

Famous Modern Ghost Stories

by

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Introduction: The Imperishable Ghost

Ghosts are the true immortals, and the dead grow more alive all the time. Wraiths have a greater vitality to-day than ever before. They are far more numerous than at any time in the past, and people are more interested in them. There are persons that claim to be acquainted with specific spirits, to speak with them, to carry on correspondence with them, and even some who insist that they are private secretaries to the dead. Others of us mortals, more reserved, are content to keep such distance as we may from even the shadow of a shade. But there's no getting away from ghosts nowadays, for even if you shut your eyes to them in actual life, you stumble over them in the books you read, you see them on the stage and on the screen, and you hear them on the lecture platform. Even a Lodge in any vast wilderness would have the company of spirits. Man's love for the supernatural, which is one of the most natural things about him, was never more marked than at present. You may go a-ghosting in any company to-day, and all aspects of literature, novels, short stories, poetry, and drama alike, reflect the shadeless spirit. The latest census of the haunting world shows a vast increase in population, which might be explained on various grounds.

Life is so inconveniently complex nowadays, what with income taxes and other visitations of government, that it is hard for us to have the added risk of wraiths, but there's no escaping. Many persons of to-day are in the same mental state as one Mr. Boggs, told of in a magazine story, a rural gentleman who was agitated over spectral visitants. He had once talked at a séance with a speaker who claimed to be the spirit of his brother, Wesley Boggs, but who conversed only on blue suspenders, a subject not of vital interest to Wesley in the flesh. "Still," Mr. Boggs reflected, "I'm not so darn sure!" In answer to a suggestion regarding subliminal consciousness and dual personality as explanation of the strange things that come bolting into life, he said, "It's crawly any way you look at it. Ghosts inside you are as bad as ghosts outside you." There are others to-day who are "not so darn sure!"

One may conjecture divers reasons for this multitude of ghosts in late literature. Perhaps spooks are like small boys that rush to fires, unwilling to miss anything, and craving new sensations. And we mortals read about them to get vicarious thrills through the safe *medium* of fiction. The war made sensationalists of us all, and the drab everydayness of mortal life bores us. Man's imagination, always bigger than his environment, overleaps the barriers of time and space and claims all worlds as eminent domain, so that literature, which he has the power to create, as he cannot create his material surroundings, possesses a dramatic intensity, an epic sweep, unknown in actuality. In the last analysis, man is as great as his daydreams—or his nightmares!

Ghosts have always haunted literature, and doubtless always will. Specters seem never to wear out or to die, but renew their tissue both of person and of raiment, in marvelous fashion, so that their number increases with a Malthusian relentlessness. We of to-day have the ghosts that haunted our ancestors, as well as our own modern revenants, and

there's no earthly use trying to banish or exorcise them by such a simple thing as disbelief in them. Schopenhauer asserts that a belief in ghosts is born with man, that it is found in all ages and in all lands, and that no one is free from it. Since accounts vary, and our earliest antecedents were poor diarists, it is difficult to establish the apostolic succession of spooks in actual life, but in literature, the line reaches back as far as the primeval picture writing. A study of animism in primitive culture shows many interesting links between the past and the present in this matter. And anyhow, since man knows that whether or not he has seen a ghost, presently he'll be one, he's fascinated with the subject. And he creates ghosts, not merely in his own image, but according to his dreams of power.

The more man knows of natural laws, the keener he is about the supernatural. He may claim to have laid aside superstition, but he isn't to be believed in that. Though he has discarded witchcraft and alchemy, it is only that he may have more time for psychical research; true, he no longer dabbles with ancient magic, but that is because the modern types, as the ouija board, entertain him more. He dearly loves to traffic with that other world of which he knows so little and concerning which he is so curious.

