Copyright, 1913, by Continental Newspaper Syndicate.

ALONZO GOES BACK STAGE

By Helen Green Van Campen

All Rights Reserved by the Author.

"Alonzo yelled and streaked across the stage."

MARTHA had to break a dinner engagement when 16-year-old Cousin Alonzo, with his frayed "telescope" and an umbrella that would not roll up, followed the hallboy to the door of her apartment.

"Ma said I could stay a week," said Alonzo. "Is there goin' to be a parade? There's awful crowds in all the streets."

"Why, you're in New York now, child—get next to yourself!" cried Martha. "A week? Well, you can't go around in that comedy make-up. I'll have to buy you a suit. Dear me, I wish she'd written. But people in the country think you haven't a thing to do, of course. Sit down, Lonny, and I'll be back soon."

To her maid Martha said:

"Put all the cigarettes and bottles out of sight. He'd go home and tattle on me to the whole State of New Hampshire. All the Gliddens are gabby."

Alonzo had to sleep on the couch and dress in the bathroom, and as the head of his bed was under the telephone Martha had to privately warn her friends not to ask questions requiring an answer that might make Alonzo credit all he saw in the Sunday supplement about high life in the city. The first evening she dined with Alonzo, and later left him to amuse himself, which he did by taking the gas range apart, being of a mechanical bent. But he could not get it together again, and escaping gas had nearly ended him when a man with a good nose broke in the door.

"Well, you'll have to go to the theatre with me to-night, for the insurance people'd never pay a cent under the circumstances if you set the place afire," sighed Martha. "Did your suit come?"

"No; but do lemme go, Marthy," he pleaded.

"Then listen to me, Lonny. You must be as still as ever was and not bother. A person can't be annoyed when they're working or your mind gets distracted. See?"

Alonzo displayed a comforting docility. Inwardly he was flaming with excitement. He had seen "Uncle Tom's Cabin" at the Gliddenville Saturday evening "pops" (admission ten cents), and a subdued version of "Three Weeks" (played without tiger skins by a stock company that had to catch an early train), and at the thought of going behind the scenes and mingling with actors and actresses he felt ineffable joy.

They went in a taxicab, Alonzo remaining in a standing position for the journey to watch the meter operate, and without incident other than a few words with the chauffeur Martha led her charge through the stage door.

"Now I've got to dress, and don't you move one inch from that spot. Understand, I mean it," said she.

Her manner was impressive, and Alonzo blithely promised. She left him in a lonely place where a sign announced:

"Electric switchboard. Keep out. This means you."

The sign was disconcerting. Alonzo was as much a "you" as any one else. He wondered if Martha had not overlooked that warning. Straight ahead of him was a prettily furnished room. There was a telephone, and three books grouped in careless profusion on a small table, a sofa with a very fat pillow, and a piano. A lady in a gown so low that Alonzo blushed sat before the piano playing and singing a "rag" that he enjoyed.

Considering the sign and that there was only the lyrical lady in the spacious parlor he decided that the sensible thing was to go and sit on the sofa, where he could rest himself and be out of the way. So with his gaze straight ahead—Martha had said "don't rubber at people"—he went to the sofa and sat down.

A stout gentleman in shirt sleeves, with a hard, mean face, began to menace Alonzo with his fist. He said in a sibilant voice:

"Get off that stage or I'll bust you in the eye! You—get off there, you rummy!"

Alonzo arose and fled. Yet he had done nothing to hurt the singing lady's feelings. But his feelings were hurt. He could see the fat man on the other side of the parlor talking and pointing. Brute!

Alonzo noted some interesting switches and plugs in the board behind his seat. He turned one switch, and made the parlor dark. Then he could not find the switch and his next sensation was of a large foot sunk deep in his yielding stomach, and there was light again. A thin, sour-looking man owned the foot, with which he massaged Alonzo thoroughly.

"Who let you in here?" he snarled when he had yanked Alonzo far from the switchboard.

