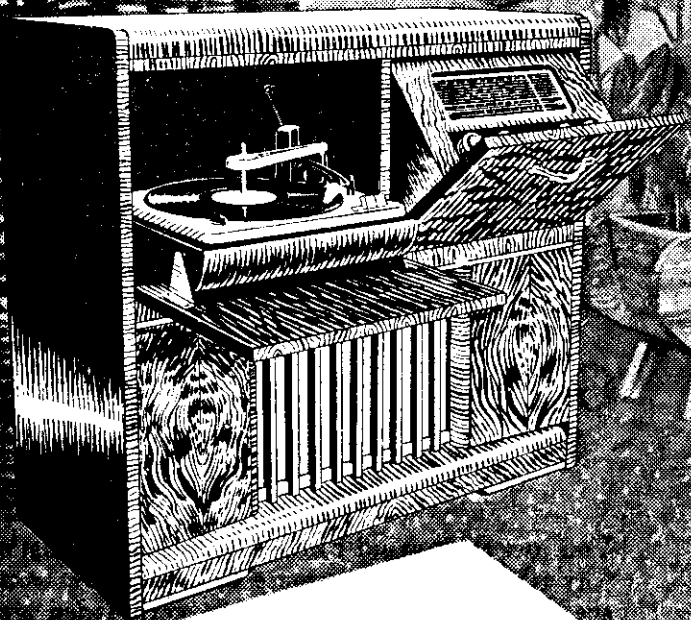
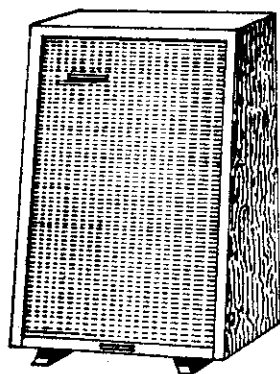


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The Cambridge Ghost

THE Cambridge University Society for Psychical Research decided recently to investigate a theory that people may see ghosts without realising it. A young man, dressed in a white gown with a hood, stationed himself at dusk about 50 yards from a road. According to a newspaper report, he was in full view of at least 80 persons, and the experiment was repeated on six successive nights. "No one noticed me," said the ghost, a little mortified. He was not sure what deductions to make from his failure, and relied in the end on a masterly understatement. "I think many people would have considered it bad manners to investigate—or perhaps they saw nothing peculiar in my behaviour."

It would be pleasant to believe that the cartoonists' view of the English character had now been confirmed. A deadpan acceptance of the incredible has long been a feature of comic art in *Punch* and elsewhere. But even the English, phlegmatic though they may be, could not be expected to remain unmoved by a phantom. The young man was obviously no better than Hamlet's father. His disguise was old-fashioned and perfunctory: a white gown and hood, seen at night, could suggest merely a female presence, in no way supernatural. It is possible that a few pedestrians noted him with an uneasy flutter of heart-beats, but passed on with firm steps, giving no sign. The watching ghost was no doubt prepared for insensitive response from some people; but an occasional start of surprise, or a gratifying sound of panic in retreating footsteps, could have allowed him to believe that he was making a subliminal assault on those with stronger nerves. Yet all that he could report, after six nights of vigil, was a massive indifference. If there is a scientific meaning in an experiment so ill prepared, so ghost-like in its implications, we suspect that only the Goons could really understand it.

Ghosts are out of fashion. If the experiment had been closer to these times, it might have shown that people are no less credulous

than they used to be, but respond to a different sort of stimulus. A mock-up of a flying saucer might have produced results, and nobody would have been happy about meeting some odd little creature who could be mistaken for a Martian—in spite of Isobel Andrews's unshakeable housewives in last week's short story. The recent vogue in horror films appealed to people who would have responded with equal zest to old stories of haunted abbeys, if they had lived in times when groans from the cellar and a white shape gliding along the galleries provided writers with acceptable material. But now they must be shown monsters than can destroy cities, triffids with whip-like tendrils that advance across a wasted countryside, and invaders from outer space—all the symbols of invention and destruction which have grown out of the years of scientific progress. The dangers of our times are reduced to fables, so that the hydrogen bomb is converted into a green and scaly monster, and the fear of radiation is expressed in imaginary growths and bug-eyed creatures which threaten the earth until a few brave men go out for the decisive encounter.

Against this background the Cambridge ghost begins to look anachronistic. He is too much of an individual in an age when all the fantasies emerge from group experience. Men today have their private anxieties, and are still concerned with the solitary enemy; but they do not find warnings of mortality in a spectre strayed from a churchyard. Psychic phenomena have reached two levels of interest, the scientific and the vulgar, and on each level—one reserved for the investigation of evidence, and the other for mediums and seances in back rooms—the element of dread has disappeared. The ghost from Cambridge was a failure because he aimed at fears that have long since been diverted to the skies, the sleek machines and atomic power-houses that draw us helplessly into a world we cannot understand. In such a world an old-fashioned ghost has almost a friendly look.

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, NOVEMBER 6, 1959.