Perhaps the war, or possibly an increase in class consciousness, or unionization of spirits, or whatever, has greatly energized the ghost in our day and given him both ambition and strength to do more things than ever. Maybe "pep tablets" have been discovered on the other side as well! No longer is the ghost content to be seen and not heard, to slink around in shadowy corners as apologetically as poor relations. Wraiths now have a rambunctious vitality and self-assurance that are astonishing. Even the ghosts of folks dead so long they have forgotten about themselves are yawning, stretching their skeletons, and starting out to do a little haunting. Spooky creatures in such a wide diversity are abroad to-day that one is sometimes at a loss to know what to do "gin a body meet a body." Ghosts are entering all sorts of activities now, so that mortals had better look alive, else they'll be crowded out of their place in the shade. The dead are too much with us!

Modern ghosts are less simple and primitive than their ancestors, and are developing complexes of various kinds. They are more democratic than of old, and have more of a diversity of interests, so that mortals have scarcely the ghost of a chance with them. They employ all the agencies and mechanisms known to mortals, and have in addition their own methods of transit and communication. Whereas in the past a ghost had to stalk or glide to his haunts, now he limousines or airplanes, so that naturally he can get in more work than before. He uses the wireless to send his messages, and is expert in all manner of scientific lines.

In fact, his infernal efficiency and knowledge of science constitute the worst terror of the current specter. Who can combat a ghost that knows all about a chemical laboratory, that can add electricity to his other shocks, and can employ all mortal and immortal agencies as his own? Science itself is supernatural, as we see when we look at it properly.

Modern literature, especially the most recent, shows a revival of old types of ghosts, together with the innovations of the new. There are specters that take a real part in the plot complication, and those that merely cast threatening looks at the living, or at least, are content to speak a piece and depart. Some spirits are dumb, while others are highly elocutionary.

Ghosts vary in many respects. Some are like the pallid shades of the past, altogether unlike the living and with an unmistakable spectral form—or lack of it. They sweep like mist through the air, or flutter like dead leaves in the gale—a gale always accompanying them as part of the stock furnishings. On the other hand, some revenants are so successfully made up that one doesn't believe them when they pridefully announce that they are wraiths. Some of them are, in fact, so alive that they don't themselves know they're dead. It's going to be a great shock to some of them one of these days to wake up and find out they're demised!

Ghosts are more gregarious than in the past. Formerly a shade slunk off by himself, as if ashamed of his profession, as if aware of the lack of cordiality with which he would be received, knowing that mortals shunned and feared him, and chary even of associating with his fellow-shades. He wraithed all by himself. The specters of the past—save in scenes of the lower world,—were usually solitary creatures, driven to haunt mortals from very lonesomeness. Now we have a chance to study the mob psychology of ghosts, for they come in madding crowds whenever they like.

Ghosts at present are showing an active interest not only in public affairs, but in the arts as well. At least, we now have pictures and writing attributed to them. Perhaps annoyed by some of the inaccuracies published concerning them—for authors have in the past taken advantage of the belief that ghosts couldn't write back—they have recently developed itching pens. They use all manner of utensils for expression now. There's the magic typewriter that spooks for John Kendrick Bangs, the boardwalk that Patience Worth executes for Mrs. Curran, and innumerable other specters that commandeer fountain pens and pencils and brushes to give their versions of infinity. There's a passion on the part of ghosts for being interviewed just now. At present book-reviewers, for instance, had better be careful, lest the wraiths take their own method of answering criticism. It isn't safe to speak or write with anything but respect of ghosts now. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, indeed! One should never make light of a shade.

Modern ghosts have a more pronounced personality than the specters of the past. They have more strength, of mind as well as of body, than the colorless revenants of earlier literature, and they produce a more vivid effect on the beholder and the reader. They know more surely what they wish to do, and they advance relentlessly and with economy of effort to the effecting of their purpose, whether it be of pure horror, of beauty, or pathos of humor. We have now many spirits in fiction that are pathetic without frightfulness, many that move us with a sense of poetic beauty rather than of curdling horror, who touch the heart as well as the spine of the reader. And the humorous ghost is a distinctive shade of to-day, with his quips and pranks and haunting grin. Whatever a modern ghost wishes to do or to be, he is or does, with confidence and success.

