The events I am going to tell you about are true. They happened to me 20 years ago but I remember them as if they happened only yesterday. During those 20 years I have told only one person about them, and now I find it difficult to overcome a certain reluctance. You see, I don’t want you to force your conclusions on me. I believe in the evidence of my own senses and I won’t change my mind.

One December day 20 years ago I went out hunting with my gun, but I had no luck all day. The east wind was cold on that wide, empty moor in the north of England. It wasn’t a pleasant place in which to lose your way – and I had lost my way. A snowstorm was coming and the evening sky was getting dark. I looked anxiously into the distance but I couldn’t see any signs of habitation – no fences, no cultivated land. So I walked on, hoping to find shelter somewhere. I had been out since dawn and I was very tired. While I was walking the snow began to fall. It grew colder and colder, and then the night came down rapidly. My heart grew heavy as I thought of my young wife watching for me through the window of the little inn. We had been married only four months and we were staying in a remote little village called Dwolding on the edge of the English moors. We were very much in love and very happy. That morning when I left my wife I promised to return before sunset. If only I had kept that promise! But even now I thought that if I could find shelter and a guide I might get back to my wife before midnight.

The snow continued to fall and the night got darker. I stopped and shouted now and then, but that seemed to make the silence deeper. I got frightened when I remembered stories of travellers who had fallen asleep in the snow and died. Could I walk all night in the snow? Death! I trembled, thinking how hard it would be for my darling wife if I died. No, no, I couldn’t stand the thought of it, so I shouted louder and longer. And then I listened. Did I hear something? Was there an answer to my shouts? Suddenly I saw a speck of light in the darkness and I ran fast towards it. Then to my great joy I found myself face to face with an old man carrying a lantern.

‘Thank God!’ I exclaimed.
‘What for?’ growled the old man, lifting the lantern and looking into my face.
‘Well – for you. I got lost in the snow.’
‘People get lost around here now and then – so why shouldn’t you?’ the old man said rudely.
‘Maybe you’re right, my friend, but I don’t want to be lost without you. How far am I from Dwolding?’
‘Twenty miles, more or less.’
‘And the nearest village?’
‘That’s twelve miles away.’
‘Where do you live then?’
‘Over that way.
‘Are you going home?’
‘Maybe.’
‘Then I’m going with you.’
But the old man shook his head. ‘It’s no good. He won’t let you in – not Him.’
‘And who is Him?’
‘The master.’
‘Who is the master?’
‘Mind your own business,’ was the rude reply.
‘All right, friend,’ I said. ‘You lead the way and I’ll follow. I’m sure the master will give me food and shelter tonight.’
‘Well, you can only try,’ muttered my guide and, shaking his head, he went off through the snow.
Soon I saw the large shape of a house in the darkness.

‘Is this the house?’ I asked.

‘This is it,’ said the man, putting a key in the door, which was like the door of a prison.

I stood close behind him, ready to enter immediately, and as soon as he turned the key I pushed past him into the house.

I found myself in a great hall with rafters on the ceiling. Hams and dried herbs hung from them. On the floor there were sacks of flour and agricultural tools. To my surprise there was a large telescope on four wheels in the centre of the hall. While I was examining it a bell rang.

‘That’s for you,’ said my guide. ‘His room’s over there.’

I went and knocked at a small black door at one end of the hall. Receiving no answer, I entered without permission and saw a huge old man with white hair standing at a table covered with books and papers.

‘Who are you?’ he said. ‘How did you come here? What do you want?’

‘James Murray. On foot across the moor. Meat, drink, and sleep.’

The man frowned. ‘This is not a hotel. What right have you to force yourself on me?’

‘The right of self-preservation. outside I would be dead in the snow before dawn.’

The man looked out of the window. ‘Hmm, that’s true I suppose. Well, you can stay here until morning.’ Then, turning to my guide, he said, ‘Jacob, serve the dinner.’

Indicating a seat for me, my host sat down at the table and began to study his books again. I sat near the fire and looked round the room with curiosity. The floor was covered with maps, papers and books. There were cupboards full of geological objects, bottles of chemicals, and other pieces of equipment. A model of the solar system and a microscope stood on a shelf beside me. I stared at my strange surroundings in amazement. Then I turned my attention to the master. He had a fine head, covered with thick white hair, and an expression of deep concentration. He looked like Beethoven the composer.

Suddenly the door opened and Jacob brought in the dinner and the master invited me to eat at the table. We ate in silence. When we had finished, Jacob took the dishes away and I took my chair back to the fire. To my surprise the master came and sat with me. He told me that he had lived alone for twenty-three years and I was the first stranger he had seen for four years. Then he began to tell me about his life. He had been a student of the supernatural in his youth and had studied hard, learning everything the old philosophers said about spirits, ghosts and spectres.

‘But modern science doesn’t accept the supernatural,’ he continued. ‘And because I studied these marvels of the spirit world the scientists said I was crazy.’

The scientists and philosophers had laughed at him and destroyed his work and his reputation. So he had come to live in this remote part of England. He had forgotten the world and the world had forgotten him. It was a sad story. When he had finished speaking he went to the window.

‘It has stopped snowing,’ he said.

I jumped quickly to my feet, ready to go. But then I said in despair, ‘No, it’s impossible for me to walk twenty miles across the moor. Oh, I’ll never see my darling wife tonight!’

‘Your wife? Where is she?’

