

THE MINISTER'S SISTER

Pastor John Huntley and the theatre visit by his unfortunate sister, Mary (with an extract from The Train and Other Ghosts by Arnold Ridley).

Pastor John Huntley, 'a tall gaunt man with a full black beard', was a successful grocer and unpaid minister at the Ebenezer Baptist Chapel who conducted Biblical studies at Miss Silversides' Seminary, the 'dame school' in Widcombe Crescent that my father attended in his early years.

[John Huntley] was one of the most sincerely good men I've ever met and possessed both courage and charity in full measure. Whether trying to enforce prohibition in a neighbourhood notorious for the rowdiness of its drunkards or urging measures to make the sad Edwardian Sunday even more depressing, he never faltered. Truly could it be said that he knew no fear. Although a comparatively wealthy man, he lived frugally and dispensed large sums to the poor and destitute. Yet never once did I see his name on a 'charity list'. It was always a matter of regret to me that from the moment I entered the world of the theatre, he refused to recognise my existence, passing me in the street with a sad but unseeing stare.

In this connection, an incident occurred in the autumn of 1926 when a touring company first presented *The Ghost Train* in my native city (Bath). John Huntley had a spinster sister, Mary, who lived at the top of Lyncombe Hill. I had been a visitor there many times in my childhood and I think sister Mary

must have been fond of me. Anyway, she was determined — whatever the rest of the family thought — she was going to see ‘Arnold’s play’. So she sneaked out in the darkness and trotted off to the Theatre Royal. To her disappointment, she found the theatre full but, undaunted, she tackled the house manager who contrived to find room for her in an upstairs box. On leaving, she slipped on the stairs, fractured her leg and was admitted to the nearby hospital. Bad enough but the local paper — short of news — featured it in the next edition: ‘Miss Mary Huntley of Rosemount, Lyncombe Hill and sister of Pastor John Huntley, met with a serious accident at the Theatre Royal and was admitted to the Royal United Hospital.’ I often wonder what sort of reception the poor old lady received when she returned home. But, as I’ve said, John Huntley was a kind man at heart and I hope he was content to allow that the event was no more than a lesson to those who permit themselves to be tempted into association with evil.