The spirit of to-day is terrifyingly visible or invisible at will. The dreadful presence of a ghost that one cannot see is more unbearable than the specter that one can locate and attempt to escape from. The invisible haunting is represented in this volume by Fitz-James O'Brien's *What Was It?* one of the very best of the type, and one that has strongly influenced others. O'Brien's story preceded Guy de Maupassant's *Le Horla* by several years, and must surely have suggested to Maupassant as to Bierce, in his *The Damned Thing*, the power of evil that can be felt but not seen.

The wraith of the present carries with him more vital energy than his predecessors, is more athletic in his struggles with the unlucky wights he visits, and can coerce mortals to do his will by the laying on of hands as well as by the look or word. He speaks with more emphasis and authority, as well as with more human naturalness, than the earlier ghosts. He has not only all the force he possessed in life, but in many instances has an access of power, which makes man a poor protagonist for him. Algernon Blackwood's spirits of evil, for example, have a more awful potentiality than any living person could have, and their will to harm has been increased immeasurably by the accident of death. If the facts bear out the fear that such is the case in life as in fiction, some of our social customs will be reversed. A man will strive by all means to keep his deadly enemy alive, lest death may endow him with tenfold power to hurt. Dark discarnate passions, disembodied hates, work evil where a simple ghost might be helpless and abashed. Algernon Blackwood has command over the spirits of air and fire and wave, so that his pages thrill with beauty and terror. He has handled almost all known aspects of the supernatural, and from his many stories he has selected for this volume *The Willows* as the best example of his ghostly art.

Apparitions are more readily recognizable at present than in the past, for they carry into eternity all the disfigurements or physical peculiarities that the living bodies possessed—a fact discouraging to all persons not conspicuous for good looks. Freckles and warts, long noses and missing limbs distinguish the ghosts and aid in crucial identification. The thrill of horror in Ambrose Bierce's story, *The Middle Toe of the Right Foot*, is intensified by the fact that the dead woman who comes back in revenge to haunt her murderer, has one toe lacking as in life. And in a recent story a surgeon whose desire to experiment has caused him needlessly to sacrifice a man's life on the operating table, is haunted to death by the dismembered arm. Fiction shows us various ghosts with half faces, and at least one notable spook that comes in half. Such ability, it will be granted, must necessarily increase the haunting power, for if a ghost may send a foot or an arm or a leg to harry one person, he can dispatch his back-bone or his liver or his heart to upset other human beings simultaneously in a sectional haunting at once economically efficient and terrifying.

The Beast with Five Fingers, for instance, has a loathsome horror that a complete skeleton or conventionally equipped wraith could not achieve. Who can doubt that a bodiless hand leaping around on its errands of evil has a menace that a complete six-foot frame could not duplicate? Yet, in Quiller-Couch's *A Pair of Hands*, what pathos and beauty in the thought of the child hands coming back to serve others in homely tasks! Surely no housewife in these helpless days would object to being haunted in such delicate fashion.

Ghosts of to-day have an originality that antique specters lacked. For instance, what story of the past has the awful thrill in Andreyev's *Lazarus*, that story of the man who came back from the grave, living, yet dead, with the horror of the unknown so manifest in his face that those who looked into his deep eyes met their doom? Present-day writers skillfully combine various elements of awe with the supernatural, as madness with the ghostly, adding to the chill of fear which each concept gives. Wilbur Daniel Steele's *The Woman at Seven Brothers* is an instance of that method.

Poe's *Ligeia*, one of the best stories in any language, reveals the unrelenting will of the dead to effect its desire,—the dead wife triumphantly coming back to life through the second wife's body. Olivia Howard Dunbar's *The Shell of Sense* is another instance of jealousy reaching beyond the grave. *The Messenger*, one of Robert W. Chambers's early stories and an admirable example of the supernatural, has various thrills, with its river of blood, its death's head moth, and the ancient but very active skull of the Black Priest who was shot as a traitor to his country, but lived on as an energetic and curseful ghost.

