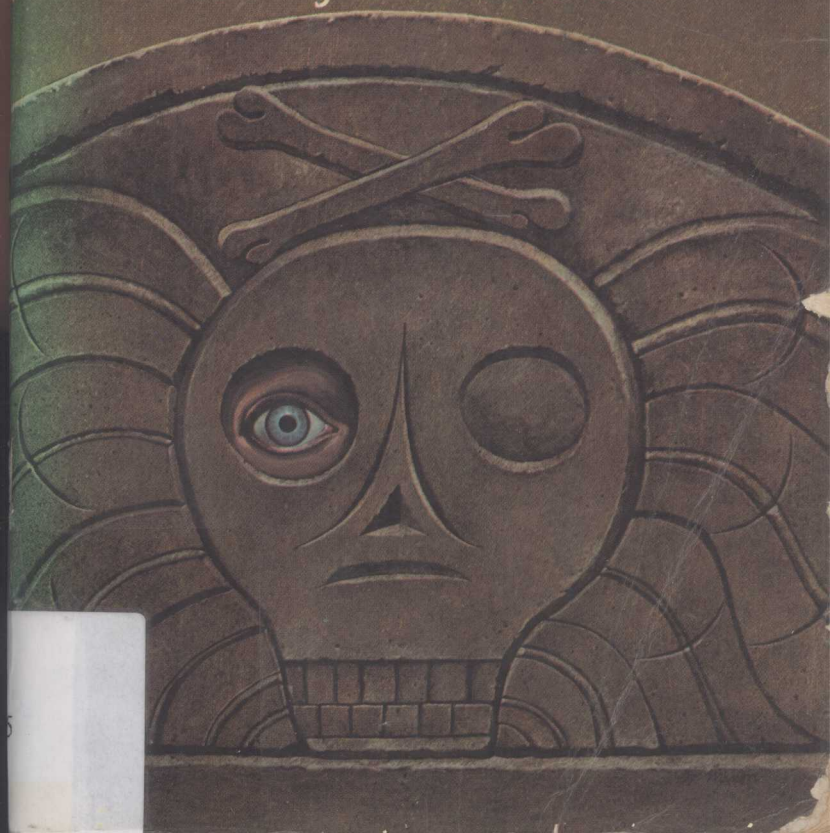


# FAMOUS GHOST STORIES

Edited by Bennett Cerf





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*Compiled and with an Introductory Note by*

BENNETT CER



VINTAGE BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE

New York



VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION

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Originally published by Random House, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FOR PERMISSION to reprint copyrighted material in this volume the editor is indebted to the following:

Dodd, Mead and Co. for "The Monkey's Paw"

E. P. Dutton and Co. for "The Willows"

The Modern Library for "The Rival Ghosts" and "The Man Who Went Too Far"

Edward Arnold and Co. for "The Mezzotint"

The Viking Press for "The Open Window"

Secker and Warburg for "The Beckoning Fair One"

Ernest Benn, Ltd. for "On the Brighton Road"

Matson and Duggan for "The Considerate Hosts"

J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd. for "August Heat"

Derleth and Schorer for "The Return of Andrew Bentley"

Random House for "The Supper at Elsinore" and "The Current Crop of Ghost Stories"

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B. C.

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

I NEVER HAVE enjoyed a literary task more genuinely than the compilation of this volume of famous ghost stories. On my bedside table were piled volume upon volume of tales of terror and the other world. What unalloyed pleasure it was to escape from omniscient strategists bent upon planning new world orders and self-appointed critics of the government and military, and lose myself in a world of fantasy and macabre goings-on!

Do I believe in ghost stories? Of course I do. So do you. Deep in the souls of the most sophisticated of us is a lurking fear of the supernatural which all the discoveries of scientists cannot eradicate. The greatest skeptic I ever met was asked point-blank if he would sleep alone in a house that had been haunted, according to common belief, for a hundred years or more. "No, sirree, not on your life!" said the skeptic. "*Why should I take the chance?*"

You may recall the story of the lady who asked Coleridge if he believed in ghosts. "No, Madame," was the reply. "I have seen far too many of them to believe in them!"

The fundamental difference between the mystery story and the ghost story is the fact that a mystery story demands a solution for its effectiveness; a ghost story is necessarily insoluble; the reader must be willing to accept the fact that nothing can be proved, and that its very thesis is, by all sensible standards, utterly impossible.

I have tried to include examples of every kind of ghost story in this volume. "The Haunted and the Haunters" has long been considered a typical and unsurpassable model of the standard, spine-tickling tale of "things that walk in the night." "The Supper at Elsinore" (never before included in an anthology) is a perfect example of the purely literary ghost story.

