



She Didn't Believe in Ghosts

by Jacqueline Downs

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Like any place nearby and far away, long ago and right now, Crystal Palace is full of ghosts. Not the ghosts of people – Ann Buckingham didn't believe in ghosts, even though she felt like one herself at times, as she receded into a life that had turned out to be as translucent as baby skin; as pale as a corpse.

So, she didn't believe in the white sheet with the eyeholes cut out, or finding belongings in the sitting room rearranged, or the glass being pushed around a Ouija board, or 'help me' lipsticked on the bathroom mirror. As far as Ann Buckingham was concerned, when you were dead you were dead; there was no coming back. For Ann, the ghosts of Crystal Palace were in the just-visible roots of the Palace itself, and in the White Hart hotel, in the site of the old windmill, in the homely cottages that once lined Westow Hill; replaced by the beauty parlours and cafés and estate agents that made up the overcast milieu of her life.

Missing people were different; missing people were neither dead nor alive; they inhabited that uncanny plane between what is known and what is unknown. They lived in the minds of the people who missed them and they became living ghosts, neither fully present nor fully absent.

Mostly, Ann felt like the missing. Where once she'd been a fully-drawn person, life and its disappointments and losses had reduced her to an outline. She did the same thing over and over every day, drifting through her routine like a white feather on a breeze. The breakfast made, the washing up done, the laundry on. She was living a life that had been written by someone from the 1950s. She took to sitting in the local library when she should have been ironing, or shopping for fresh fish, or making the beds, or – in a different life – visiting a Parisian hotel with a lover. She had started by browsing the books, picking them off the shelves, dipping into the worlds they offered her. Then she discovered the postcard images from long ago of this place that she

knew right now: the carriage-like cars with their oversized wheels, frozen on the uneven road by the streets she walked daily; the blurred figures in long dark coats and stiff hats; the cottages and cobbles and churches.

These postcards that illustrated the days when one century had become another led her elsewhere: to the archives of newspapers and the microfiche with its luminous glare giving off the ghosts of stories past. It took her a while to accustom her wrist to the machine, and for some time the pages spun before her at dizzying speed. Her eyes flickered over the screen as she tried to make some sense of the words on it, until her wrist, and her eyes, came to light on a page from *The Norwood Review* from the 27th of May 1900. Her attention was caught by a headline. ‘FOURTH LOCAL MAN STILL MISSING’ and in smaller print ‘mystery deepens, police no closer to solution’. The article outlined the case: the four men had been part of the Upper Norwood Literary and Scientific Society which met in Forrester’s Hall on Westow Street, under the presidency of Arthur Conan Doyle. When the writer had resigned in 1894, this group of men had retained their links to the hall with a variety of clubs and organisations, trying to settle on something of interest. When one of the men, Alfred Cooper, had journeyed to Paris at the end of 1895, he had seen on a makeshift screen the first flickering movements of babies eating breakfast, of leaves fluttering in the breeze, of workers leaving a factory, and he brought back with him to Crystal Palace a desire to share these wonderful dreams with his friends. ‘We sat in the dark together, as one, and we watched as these photographs moved and danced before us, and it was as though ghosts were coming to life before my eyes,’ he is reported to have said at the inaugural meeting of the Crystal Ciné Club.

Ann read on, her wrist taking her back and forth between the unfolding of the mystery. The men had met regularly, spending the end of the century buying the equipment necessary to watch these one-reelers with their primitive narratives, a combination of realism and fantasy. Then, between February and May 1900, they had disappeared from public life. One by one they no longer attended their jobs or their club; they no longer took in the clear air in the park or the blackened smoke of Church Road. As each one left, the others continued, making no comment, appearing resigned to the circumstances, until they, too, took their leave. Their families reported no sightings of them. Cooper and his friends, Samuel Cheevener, Thomas Bateson and William Makepeace, had simply vanished.

Ann scoured the photographs that accompanied the stories, noting the tidy beard and trimmed moustache of Cooper, Makepeace’s Homburg, Bateson and Cheevener’s greatcoats. She tucked her long, red hair behind her ears, scribbled the details in her notebook, sketched the men in the charcoal of her pencil, capturing their likenesses, printing their names beneath their faces, frozen as they were on the lined page.

