

# SPRING HEEL JACK: VICTORIAN HUMANOID?

*Roger Sandell*

A STRANGE tale appeared in the issue of the *Annual Register* for 1838. A frightful being had been terrifying late night strollers in various parts of London, notably Barnes Common. Witnesses spoke of a luminous figure capable of jumping incredible distances. Such was the fear generated that appeals for help had gone out to the Lord Mayor of London.

Incredible as this report seemed, the then recently formed Metropolitan Police had reason to know that behind the rumours was a solid basis of fact. In February 1838 they had investigated the case of Miss Jane Alsop of Bearbird Lane near Bow.

Miss Alsop told the police how late one night she had heard a voice calling to her to bring a lantern as the police had caught Spring Heel Jack (as the being was commonly known) nearby. As she took a lantern and hurried down the road to approach the person who had called out, she discovered that there were no policemen, and that the voice that had called her was that of Spring Heel Jack himself.

She described the being as a tall, luminous creature, clad in a metal helmet and an oilskin-like garment, spitting fire from his mouth. As her screams roused her family the creature leapt off, but not before scratching her face with a claw-like hand.

When the police arrived, the marks on her face were still visible. In any case, as supporting evidence, they had an independent report from a Mr. Scales of Limehouse, who claimed that his daughter had, late one night, been attacked by a tall luminous figure.<sup>1</sup>

Had these reports appeared in the press today it is possible that the creature would have been described as a "man from outer space". The helmet and oilskin garment may well have been described as a "space suit". Even the luminescence,<sup>2</sup> and the incredible jumping ability,<sup>3</sup> can be paralleled in many modern reports. However, at the time, various other ideas were put forward.

One school of thought held that Spring Heel Jack was a kangaroo which, as part of a circus act, had been dressed up and had then escaped. Others held that those responsible were a gang of footpads who used this means to frighten off witnesses to their activities. Another rumour stated that Spring Heel Jack was, in reality, the Marquis of Waterford, a deranged peer whose behaviour had led to his arrest on various occasions. Yet another version appeared in "Spring Heel Jack, the Terror of London", a series of Victorian cheap novels. In these, Spring Heel Jack became a "Batman"-style of character who defended the virtuous, and donned his fearsome disguise solely to frighten evil-doers.

## Eerie "visitor" at Peckham

In spite of these tales, factual accounts of appearances of Spring Heel Jack crop up at other times during the Victorian era. One such comes from the *News of the World* of November 17, 1872. The report opens by recalling the Spring Heel Jack cases of the 1830s, and states that in spite of improvements in street lighting and the police force, a similar being seems to have taken up residence in Peckham, in South-East London. The reporter describes the strange tales circulating:

"We can hardly be expected to credit that the figure is eight feet in height, springs over stone walls



Victorian "twopenny blood"

and lofty hedges, and on nearing a victim changes from grim blackness to luminous white."

However, two factual cases are offered. The first, of little value in its present form, merely tells how an undescribed figure ran across Lordship Lane, frightening an anonymous carter. The other report is far more detailed:

"On the evening of Sunday week, the two daughters of Dr. Carver, the head master of Dulwich College, young girls aged from fourteen to sixteen years were, with their governess, setting out for church. The younger had just passed through the open doorway to the step when she saw, moving rapidly towards her across the drive, at about eight to ten yards distance, a figure enveloped in white and with arms extended. Startled, the young lady screamed and sprang hastily back into the porch, communicating her fear to her companions. They meanwhile had caught sight of the miscreant but were unable to observe in which direction he made his escape. On the following morning traces were discovered in the grass of someone having stationed himself behind a small shrubbery."

The report also tells us that, some months before, Peckham had been the scene of the activities of a window-smashing poltergeist.

#### Scaring the sentries

The files of the *Illustrated Police News*<sup>4</sup> for 1877 contain several interesting reports. The issue of April 28 tells us:

"A curious story comes from Aldershot. For some time past, the sentries on two outlying posts have been frightened by the appearance at night of two spectral figures. The figures, glowing with phosphorus, are in the habit of suddenly manifesting themselves, making tremendous springs of ten or twelve yards at a time and upsetting the sentry before he has been able to collect himself sufficiently to oppose earthly arms to his ghostly visitants. The latter do him no bodily injury, contenting themselves with upsetting the poor man, after which they mysteriously disappear. So great has been the alarm that it has been found necessary to post double sentries."

Like many modern press reports, this story is treated rather facetiously, the reporter suggesting that the entities are the spirits of dead army officers, protesting about government plans to stamp out corruption in the army.

#### Methods reminiscent of Kelly-Hopkinsville entities

The *Illustrated Police News* of September 8, 1877, described how the Aldershot manifestations had continued:

"Suspicion chiefly centred on one corps for the reason that the ghost had only been seen where this regiment was stationed. The corps in question has now left Aldershot and the authorities were much astonished when they learned that Spring Heel Jack had reappeared. His method of proceeding seems to be to approach unobserved some post, then climb the sentry box and pass his hand across the face of the sentinel. The reappearance of the ghost has caused a great sensation and the authorities seem determined to exhaust every means of discovering the culprit."

The November 3, 1877, issue of the same paper includes a report of some interest in spite of the preconceived explanation of the writer:

"For some time Newport, near Lincoln, has been disturbed by a man dressed in a sheepskin or something of the kind. The man has springs on his boots and can jump a height of 15 feet. The other night he jumped on a college, got into a window by the roof and so frightened the ladies that one has not yet recovered."

The writer states that on one occasion Spring Heel Jack was chased by a crowd which found him to be immune to bullets:

"As he was running on the wall of the new barracks he was shot at by a publican but the shot did not appear to take effect." [*The publican could have missed*—EDITOR.]

Although the size of this being is not mentioned, its agility and immunity to bullets are reminiscent of the "little men" seen at Hopkinsville, Kentucky, in 1955.<sup>5</sup> The Hopkinsville witnesses also stated that the creatures leaped on to the roof and put their hands down to feel the witnesses' heads, as Spring Heel Jack is reported to have done at Aldershot. The mention of the sheepskin is also interesting when we compare it with some South American cases of hairy, agile dwarfs with bodies immune to weapons.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to these reports there are probably other  
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