

Introduction

The Fascination of the Ghost Story

By Arthur B. Reeve

What is the fascination we feel for the mystery of the ghost story?

Is it of the same nature as the fascination which we feel for the mystery of the detective story?

Of the latter fascination, the late Paul Armstrong used to say that it was because we are all as full of crime as Sing Sing—only we don't dare.

Thus, may I ask, are we not fascinated by the ghost story because, no matter what may be the scientific or skeptical bent of our minds, in our inmost souls, secretly perhaps, we are as full of superstition as an oboe man—only we don't let it loose?

Who shall say that he is able to fling off lightly the inheritance of countless ages of superstition? Is there not a streak of superstition in us all? We laugh at the voodoo worshiper—then create our own hoodoos, our pet obsessions.

It has been said that man is incurably religious, that if all religions were blotted out, man would create a new religion.

Man is incurably fascinated by the mysterious. If all the ghost stories of the ages were blotted out, man would invent new ones.

For, we do not all stand in awe of that which we cannot explain, of that which, if it be not in our own experience, is certainly recorded in the experience of others, of that of which we know and can know nothing?

Skeptical though one may be of the occult, he must needs be interested in things that others believe to be objective—that certainly are subjectively very real to them.

The ghost story is not born of science, nor even of super-science, whatever that may be. It is not of science at all. It is of another sphere, despite all that the psychic researchers have tried to demonstrate.

There are in life two sorts of people who, for want of a better classification, I may call the psychic and the non-psychic. If I ask the psychic to close his eyes and I say to him, "Horse," he immediately visualizes a horse. The other, non-psychic, does not. I rather incline to believe that it is the former class who see ghosts, or rather some of them. The latter do not—though they share interest in them.

The artists are of the visualizing class and, in our more modern times, it is the psychic who think in motion pictures, or at least in a succession of still pictures.

However we explain the ghostly and supernatural, whether we give it objective or merely subjective reality, neither explanation prevents the non-psychic from being intensely interested in the visions of the psychic.

Thus I am convinced that if we were all quite honest with ourselves, whether we believe in or do not believe in ghosts, at least we are all deeply interested in them. There is in this interest something that makes all the world akin.

Who does not feel a suppressed start at the creaking of furniture in the dark of night? Who has not felt a shiver of goose flesh, controlled only by an effort of will? Who, in the dark, has not had the feeling of some *thing* behind him—and, in spite of his conscious reasoning, turned to look?

If there be any who has not, it may be that to him ghost stories have no fascination. Let him at least, however, be honest.

To every human being mystery appeals, be it that of the crime cases on which a large part of yellow journalism is founded, or be it in the cases of Dupin, of Le Coq, of Sherlock Holmes, of Arsene Lupin, of Craig Kennedy, or a host of others of our fiction mystery characters. The appeal is in the mystery.

The detective's case is solved at the end, however. But even at the end of a ghost story, the underlying mystery remains. In the ghost story, we have the very quintessence of mystery.

Authors, publishers, editors, dramatists, writers of motion pictures tell us that never before has there been such an intense and wide interest in mystery stories as there is to-day. That in itself explains the interest in the super-mystery story of the ghost and ghostly doings.

Another element of mystery lies in such stories. Deeper and further back, is the supreme mystery of life—after death—what?

"Impossible," scorns the non-psychic as he listens to some ghost story.

To which, doggedly replies the mind of the opposite type, "Not so. I believe *because* it is impossible."

The uncanny, the unhealthy—as in the master of such writing, Poe—fascinates. Whether we will or no, the imp of the perverse lures us on.

That is why we read with enthralled interest these excursions into the eerie unknown, perhaps reading on till the mystic hour of midnight increases the creepy pleasure.

One might write a volume of analysis and appreciation of this aptly balanced anthology of ghost stories assembled here after years of reading and study by Mr. J. L. French.

Foremost among the impressions that a casual reader will derive is the interesting fact, just as in detective mystery stories, so in ghost stories, styles change. Each age, each period has the ghost story peculiar to itself. To-day, there is a new style of ghost story gradually evolving.

Once stories were of fairies, fays, trolls, the "little people," of poltergeist and loup garou. Through various ages have progressed to the ghost story of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until to-day, in the twentieth, we are seeing a modern style, which the new science is modifying materially.

High among the stories in this volume, one must recognize the masterful art of Algernon Blackwood's "The Woman's Ghost Story."

