regard as a spoiler, a trite claim that carries no persuasive weight and detracts from whatever suspense or horror the story generates. Maybe that final declaration alludes to more than the possible "real-life" haunting that may lie behind this tale – maybe it concerns the horror hidden beneath those assumptions about what should constitute a Victorian woman's "Heaven."

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