Note how Miss Dinesen takes her ghost as a matter of course, and how easy it is for the reader to accept his appearance in the same manner! "The Rival Ghosts" strikes me as a worthy example of the humorous ghost story, although I found the telling old-fashioned and cumbersome. (I have omitted anything remotely resembling those loathsome dialect stories of Negro and Irish visitations that enjoyed a certain vogue some years ago.) "The Willows" is only one of a number of superb ghost stories by Algernon Blackwood; a collected volume of his best work was published by Heinemann, in London, under the title of *Strange Stories*. "The Mezzotint," another of the traditional ghost-story classics included here, comes from *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. Probably the most familiar story of all is W. W. Jacobs' "The Monkey's Paw," but what anthology of stories of this character would be complete without it? Side by side with old stand-bys that simply could not be omitted, I think you will find a handful that you have not heard of before.

The two best ghost stories I have ever read, or ever expect to read, are "The Turn of the Screw" by Henry James, and "The Beckoning Fair One" by Oliver Onions. "The Turn of the Screw" is one hundred and thirty-odd pages in length; I omitted it because it is obtainable in another Modern Library volume (Number 169); "The Beckoning Fair One," however, is here to thrill and delight you. William Lyon Phelps called it "one of the most terrifying, nerve-shattering tales of horror I ever read. . . . If you have weak nerves, I advise you to skip it!" Its author, Oliver Onions, now seventy years old, is a Yorkshireman who became so understandably provoked by witticisms about his name that he changed it legally to George Oliver. "The Beckoning Fair One" appeared originally in 1911 in a volume of short tales called *Widdershins*.

I have also set down a few of the current ghost stories that are guaranteed to rivet the attention of any dinner party. The late Alexander Woollcott delighted in collecting tales of this sort, and added trimmings of his own that not always heightened their effectiveness.

I must ruefully admit that I myself have not yet encountered anything that even remotely resembled a ghost. Since I have been poring over the varied examples of literature on the subject, however, I can report some very promising creakings in distant corners of my own house, and a couple of peculiar shadows that may develop into something extraordinary at any moment. Probably you have heard the story of the timid soul who was hurrying down a dark, dark corridor, when he suddenly collided with a stout and shadowy personage whom he certainly had not seen approaching him. "My, my!" said the timid one. "You gave me a start! For a moment I could have sworn you were a ghost!" "What, my friend," answered the other, "makes you believe I'm not?"—and promptly disappeared!

BENNETT CERF

*New York, 1943*

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# FAMOUS GHOST STORIES



# THE HAUNTED AND THE HAUNTERS

*or, The House and the Brain*

BY EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON

A FRIEND of mine, who is a man of letters and a philosopher, said to me one day, as if between jest and earnest, "Fancy! since we last met, I have discovered a haunted house in the midst of London."

"Really haunted?—and by what? ghosts?"

"Well, I can't answer that question: all I know is this—six weeks ago my wife and I were in search of a furnished apartment. Passing a quiet street, we saw on the window of one of the houses a bill, 'Apartments Furnished.' The situation suited us; we entered the house—liked the rooms—engaged them by the week—and left them the third day. No power on earth could have reconciled my wife to stay longer; and I don't wonder at it."

"What did you see?"

"Excuse me—I have no desire to be ridiculed as a superstitious dreamer—nor, on the other hand, could I ask you to accept on my affirmation what you would hold to be incredible without the evidence of your own senses. Let me only say this, it was not so much what we saw or heard (in which you might fairly suppose that we were the dupes of our own excited fancy, or the victims of imposture in others) that drove us away, as it was an undefinable terror which seized both of us

whenever we passed by the door of a certain unfurnished room, in which we neither saw nor heard anything. And the strangest marvel of all was, that for once in my life I agreed with my wife, silly woman though she be—and allowed, after the third night, that it was impossible to stay a fourth in that house. Accordingly, on the fourth morning I summoned the woman who kept the house and attended on us, and told her that the rooms did not quite suit us, and we would not stay out our week. She said, dryly, ‘I know why: you have stayed longer than any other lodger. Few ever stayed a second night; none before you a third. But I take it they have been very kind to you.’

“‘They—who?’ I asked, affecting to smile.

