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The Adaptable Ghost

A RADIO adaptation of *Berkeley Square*, heard a week or two ago from 2YC, showed once again how hard it is to make supernatural themes convincing. This play was built around the idea that the past is conserved outside time, and may be visited by the right sort of person in favourable circumstances. The idea is interesting, but perhaps too fragile for dramatic treatment. If a leap into fantasy is too sudden and too far, our critical faculties are awakened, and it is an easy step from disbelief to laughter. In a short story, skilfully written, the effect might have been different. We have moved on a little since the older type of ghost story could make readers fearful in candlelight. The churchyard at midnight, the sheeted figure in dusty corridors, and the clanking of chains from vault or cellar have long become the properties of burlesque. This does not mean that the theme of the restless or intruding spirit has lost its power. But the newer method is more subtle, even—to suggest a paradox—more scientific.

The supernatural is treated most successfully by stories that are just on the edge of reality. What men fear most is a disturbance of the commonplace—a sensation of strangeness, beyond rational explanation, in the midst of all that is known and familiar. Life in space and time depends on intricate balances, and the faintest departure from the ordered march of our days brings us to the edge of an earthquake. Behind the order is the feeling of a larger reality, or at least the awareness of mind outside conscious thought; and writers and dramatists are sometimes able to chill us with suggestions of what might happen if the unknown began to invade everyday experience. For that

reason the new settings are often made deliberately prosaic. It is not the old and dilapidated house which becomes the scene of a modern "haunting," but a bright room in a flat, a ship at sea, a plane in the skies, a train or a bus. Ghosts are very adaptable. There is no longer much scope for them in Gothic interiors, but they can find places and occasions in an age of machines.

The teachings of psychology, which might have been expected to turn ghost stories into museum pieces, have opened new possibilities. Many writers now concern themselves with stories of obsession. The ghosts are in the minds of those who see them; and they are there because the minds are weakened. They are projections of fear or guilt, but are not less terrible because they come from within. On the contrary, the haunted person (no matter what scientific explanations may be given about him) is more terrifying than the haunted place, for a house may be left or burnt to the ground, and the dark forest can be avoided; but the obsessed man goes around in his own prison, and cannot escape. Moreover, the reader is not allowed to see too much: the strangeness is rarely explained, but is enough to take him in imagination to the darker places of mind that are known to him in dreams. A man upon whom the abnormal is encroaching is in a world out of focus. The experience can be the same today, when text books describe it as the result of mental disorder, as it was in simpler times. And underneath our new knowledge we are still aware of the darkness, still able to feel the longing to rise above the flow of time, and still ready to listen to those who for a moment or two can make us hear surf in the night as if it were breaking on the coasts of another world.

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