But instead of replying Alonzo struggled up and hit him in the stomach, and he did not appear to like the sensation any better than Alonzo had. The electrician might have thrown Alonzo's limp corpse into the alley if a lady in pink and spangles had not rushed to them, exclaiming that Alonzo was Mlle. Violette's cousin from New England, who was just a poor fool, and mademoiselle couldn't come out because she was only half made up, but for goodness sake, spare him!

The pink-spangled lady told Alonzo to hep himself to where he was, as there were people hired to furnish the comedy and they would do it all. She departed.

Very soon a delicious little girl in fluffy pale-yellow skirts and a big yellow hair-bow, with beautiful ringlets and yellow legs, stood beside Alonzo. She had the reddest cheeks and the largest black eyes. His heart bled for the little thing, for he knew instantly that she was one of the unfortunate stage children one reads of. So he said kindly:

"Hello, dear. What's your name?"

"None of that or I'll cave in some of your slats, you fresh hick!" she retorted fiercely, and she bounced away from him, out before a curtain that had a street, a red brick hotel and three carriages on one side and nothing on the other. He heard clapping, so he looked beyond the curtain, and there were a couple of million people, and a man with a baton seated a little above the million was motioning to Alonzo and saying:

"Back! Back! Back!"

Alonzo got back. They were a touchy crowd. The pink-spangled lady returned.

"They're awful cold," she said sadly. "They got the rottenest gallery here of any house on the big time. I always hope no agent comes in to look me over, for your act's bound to seem deader when they won't warm up. I could have went on the S. C. time, but I loathe that long jump to the Coast, and losing a half week—Denver to California besides, you know. Performers that top bills in other houses are lucky to be on third here."

Alonzo meditated. What was she talking about, anyway?

While the unfriendly little girl was singing and dancing before the curtain several men placed nine stools in a row, and Alonzo laughed with pleasure when nine dear little monkeys in red jackets and trousers and gold caps gamboled forth and hoisted themselves upon the stools. If he could only get one of them to hold! The pink-spangled lady, he discovered, was Mabel Marmosette, with her wonderful European animals, although she had confided to him that she was from Yellow Fever, Tenn.

One monkey kept eying Alonzo when Miss Marmosette was on the stage with them and the curtain had ascended. The monkeys showed many clever tricks, and the one that continued to look at Alonzo was the most talented. His name was Bijou. Miss Marmosette informed the audience that Bijou, with their kind attention, would endeavor to entertain them. She said he was a somewhat different monkey.

A man in a velvet suit—Mr. Marmosette—carried a steel apparatus to the center of the stage. Bijou was to perform acrobatic feats. Just as Bijou started Alonzo recollected a pear he had found in Martha's icebox. He withdrew it from his pocket, taking a large bite. Bijou emitted a terrifying screech. Leaping from his perch to Alonzo he snatched the pear. Alonzo yelled and streaked across the stage, pursued by Bijou, eager for more pears. Everybody cuffed and pulled at Alonzo, and she who beset him most viciously was a tall woman with golden hair and white silk tights which showed when her bathrobe flapped open.

"Take this key and get into my dressing-room—number three—before Mr. Levey gets to you," she said tensely.

It was Martha, in such a rig and such hair! Her hair was quite black at home. Rough hands threw Alonzo at number five, but a lady within, even less dressed than Martha, protested that she couldn't change with him there. So Alonzo emerged gladly, and when he was calmer he stepped cautiously in the darkness around the back drop, to where he could see the stage. Martha and two gentlemen in white silk tights were presenting what the programme called a "Sensational Roman Ladder and Iron Jaw Act," and Martha—he stared at her entranced—tripped up and down, carrying a gentleman poised on his left leg on each of her shoulders. The right legs of her burdens were gracefully extended. Then the orchestra played a galop. Martha put something between her teeth, the gentlemen circled their middles with stout bands, and suddenly Martha ran about, the gentlemen stretched taut and bumping each other as they depended from her "iron jaw." She dropped them and shouted "Hoop-la!" triumphantly. The act was over.