“‘Why, they who haunt the house, whoever they are. I don’t mind them; I remember them many years ago, when I lived in this house, not as a servant; but I know they will be the death of me some day. I don’t care—I’m old, and must die soon anyhow; and then I shall be with them, and in this house still.’ The woman spoke with so dreary a calmness, that really it was a sort of awe that prevented my conversing with her further. I paid for my week, and too happy were my wife and I to get off so cheaply.”

“You excite my curiosity,” said I; “nothing I should like better than to sleep in a haunted house. Pray give me the address of the one which you left so ignominiously.”

My friend gave me the address; and when we parted, I walked straight towards the house thus indicated.

It is situated on the north side of Oxford Street (in a dull but respectable thoroughfare). I found the house shut up—no bill at the window, and no response to my knock. As I was turning away, a beer-boy, collecting pewter pots at the neighboring areas, said to me, “Do you want any one at that house, sir?”

“Yes, I heard it was to be let.”

“Let!—why, the woman who kept it is dead—has been dead these three weeks, and no one can be found to stay there, though Mr. J—— offered ever so much. He offered Mother,

who chars for him, £1 a week just to open and shut the windows, and she would not."

"Would not!—and why?"

"The house is haunted: and the old woman who kept it was found dead in her bed, with her eyes wide open. They say the devil strangled her."

"Pooh!—you speak of Mr. J——. Is he the owner of the house?"

"Yes."

"Where does he live?"

"In G—— Street, No. —."

"What is he—in any business?"

"No, sir—nothing particular; a single gentleman."

I gave the pot-boy the gratuity earned by his liberal information, and proceeded to Mr. J——, in G—— Street, which was close by the street that boasted the haunted house. I was lucky enough to find Mr. J—— at home, an elderly man, with intelligent countenance and prepossessing manners.

I communicated my name and my business frankly. I said I heard the house was considered to be haunted—that I had a strong desire to examine a house with so equivocal a reputation—that I should be greatly obliged if he would allow me to hire it, though only for a night. I was willing to pay for that privilege whatever he might be inclined to ask. "Sir," said Mr. J——, with great courtesy, "the house is at your service, for as short or as long a time as you please. Rent is out of the question—the obligation will be on my side should you be able to discover the cause of the strange phenomena which at present deprive it of all value. I cannot let it, for I cannot even get a servant to keep it in order or answer the door. Unluckily the house is haunted, if I may use that expression, not only by night, but by day; though at night the disturbances are of a more unpleasant and sometimes of a more alarming character. The poor old woman who died in it three weeks ago was a pauper whom I took out of a workhouse, for in her childhood she had been known to some of my family, and had once been in such good circumstances that she had rented that house of

my uncle. She was a woman of superior education and strong mind, and was the only person I could ever induce to remain in the house. Indeed, since her death, which was sudden, and the coroner's inquest, which gave it a notoriety in the neighborhood, I have so despaired of finding any person to take charge of the house, much more a tenant, that I would willingly let it rent-free for a year to any one who would pay its rates and taxes."

"How long is it since the house acquired this sinister character?"

"That I can scarcely tell you, but very many years since. The old woman I spoke of said it was haunted when she rented it between thirty and forty years ago. The fact is, that my life has been spent in the East Indies, and in the civil service of the Company. I returned to England last year, on inheriting the fortune of an uncle, among whose possessions was the house in question. I found it shut up and uninhabited. I was told that it was haunted, that no one would inhabit it. I smiled at what seemed to me so idle a story. I spent some money in repairing it—added to its old-fashioned furniture a few modern articles—advertised it, and obtained a lodger for a year. He was a colonel retired on half-pay. He came in with his family, a son and a daughter, and four or five servants: they all left the house the next day; and, although each of them declared that he had seen something different from that which had scared the others, a something still was equally terrible to all. I really could not in conscience sue, nor even blame, the colonel for breach of agreement. Then I put in the old woman I have spoken of, and she was empowered to let the house in apartments. I never had one lodger who stayed more than three days. I do not tell you their stories—to no two lodgers have there been exactly the same phenomena repeated. It is better that you should judge for yourself, than enter the house with an imagination influenced by previous narratives; only be prepared to see and to hear something or other, and take whatever precautions you yourself please."

"Have you never had a curiosity yourself to pass a night in that house?"

"Yes. I passed not a night, but three hours in broad daylight alone in that house. My curiosity is not satisfied but it is quenched. I have no desire to renew the experiment. You cannot complain, you see, sir, that I am not sufficiently candid; and unless your interest be exceedingly eager and your nerves unusually strong, I honestly add, that I advise you not to pass a night in that house."