The Shadows on the Wall, by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman,—which one prominent librarian considers the best ghost story ever written,—is original in the method of its horrific manifestation. Isn't it more devastating to one's sanity to see the shadow of a revenge ghost cast on the wall,—to know that a vindictive spirit is beside one but invisible—than to see the specter himself? Under such circumstances, the sight of a skeleton or a sheeted phantom would be downright comforting.

The Mass of Shadows, by Anatole France, is an example of the modern tendency to show phantoms in groups, as contrasted with the solitary habits of ancient specters. Here the spirits of those who had sinned for love could meet and celebrate mass together in one evening of the year.

The delicate beauty of many of the modern ghostly stories is apparent in *The Haunted Orchard*, by Richard Le Gallienne, for this prose poem has an appeal of tenderness rather than of terror. And everybody who has had affection for a dog will appreciate the pathos of the little sketch, by Myla J. Closser, *At the Gate*. The dog appears more frequently as a ghost than does any other animal, perhaps because man feels that he is nearer the human,—though the horse is as intelligent and as much beloved. There is an innate pathos about a dog somehow, that makes his appearance in ghostly form more credible and sympathetic, while the ghost of any other animal would tend to have a comic connotation. Other animals in fiction have power of magic—notably the cat—but they don't appear as spirits. But the dog is seen as a pathetic symbol of faithfulness, as a tragic sufferer, or as a terrible revenge ghost. Dogs may come singly or in groups—Edith Wharton has five of different sorts in *Kerfol*—or in packs, as in Eden Phillpotts's *Another Little Heath Hound*.

An illuminating instance of the power of fiction over human faith is furnished by the case of Arthur Machen's *The Bowmen*, included here. This story it is which started the whole tissue of legendry concerning supernatural aid given the allied armies during the war. This purely fictitious account of an angel army that saved the day at Mons was so vivid

that its readers accepted it as truth and obstinately clung to that idea in the face of Mr. Machen's persistent and bewildered explanations that he had invented the whole thing. Editors wrote leading articles about it, ministers preached sermons on it, and the general public preferred to believe in the Mons angels rather than in Arthur Machen. Mr. Machen has shown himself an artist in the supernatural, one whom his generation has not been discerning enough to appreciate. Some of his material is painfully morbid, but his pen is magic and his inkwell holds many dark secrets.

In this collection I have attempted to include specimens of a few of the distinctive types of modern ghosts, as well as to show the art of individual stories. Examples of the humorous ghosts are omitted here, as a number of them will be brought together in *Humorous Ghost Stories*, the companion volume to this. The ghost lover who reads these pages will think of others that he would like to see included—for I believe that readers are more passionately attached to their own favorite ghost tales than to any other form of literature. But critics will admit the manifest impossibility of bringing together in one volume all the famous examples of the art. Some of the well-known tales, particularly the older ones on which copyright has expired, have been reprinted so often as to be almost hackneyed, while others have been of necessity omitted because of the limitations of space.

D.S.

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The Willows

BY ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

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I

After leaving Vienna, and long before you come to Buda-Pesth, the Danube enters a region of singular loneliness and desolation, where its waters spread away on all sides regardless of a main channel, and the country becomes a swamp for miles upon miles, covered by a vast sea of low willow-bushes. On the big maps this deserted area is painted in a fluffy blue, growing fainter in color as it leaves the banks, and across it may be seen in large straggling letters the word *Sümpfe*, meaning marshes.

In high flood this great acreage of sand, shingle-beds, and willow-grown islands is almost topped by the water, but in normal seasons the bushes bend and rustle in the free winds, showing their silver leaves to the sunshine in an ever-moving plain of bewildering beauty. These willows never attain to the dignity of trees; they have no rigid trunks; they remain humble bushes, with rounded tops and soft outline, swaying on slender stems that answer to the least pressure of the wind; supple as grasses, and so continually shifting that they somehow give the impression that the entire plain is moving and *alive*. For the wind sends waves rising and falling over the whole surface, waves of leaves instead of waves of water, green swells like the sea, too, until the branches turn and lift, and then silvery white as their under-side turns to the sun.