Alonzo retreated and sat on a lion used by the Funny Fields Family in their turn. Martha located him. She wore a spotted and smudged blue kimono and her face was covered with grease. Her hair was black again.

"What've I done now?" he asked pathetically.

"I've lost my diamonds, Lonny! Quick! You skate to a phone and tell Central to give you the Forty-seventh street station house, or Thirtieth street, and to send a de—eh?"

"But I can't phone. I dunno how!" said Alonzo shrilly. "Where'd you lose 'em?"

"On the way to the stage—or the cab. Oh, they were in a pink satin bag that looks like a sachet, but it's padded and chamois lined!"

"Like this looks?" Alonzo held out a pink satin bag. "I got this on your table, where the mirror is, 'cause I wanted a souvenir to give ma."

Martha tore it from him. Then she gasped:

"You go stand in the street till I come, d'you hear? And if you speak, if you s'much as breathe, I—I—d'you hear me?"

"Aw, darn New York!" cried Alonzo.

EXPERIENCES IN HAUNTED HOUSES

BY ELLIOTT O'DONNELL

NOT so very long ago the mere mention of the word "ghosts" excited general ridicule; today it is otherwise. The numerous testimonies of wholly reliable people to the effect that they had seen or heard phenomena unaccountable by natural causes at length led to an earnest and widespread desire to take the matter up and make a systematic investigation.

Societies devoted to psychical research sprang up in various parts of the world, and, although no very "showy" work has been accomplished, a vast amount of evidence has been collected, which goes far to proving the actual existence of haunted houses and the occurrence of supernatural (styled by some "superphysical") manifestations.

IT is not, however, of the doings of research societies I am going to write, but of my own experiences. The publication of my book, "Some Haunted Houses of England and Wales," by Mr. Eveleigh Nash, some years ago led to a large number of people writing to me to know if I would investigate inexplicable happenings at their houses, and the work so interested me that I eventually set aside for it a certain portion of each year.

One of my most exciting recent experiences was at a house in a Southern watering-place, owned by an old schoolfellow of mine, whom I will call Dr. B———. At his earnest request I spent Twelfth Night with him.

"I won't tell you what form the hauntings take," he said. "I want you to find out for yourself, and then we will compare notes."

The house was the last one in a fine old crescent, that in all probability had been erected about the beginning of the nineteenth century. It had the deep and rather gloomy basements, long passages, and narrow staircases characteristic of that period. In the daytime it looked cheery enough, but directly the sun set and the evening shadows made their appearance it underwent an unpleasant metamorphosis. There is a peculiar something in the atmosphere of a haunted house that sooner or later betrays itself to me; in this instance it was most pronounced.

I AT once set to work to locate it, and at length arrived at the conclusion that it was most in evidence on the top landing, back staircases, and in the basements, which spots I resolved would constitute my nocturnal beat. As arranged, directly the household had retired to bed I crept out of my room, and, stealing softly across the thickly carpeted floor, took up my position at the top of the stairs leading to the basement.

Hour after hour passed in perfect silence without anything happening, and I had almost begun to despair of witnessing any phenomena, when a sudden noise below set my heart violently throbbing. It was the sound of some one scraping—scrape, scrape, scrape—on a hard, metallic surface. Impelled by a fascination I could not resist, I crept gently down the wooden stairs, and, aiming for the direction of the noise, perceived a bluish white light proceeding from a half-open door.

Cautiously approaching on tip-toe, I peered in. Opposite me, eagerly engaged in examining the contents of an iron box, was an old woman. She was kneeling down by the side of a deep hole, and the light from the candle she had set beside her, falling on her face, revealed a countenance which for sheer devilry would have been difficult to match.

I could not see what was in the box, but from the clinking sound she made as she passed her fingers through its contents I judged it was full of coins. After amusing herself in this way for some seconds she carefully closed the lid, placed the box in the hole, covered the latter with a flagstone and cemented the crevices.