"My interest is exceedingly keen," said I, "and though only a coward will boast of his nerves in situations wholly unfamiliar to him, yet my nerves have been seasoned in such variety of danger that I have the right to rely on them—even in a haunted house."

Mr. J—— said very little more; he took the keys of the house out of his bureau, gave them to me—and, thanking him cordially for his frankness, and his urbane concession to my wish, I carried off my prize.

Impatient for the experiment, as soon as I reached home, I summoned my confidential servant—a young man of gay spirits, fearless temper, and as free from superstitious prejudices as any one I could think of.

"F——," said I, "you remember in Germany how disappointed we were at not finding a ghost in that old castle, which was said to be haunted by a headless apparition? Well, I have heard of a house in London which, I have reason to hope, is decidedly haunted. I mean to sleep there to-night. From what I hear, there is no doubt that something will allow itself to be seen or to be heard—something, perhaps, excessively horrible. Do you think if I take you with me, I may rely on your presence of mind, whatever may happen?"

"Oh, sir! pray trust me," answered F——, grinning with delight.

"Very well; then here are the keys of the house—this is the address. Go now—select for me any bedroom you please; and since the house has not been inhabited for weeks, make up a good fire—air the bed well—see, of course, that there are

candles as well as fuel. Take with you my revolver and my dagger—so much for my weapons—arm yourself equally well; and if we are not a match for a dozen ghosts, we shall be but a sorry couple of Englishmen.”

I was engaged for the rest of the day on business so urgent that I had not leisure to think much on the nocturnal adventure to which I had plighted my honor. I dined alone, and very late, and while dining, read, as is my habit. I selected one of the volumes of Macaulay's *Essays*. I thought to myself that I would take the book with me; there was so much of the healthfulness in the style, and practical life in the subjects, that it would serve as an antidote against the influence of superstitious fancy.

Accordingly, about half-past nine, I put the book into my pocket, and strolled leisurely towards the haunted house. I took with me a favorite dog—an exceedingly sharp, bold and vigilant bull-terrier—a dog fond of prowling about strange ghostly corners and passages at night in search of rats—a dog of dogs for a ghost.

It was a summer night, but chilly, the sky somewhat gloomy and overcast. Still there was a moon—faint and sickly, but still a moon—and if the clouds permitted, after midnight it would be brighter.

I reached the house, knocked, and my servant opened with a cheerful smile.

“All right, sir, and very comfortable.”

“Oh!” said I, rather disappointed; “have you not seen nor heard anything remarkable?”

“Well, sir, I must own I have heard something queer.”

“What—what?”

“The sound of feet pattering behind me; and once or twice small noises like whispers close at my ear—nothing more.”

“You are not at all frightened?”

“I! not a bit of it, sir,” and the man's bold look reassured me on one point—viz., that happen what might, he would not desert me.

We were in the hall, the street-door closed, and my atten-

tion was now drawn to my dog. He had at first run in eagerly enough, but had sneaked back to the door, and was scratching and whining to get out. After patting him on the head, and encouraging him gently, the dog seemed to reconcile himself to the situation, and followed me and F—— through the house, but keeping close at my heels instead of hurrying inquisitively in advance, which was his usual and normal habit in all strange places. We first visited the subterranean apartments, the kitchen and other offices, and especially the cellars, in which last there were two or three bottles of wine still left in a bin, covered with cobwebs, and evidently, by their appearance, undisturbed for many years. It was clear that the ghosts were not wine-bibbers. For the rest we discovered nothing of interest. There was a gloomy little back-yard with very high walls. The stones of this yard were very damp; and what with the damp, and what with the dust and smoke-grime on the pavement, our feet left a slight impression where we passed.

And now appeared the first strange phenomenon witnessed by myself in this strange abode. I saw, just before me, the print of a foot suddenly form itself, as it were. I stopped, caught hold of my servant, and pointed to it. In advance of that footprint as suddenly dropped another. We both saw it. I advanced quickly to the place; the footprint kept advancing before me, a small footprint—the foot of a child; the impression was too faint thoroughly to distinguish the shape, but it seemed to us both that it was the print of a naked foot. This phenomenon ceased when we arrived at the opposite wall, nor did it repeat itself on returning. We remounted the stairs, and entered the rooms on the ground floor, a dining-parlor, a small back parlor, and a still smaller third room that had been probably appropriated to a footman—all still as death. We then visited the drawing-rooms, which seemed fresh and new. In the front room I seated myself in an armchair. F—— placed on the table the candlestick with which he had lighted us. I told him to shut the door. As he turned to do so, a chair opposite to me moved from the wall quickly and noiselessly,