It was only closing time that drove her back home. There, she did what she had to do but it was as though someone else’s hands made the dinner; someone else’s voice held conversations. When she slept that night she dreamt of trains arriving at stations, of babies being fed, of bearded men in tall hats, and then blankness, nothingness.

The next morning, the house to herself, she made tea, as she always did. She glanced up at the window pane, where the steam from the kettle was clouding her view. When she looked again, she saw the merest trace of letters, what appeared to her startled eyes as C, I, N, before they weakened and disappeared, trickling down the pane, like tears.

She was at the library doors when they opened, back on the microfiche, back with the Norwood Review. After the end of May 1900 the story seemed also to disappear from view. The police had given up and so had the reporters. There was nothing left to see.

She made her way down Westow Hill to Anerley Hill, passing the museum. Although the ground was smooth and the path clear, she tripped, falling sideways into the gate at the museum’s entrance. ‘If I was a character in a film,’ she thought, ‘I would have to take this as a sign.’ So she imagined she was a character in a film and she took the fall as a sign and she entered through the gate, over the pebbles, round the back and up the stairs into the rooms of glass cabinets, and carefully printed explanations, and models of the Crystal Palace. There was nothing she could see about the Literary and Scientific Society or the Crystal Ciné Club. She spoke to the man behind the counter, the only person in the museum, about her discovery in the library, and he took her to a door off the side of the main room. Unlocking it, and gesturing to the winding staircase behind it, he said: ‘Up there you’ll find a storeroom. There are

some old trunks, from way back, Victorian times I think. Have a look round, you never know what you’ll find.’ And before she could take her first step towards the staircase he was gone.

She was there for hours, rooting through boxes and cases and trunks, finding nothing of consequence. Sitting on the floor, leaning against one of the bigger trunks, she felt something give at the small of her back, and turning behind her she saw that a panel in the side of the trunk had shifted slightly. She pushed it gently and it gave a little further. She pushed again and it moved entirely, yielding up a gap large enough to get her hand in. She felt her way into the space, and when she pulled her hand out she was surprised to find in her fingers a tiny reel of film. Without thinking, she placed it in her purple satchel, made her way down the staircase, out of the door and into the main room. There was a woman at the counter this time and she was clearly taken aback. ‘How did you get up there? That’s supposed to be locked,’ she said. Ann smiled as warmly as she was able to in this newly chilly atmosphere. ‘I had an arrangement,’ she said, ‘with the manager.’ And she passed through the room and out of the main door before the woman could protest that *she* was the manager and there had been no such arrangement and...

A week of washing and cooking and ironing later and Ann had the contents of that film reel on a DVD. Her shivering fingers posted the disc into its slot and the picture appeared at once. It was grainy and jumpy, the novelty of its movements enhanced and exaggerated by the damage done by the passing of time. She moved closer to the screen as the footage of the magnificent front of the Palace sharpened into view. At first there was just the Palace and the grass and the wide, open space of the park. Then her eyes were caught by what appeared to be human shapes. The figures moved slowly, as though weighed down by more than a century of mystery. Two figures wore greatcoats, the tails flapping in the breeze, another had on a Homburg. The last had his face turned away from the camera. She was close enough to the machine to hit the rewind button and the figures reversed and disappeared before making their appearance again. And again, and again. They repeated these actions, moving back and forth, back and forth, although she had stopped hitting the rewind button. She remembered the greatcoats and the Homburg from the newspaper reports. As the missing men walked their interminable walk beyond the Palace, across the grounds and back, again and again, over and over, the last one turned,

his face looking directly into the camera. He had a tidy beard and a trimmed moustache. His mouth opened and she saw the words form, as faintly but distinctly as the letters on the window pane in her kitchen. ‘Help us.’ She jumped back, her stomach dropping like a bird shot from its nest. ‘Help us.’ Before she could hit the stop button she noticed a fifth figure, a woman, not written about in the reports. The woman’s clothes were different, more modern, and in colour. As the female figure approached the camera, unacknowledged by the men, Ann was able to see her more clearly than she had ever seen anything in her life: the blue skirt, the black shoes, the purple satchel. As she saw the red hair of the woman swinging in the breeze against the backdrop of the Palace she knew she was lost forever.