THAT done, she gave a low chuckle of satisfaction, and, picking up the candle, advanced to where I was standing. In mortal agony lest she should perceive me, I shrank back. Out she came—out into the black, narrow passage, and, gliding past me, her pale, sinister eyes fixed smilingly at the gloom ahead of her, ascended the staircase. At the top she paused; there was the sound of a violent scuffle, a chorus of awful, blood-curdling screams, the rush of several heavy bodies through the air, a couple of terrific thuds at my feet—and all was still.

That was enough for one night's vigil. I lost no time in getting to my room, where I remained with the lights "full on" till morning. My doctor friend was greatly interested when I related to him what had occurred.

"You must be far more clairvoyant than any of us," he said. "We have never seen anything, only heard such noises as you have described—scraping and screaming. I will have the cellar excavated at once."

He did so in my presence, and under one of the flagstones we discovered an iron box. Imagine our astonishment when, on opening it, we saw fifty golden sovereigns and two sets of false teeth!

AT my suggestion he buried the teeth in a churchyard and gave the sovereigns to a local charity. From that time the hauntings ceased. A year or so later he wrote to me, saying: "After endless inquiries I have at last ascertained that this house was once occupied by two old ladies, reputed to be misers. They were frequently heard quarreling, and were found one day at the foot of the kitchen staircase with their necks broken."

I underwent rather a different experience to this in a house in one of the London suburbs. Hearing that the place was supposed to be haunted, I pretended I wanted to look over it with the idea of renting it, and with this plea obtained the keys from the agent. I entered the premises after sunset, and, armed only with a candle, was proceeding to make an examination of the place when an icy current of air blew out the light, and I was left hopelessly stranded in the dark—in the intense dark, for the sky was heavily clouded, and there were signs neither of moon nor stars. To add to my predicament, I could not find my match box.

Coming to the conclusion that the best thing I could do was to remain where I was, I flopped on the floor, and had just succeeded in making myself tolerably comfortable when the sound of some one moving about overhead sent the blood to my heart. Who on earth—what on earth could it be? What but a ghost? For assuredly nothing else would be in such a house at such an hour. The sounds came nearer and nearer, over the landing, down the stairs, and—horror of horrors—into the room toward me.

Nearer, nearer, nearer! At last, unable to bear the suspense any longer, the hair on my head literally standing on end, I jumped up, and, in a voice quivering with emotion, asked, in Heaven's name, who it was and what it wanted. For some seconds there was an awful pause, and then a voice, equally weak and frightened, faltered out, "That is just what I was going to ask you!"

WE were both so relieved we burst out laughing. The owner of the voice was another ghost hunter, who, oddly enough, had singled out that house and night for his investigations. On hearing me move about downstairs, he had made sure it was some kind of phantasm, and had just managed to screw up sufficient courage to go and look. We spent the rest of the night in each other's company, but, beyond the sound of one or two rats, there were no other manifestations. So much for the humorous side of psychical research work.

Now for the tragic. I was looking over a house one day with the occupier, who had only just commenced his tenancy.

"I wish you would tell me whether you have any peculiar sensations when you enter this room," he said, ushering me into a large bedroom on the first floor.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "What's that?"

"What?" my friend asked.

"Why, that thing suspended to the rafter over your bed!"

"There's nothing there," he said, his cheeks ashy pale. "What do you see?"

"A skeleton!" I gasped. "A skeleton swaying to and fro!"

And, unable to bear the sight of it any longer, I beat a precipitate retreat.

"It's very odd," my friend observed, a few minutes later, as we helped ourselves to brandy. "I can never see anything there, though I frequently have the sensation of being strangled—of feeling something tight round my throat. Do you think some one hanged himself there?"

I nodded.

Exactly a week afterward I received a black-edged envelope from my friend's brother.

"Isn't it dreadful!" the contents ran. "Charles (that was my friend's name) was found this morning quite dead, hanging by a cord to the beam at the foot of his bed!"

The house is now vacant. Too eerie a home for me!

©Maryland State Archives, msa_sc4150_1_156-0737