"I was interested in psychic things," says the woman as she starts to tell her story simply, with a sweep toward the climax that has the ring of the truth of fiction. Here perhaps we have the modern style of ghost story at its best.

Times change as well as styles. "The Man Who Went Too Far" is of intense interest as an attempt to bring into our own times an interpretation of the symbolism underlying Greek mythology, applied to England of some years ago.

To see Pan meant death. Hence in this story there is a philosophy of Pan-theism—no "me," no "you," no "it." It is a mystical story, with a storm scene in which is painted a picture that reminds one strongly of "The Fall of the House of Ushur,"—with the frankly added words, "On him were marks of hoofs of a monstrous goat that had leaped on him,"—uncompromising mysticism.

Happy is the Kipling selection, "The Phantom 'Rickshaw," if only for that obiter dictum of ghost-presence as Kipling explains about the rift in the brain: "—and a little bit of the Dark World came through and pressed him to death!"

Then there are the racial styles in ghost stories. The volume takes us from the "Banshees and Other Death Warnings" of Ireland to a strange example of Jewish mysticism in "The Silent Woman." Mr. French has been very wide in his choice, giving us these as well as many examples

from the literature of England and France. Finally, he has compiled from the newspapers, as typically American, many ghost stories of New York and other parts of the country.

Strange that one should find humor in a subject so weird. Yet we find it. Take, for instance, De Foe's old narrative, "The Apparition of Mrs. Veal." It is a hoax, nothing more. Of our own times is Ellis Parker Butler's "Dey Ain't No Ghosts," showing an example of the modern Negro's racial heritage.

In our literature and on the stage, the very idea of a Ducky and a graveyard is mirth-provoking. Mr. Butler extracts some pithy philosophy from his Ducky boy: "I ain't skeered ob ghosts whut am, c'ase dey ain't no ghosts, but I jes' feel kinder oneasy 'bout de ghosts whut ain't!"

Humor is succeeded by pathos. In "The Interval" we find a sympathetic twist to the ghost story—an actual desire to meet the dead.

It is not, however, to be compared for interest to the story of sheer terror, as in Bulwer-Lytton's "The Haunted and the Haunters," with the flight of the servant in terror, the cowering of the dog against the wall, the death of the dog, its neck actually broken by the terror, and all that go to make an experience in a haunted house what it should be.

Thus, at last, we come to two of the stories that attempt to give a scientific explanation, another phase of the modern style of ghost story.

One of these, perhaps hardly modern as far as mere years are concerned, is this same story of Bulwer, "The Haunted and the Haunters." Besides being a rattling good old-fashioned tale of horror, it attempts a new-fashioned scientific explanation. It is enough to read and re-read it.

It is, however, the lamented Ambrose Bierce who has gone furthest in the science and the philosophy of the matter, and in a very short story, too, splendidly titled "The Damned Thing."

"Incredible!" exclaims the coroner at the inquest.

"That is nothing to you, sir," replies the newspaper man who relates the experience, and in these words expresses the true feeling about ghostly fiction, "that is nothing to you, if I also swear that it is true!"

But furthest of all in his scientific explanation—not scientifically explaining away, but in explaining the way—goes Bierce as he outlines a theory. From the diary of the murdered man he picks out the following which we may treasure as a gem:

"I am not mad. There are colors that we cannot see. And—God help me!—the Damned Thing is of such a color!"

This fascination of the ghost story—have I made it clear?

As I write, nearing midnight, the bookcase behind me cracks. I start and turn. Nothing. There is a creak of a board in the hallway.

I know it is the cool night wind—the uneven contraction of materials expanded in the heat of the day.

Yet—do I go into the darkness outside otherwise than alert?

It is this evolution of our sense of ghost terror—ages of it—that fascinates us.

Can we, with a few generations of modernism behind us, throw it off with all our science? And, if we did, should we not then succeed only in abolishing the old-fashioned ghost story and creating a new, scientific ghost story?

Scientific? Yes. But more,—something that has existed since the beginnings of intelligence in the human race.

Perhaps, you critic, you say that the true ghost story originated in the age of shadowy candle light and pine knot with their grotesqueries on the walls and in the unpenetrated darkness, that

the electric bulb and the radiator have dispelled that very thing on which, for ages, the ghost story has been built.

What? No ghost stories? Would you take away our supernatural fiction by your paltry scientific explanation?

Still will we gather about the story teller—then lie awake o' nights, seeing mocking figures, arms akimbo, defying all your science to crush the ghost story.