‘At Dwolding. Oh, I’d give a thousand pounds now for a horse and guide!’

The master smiled at this. ‘You can get to Dwolding for much less than a thousand pounds. The night mail coach from the north goes to Dwolding. It passes a certain crossroads only five miles from here in about an hour and a quarter. Jacob can guide you there.'
He rang the bell and gave old Jacob his directions. Then he offered me a glass of whisky, which I drank. It was very strong.

I thanked him for his kind hospitality, and in a minute Jacob and I were out on the white, silent moor. It was freezing cold. No stars shone in the black sky; the only sound was the crunching of the snow under our feet. Jacob walked in front of me and I followed with my gun on my shoulder. I was thinking of the old master. His voice and his words still rang in my ears. What he had said about the supernatural excited my imagination. Then Jacob’s voice broke into my thoughts.

‘Follow this stone wall on your right and you can’t miss the crossroads.’

‘How far is it?’

‘About three miles. This road is steep and narrow so be careful, especially near the signpost where the stone wall is broken. It hasn’t been repaired since the accident.’

‘What accident?’

‘About nine years ago the night mail coach crashed through the wall near the signpost and fell into the valley. There were four passengers inside. All of them were killed. The coachman, the guard and an outside passenger died too.’

‘How horrible! Near the signpost, you say? I’ll remember.’

I gave Jacob some money and he went away into the darkness. Then I began to walk along the road, keeping the stone wall to my right. How silent and lonely it was now! I felt so lonely I started to sing a tune. The night air became colder and colder. My feet were like ice. I walked faster to keep warm and I tried to occupy my mind so that I wouldn’t think about the master’s talk of the supernatural.

After a while I had to stop and rest. As I leaned against the stone wall to get my breath back I saw a point of light in the distance. At first I thought it was Jacob coming back, but then I saw a second light exactly like the first and I guessed that a vehicle was approaching. I was surprised. What was a vehicle doing on this steep, dangerous road? But there could be no doubt that it was a carriage coming fast and silently towards me through the thick snow. Was it possible that I had passed the crossroads in the dark and this was the night mail coach I had come to meet?

I didn’t have time to answer before the coach came round the bend of the road at full speed. I waved my hat and shouted but the vehicle passed me. Then to my relief the driver stopped and I ran to the coach. The guard seemed to be asleep because he didn’t answer my greeting and he didn’t move. The passenger sitting next to the coachman didn’t even turn his head. I opened the door and looked in. There were three people inside. I got in and sat in a corner, feeling very glad about my good luck.

Inside the coach it seemed, if possible, even colder than outside, and there was a damp and unpleasant smell. I looked at the other travellers, all men. They were silent but didn’t seem to be asleep. Each man was sitting back in his corner and seemed to be lost in thought. I tried to start a conversation.

‘It’s very cold tonight,’ I said to the passenger opposite me.

He lifted his head, looked at me, but didn’t reply.

‘This is real winter weather,’ I added.

Although I couldn’t see his face very clearly, I saw that his eyes were looking at me. But he didn’t say a word.

I was beginning to feel ill. The icy coldness had penetrated to my bones and the strange smell in the coach was making me feel nauseous. Turning to the traveller on my left I asked, ‘Do you mind if I open the window?’

He neither spoke nor moved. I asked again and when he didn’t answer I pulled the leather strap impatiently to open the window.
The strap broke in my hands. It was then that I noticed the thick mildew on the window – years of accumulated mildew! Now I turned my attention to the condition of the coach. Every part of it was falling to pieces. The whole machine was mouldy. The wood was rotting, the floor was nearly breaking away under my feet.

I said to the third passenger, 'This coach is in a terrible condition. It's rotting away. I suppose the regular mail coach is under repair, is it?'

He moved his head slowly and looked at me without saying a word. I will never forget that look as long as I live. It froze my heart and it freezes my heart now when I remember it. His eyes glowed an unnatural red. His face was as purple as a corpse and his lips were pulled back as if in the agony of death, showing his bright teeth.

An awful horror came over me. I looked at my opposite neighbour. He was looking at me too with the same red glow in his eyes. I turned to the passenger next to me and saw – oh God, how can I describe it! – I saw that he was dead. All of them were dead! The pale, phosphorescent light of putrefaction played on their faces and their hair, which was damp with the dampness of the grave. Their rotting clothes were dirty with mud and their hands were the hands of long-dead corpses. Only their terrible eyes were living – and those eyes were looking at me menacingly.

With a scream of terror I threw myself at the door and tried to open it. At that moment I saw the moon shining on the signpost, the broken wall, and the black valley below. Then the coach rocked and fell like a ship at sea, there was a tremendous crash, a terrifying sense of falling... for a moment I felt a great pain... and then, darkness.

It seemed years later that I woke up one morning from a deep sleep and found my wife sitting by my bed. She told me I had fallen over a precipice near the crossroads and had only survived death by landing in deep snow. Some men had found me at dawn, carried me to safety, and called a doctor. When the doctor came I was in a state of delirium, and had a broken arm. My name and address were on some letters in my pocket so the doctor was able to contact my wife, who came and nursed me with loving care until I was out of danger.

The place where I fell was, of course, exactly where the night mail coach had crashed nine years before. I have never told my wife about the terrible events of that night. I told the doctor but he thought it was all a dream caused by the fever in my brain. Well, others can form any conclusions they want – I know that 20 years ago I was the fourth passenger inside the Phantom Coach.