Happy to slip beyond the control of stern banks, the Danube here wanders about at will among the intricate network of channels intersecting the islands everywhere with broad avenues down which the waters pour with a shouting sound; making whirlpools, eddies, and foaming rapids; tearing at the sandy banks; carrying away masses of shore and willow-clumps; and forming new islands innumerable which shift daily in size and shape and possess at best an impermanent life, since the flood-time obliterates their very existence.

Properly speaking, this fascinating part of the river's life begins soon after leaving Pressburg, and we, in our Canadian canoe, with gipsy tent and frying-pan on board, reached it on the crest of a rising flood about mid-July. That very same morning, when the sky was reddening before sunrise, we had slipped swiftly through still-sleeping Vienna, leaving it a couple of hours later a mere patch of smoke against the blue hills of the Wienerwald on the horizon; we had breakfasted below Fischeramend under a grove of birch trees roaring in the wind; and had then swept on the tearing current past Orth, Hainburg, Petronell (the old Roman Carnuntum of Marcus Aurelius), and so under the frowning heights of Theben on a spur of the Carpathians, where the March steals in quietly from the left and the frontier is crossed between Austria and Hungary.

Racing along at twelve kilometers an hour soon took us well into Hungary, and the muddy waters—sure sign of flood—sent us aground on many a shingle-bed, and twisted us like a cork in many a sudden belching whirlpool before the towers of Pressburg (Hungarian, Poszóny) showed against the sky; and then the canoe, leaping like a spirited horse, flew at top speed under the gray walls, negotiated safely the sunken chain of the Fliegende Brücke ferry, turned the corner sharply to the left, and plunged on yellow foam into the wilderness of islands, sand-banks, and swamp-land beyond—the land of the willows.

The change came suddenly, as when a series of bioscope pictures snaps down on the streets of a town and shifts without warning into the scenery of lake and forest. We entered the land of desolation on wings, and in less than half an hour there was neither boat nor fishing-hut nor red roof, nor any single sign of human habitation and civilization within sight. The sense of remoteness from the world of human kind, the utter isolation, the fascination of this singular world of willows, winds, and waters, instantly laid its spell upon us both, so that we allowed laughingly to one another that we ought by rights to have held some special kind of passport to admit us, and that we had, somewhat audaciously, come without asking leave into a separate little kingdom of wonder and magic—a kingdom that was reserved for the use of others who had a right to it, with everywhere unwritten warnings to trespassers for those who had the imagination to discover them.

Though still early in the afternoon, the ceaseless buffetings of a most tempestuous wind made us feel weary, and we at once began casting about for a suitable camping-ground for the night. But the bewildering character of the islands made landing difficult; the swirling flood carried us in-shore and then swept us out again; the willow branches tore our hands as we seized them to stop the canoe, and we pulled many a yard of sandy bank into the water before at length we shot with a great sideways blow from the wind into a backwater and managed to beach the bows in a cloud of spray. Then we lay panting and laughing after our exertions on hot yellow sand, sheltered from the wind, and in the full blaze of a scorching sun, a cloudless blue sky above, and an immense army of dancing, shouting willow bushes, closing in from all sides, shining with spray and clapping their thousand little hands as though to applaud the success of our efforts.

"What a river!" I said to my companion, thinking of all the way we had traveled from the source in the Black Forest, and how we had often been obliged to wade and push in the upper shallows at the beginning of June.

"Won't stand much nonsense now, will it?" he said, pulling the canoe a little farther into safety up the sand, and then composing himself for a nap.

I lay by his side, happy and peaceful in the bath of the elements—water, wind, sand, and the great fire of the sun—thinking of the long journey that lay behind us, and of the great stretch before us to the Black Sea, and how lucky I was to have such a delightful and charming traveling companion as my friend, the Swede.

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