

The old family home's Ghost Stories
John Syme's recollections of Claremont House in the 1920s
(Extracts from his autobiography)

The old family homeⁱ was situated some distance from the Main Road in very large and beautiful grounds. It was named Claremont House. It was a very large, single-storey house of old-fashioned construction with thick walls built of mostly soft brick and under a thatch roof. Most of the rooms were very large and spacious. The drawing room, in particular, was immense. It had two bow windows and at the further end opened into a glass conservatory well stocked with plants. At night, the room could feel a bit eerie if you were alone in it. The piano stood in the far corner. If you sat at it playing, with your back to the room, after a little while you would feel some sort of presence and the hairs on the back of your neck would be somehow affected. But if you looked round, there was nothing to see. Nevertheless, it wouldn't be long before you closed the piano and got out!

I don't remember the history of this grand old house. But there was a history.ⁱⁱ Several stories were told of strange happenings, both in the house and in the grounds at night. One was that some visitors from next door had paid a visit one evening. On their return through the grounds accompanied by their friends, they took a short cut by way of a wicket gate separating the two properties. On approaching the



gate, one of the ladies drew back to allow, as she thought, some other lady from the other side to come through first. But when she looked round to see who it could be, she was badly disturbed to see that the lady had completely vanished. Her friends immediately urged her not to worry as she had only seen "The Grey Lady", a phantom quite well known about the grounds. For my part, I never saw The Grey Lady.

The drawing room at Claremont House

There were other weird things about the house. A tremendous crashing in the night took place occasionally when all was quite quiet. It only happened rather seldom. It sounded for all the world like a person carrying a load of plates and glasses, cups and saucers and tripping over something and the whole lot crashing to the floor. The noise would be heard by not just one person but almost everyone in the house. The servants would be seen peeping out of their doors and others did the same, looking about to see what had happened. And yet there was nothing amiss.

Another strange thing was the behaviour of Brenda's pet dog. Brenda was Nesta's sister, and the elder daughter of Frank and Ella Molteno. The dog was a sort of wire-haired terrier. Brenda was very fond of it, and he of his mistress. Brenda had a room on the right-hand side of a long passage near the entrance hall. The strange thing was that it was difficult to induce the dog to enter the room. If he did, however, he would walk slowly as if on tip toe and with his hair all up. And when he got out of the room, he would dash outside screaming all over the grounds. After a short time, he would calm down and be quite normal again. The reason for this behavior was never discovered.



Frank Molteno with a grandchild, probably at Claremont House, pre-1926

sounds like the crashing of plates. This made me interested to find out the reason. I went up into the attic with torches and searched the whole place. The rough pole timbers supporting the roof were very old and on close examination I found that movement had taken place. What had happened was this. When the weather changed, the roof expanded or contracted.

But it did not actually move until the stress reached a limit. Then during the coldest part of the night, one end of the timbers would suddenly give way, thereby setting off the whole roof moving slightly. The differences in weight between the various parts of the roof produced these noises that, combined, sounded like crashing plates. This accounted for people hearing the sounds come from all over the house. So at last one thing at least was settled!

Yet another strange thing about the house was that it had a very long, rather narrow passage with a series of empty rooms opening on to it, including a box room. At the end the passage continued round a corner to the lav. No one was happy to go down this passage after dark. It produced a powerfully eerie feeling; there was no reason for this, one just got this strange feeling which was not to be easily described. Mr Frank Molteno, however, never felt anything of the sort. I can only think that perhaps he was a man of super faith. It seems to me that the nearer to Godliness one is, the less this sort of thing affects you.

..... About this time [1924] a dreadful tragedy happened. Nesta's father was killed in the Salt River railway disaster.ⁱⁱⁱ Sometimes one wonders why a man of such goodness should be taken in so terrible a manner. After the shock had passed, life went on as usual again. But there were some changes. Nesta had been left Claremont House in her father's will and her sister, Brenda, had been left the farm, Applegarth, at Elgin. The upshot was that Nesta and I went to live at Claremont House where her mother was now alone. As I mentioned before, Claremont House was a large and eerie house at night. I myself now heard the strange

ⁱ Claremont House had been bought by Nesta's grandfather, John Charles Molteno, in the early 1860s. He had decided to relocate his family from Beaufort West in the Karoo and make a new home in Cape Town. This was

partly for family reasons (his growing number of children needed to be in school), but also because of his growing involvement in the movement to wrest full self-government for the Cape from the British Government.

ⁱⁱ See elsewhere on this website for lots more information about Claremont House, the Molteno family home for some 60 years.

ⁱⁱⁱ This collision in which several prominent Capetonians, including Frank Molteno, were killed occurred in 1926 on the city's hitherto very safe suburban railway which threads its way for 20 miles along the Cape Peninsula. As a result of Frank's untimely death, John and Nesta went to live with Ella Molteno in Claremont House for a couple of years until it was sold in November 1929.