

A Haunted House

by A.A. Milne

We have been trying to hide it from each other, but the truth must now come out. Our house is haunted.

Well, of course, anybody's house might be haunted. Anybody might have a headless ghost walking about the battlements or the bath-room at midnight, and if it were no more than that, I should not trouble you with the details. But our house is haunted in a peculiar way. No house that I have heard of has ever been affected in quite this way before.

I must begin by explaining that it is a new house, built just before the war. (Before the war, not after; this is a true story.) Its first and only tenant was a Mrs. Watson-Watson, who lived here with her daughter. Add her three servants, and you have filled the house. No doubt she could have stowed people away in the cellar, but I have never heard that she did; she preferred to keep it for such coal and wood as came her way. When Mrs. Watson-Watson decided six months ago to retire to the country, we took the house, and have lived here since. And very comfortably, except for this haunting business.

As was to be expected, we were busy for the first few weeks in sending on Mrs. Watson-Watson's letters. Gradually, as the news of her removal got round to her less intimate friends, the flow of them grew less, and at last--to our great relief, for we were always mislaying her address--it ceased altogether. It was not until then that we felt ourselves to be really in possession of our house.

We were not in possession for long. A month later a letter arrived for Lady Elizabeth Mullins. Supposing this to be a *nom-de-guerre* of Mrs. Watson-Watson's, we searched for, and with great difficulty found, the missing address, and sent the letter on. Next day there were two more letters for Lady Elizabeth; by the end of the week there were half a dozen; and for the rest of that month they came trickling in at the rate of one a day. Mrs. Watson-Watson's address was now definitely lost, so we tied Lady-Elizabeth's letters up in a packet and sent them to the ground-landlord's solicitors. Solicitors like letters.

It was annoying at this time, when one was expecting, perhaps, a very important cheque or communication from the Prime Minister, to go downstairs eagerly at the postman's knock and find a couple of letters for Lady Elizabeth and a belated copy of the *Church Times* for Mrs. Watson-Watson. It was still more annoying, that, just when we were getting rid of Lady Elizabeth, Mr. J. Garcia should have arrived to take her place.

Mr. Garcia seems to be a Spaniard. At any rate, most of his letters came from Spain. This makes it difficult to know what to do with them. There was something clever in Spanish on the back of the last one, which may be the address to which we ought to return it, but on the other hand, may be just the Spanish for "Always faithful" or "Perseverance" or "Down with the bourgeoisie." He seems to be a busier person than Lady Elizabeth. Ten people wrote to him the other week, whereas there were never more than seven letters in a week for her ladyship.

Until lately, I have always been annoyed by the fact that there is no Sunday post in London. To come down to breakfast knowing that on this morning anyhow there is no chance of an O.B.E. takes the edge off one's appetite. But lately, I have been glad of the weekly respite. For one day in seven I

can do without the excitement of wondering whether there will be three letters for Mr. Garcia this morning, or two for Lady Elizabeth, or three for Lady Elizabeth, or one for Mrs. Watson-Watson. I will gladly let my own correspondence go in order to be saved from theirs. But on Sunday last, about tea-time, there came a knock at the front-door and the unmistakable scuttle of a letter being pushed through the slit and dropping into the hall, My senses are now so acute in this matter, that I can almost distinguish the scuffle of a genuine Garcia from that of a Mullins or even a Watson-Watson. There was a novelty about this arrival which was interesting. I went into the hall, and saw a letter on the floor, unstamped and evidently delivered by hand. It was inscribed to Sir John Poling.

Will somebody offer an explanation? I have given you our story--leaving out as accidental, and not of sufficient historic interest, the postcard to the Countess of Westbury and the obvious income-tax form to Colonel Todgers, C.B.--and I feel that it is up to you or the Psychical Research Society or somebody to tell us what it all means. My own explanation is this. I think that our house is haunted by ghosts, but by the ghosts of living persons only, and that these ghosts are visible to outsiders, but invisible to the inmates Thus Mr. Lopez, while passing down our street, suddenly sees J. Garcia looking at him from our drawing-room window. "Caramba!" he says, "I thought he was in Barcelona." He makes a note of the address, and when he gets back to Spain writes long letters to Garcia begging him to come back to his Barcelonian wife and family. At another time somebody else sees Sir John Poling letting himself in at the front door with a latch-key. "So that's where he lives now," she says to herself, and spreads the news among their mutual friends. Of course, this is very annoying for us, and one cannot help wishing that these ghosts would confine themselves to one of the back bedrooms. Failing this, they might leave some kind of address in indelible letters on the bath-mat.

Another explanation is that our address has become in some way a sort of typical address, just as "Thomas Atkins" became the typical soldier for the purpose of filling up forms, and "John Doe" the typical litigant. When a busy woman puts our address on an envelope beneath the name of Lady Elizabeth Mullins, all she means is that Lady Elizabeth lives somewhere, and that the secretary had better look up the proper address and write it in before posting the letter. Every now and then the secretary forgets to do this, and the letter comes here. This may be a compliment to the desirability of our house, but it is a compliment of which we are getting tired. I must ask that it should now cease.

Source:

Milne, A.A. "A Haunted House." *If I May*. Electronic.