

Stephen Johnson

– Introduction –

‘A menacing enchantment’ – that memorable phrase occurs in *The Sculptor’s Daughter*, the childhood memoir of Tove Jansson, creator of the Moomins. It captures the sense of both magic and encroaching darkness that was so much part of the infant (and adult) Jansson’s imaginative world. And yet there was one thing that made little Tove feel safe amid the blackness of the long Finnish winter nights: stories, particularly the stories told to her by her mother, the illustrator Signe Hammarsten-Jansson – later the model for Jansson’s wise, practical, endlessly loving Moominmamma:

The log-fire is alight and we draw up the big chair. We turn out the lights in the studio and sit in front of the fire and she says: once there was a little girl who was terribly pretty and her mummy liked her so awfully much . . . A soft gentle voice in the warm darkness and one gazes into the fire and nothing is dangerous. Everything else is outside and can’t get in. Not now or at any time.

But not everyone is blessed with a mummy like Signe-Hammarsten-Jansson. For those who aren’t,

there may be another possibility: that the story itself can perform a similar function, giving form to the threatening shadows, and in the process taming them, containing them. When the story is well told, maybe the very pleasure we take in the telling can help us deal with those fears – make them less menacing and more enchanting.

My first memory of being gripped, scared, but also enthralled, by a ghost story goes back to when I was about five. I was with my mother in the kitchen, and David Davis, head of BBC's *Children's Hour*, was beginning a story on the radio. I'd heard that beautifully modulated, deliciously reassuring voice before, reading *Winnie the Pooh* and *The Wind in the Willows*, and I made myself comfortable in preparation for a similar 'Listen with Mother' session. What I got, however, was M. R. James's terrifying *The Haunted Doll's House*, in which two children are somehow made away with by the hideous, frog-faced apparition of the rich grandfather their coldly avaricious parents have obviously murdered. I remember spending a fearful, truly haunted night – and yet I was also hooked. Was this pure emotional masochism on my part, or was there a sense that I needed to face something down? To peer into the darkness that so frightened me? Could it even be that I'd begun to realise what Thomas Hardy had grasped: that, 'If a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst'?

After decades of grappling with the dread and

weird exhilaration that goes with the bipolar condition I have suffered with since my teens, I'd like to think that I was close to the right track. Human beings have always loved frightening and being frightened by each other – within reason, of course, and as long as one retains that sense of being in a fundamentally 'safe space'. An adrenaline rush, followed by a pleasurable dopamine release when one draws oneself up, looks around, and remembers that it's all make-believe – maybe for many that's all it ever needs to be. But for others, and especially for some of the troubled men and women who wove these stories together in the first place, I suspect that it was more than that. Looking back on the ghost stories that riveted me as a teenager and as a young adult, I'm struck by how many of them contain descriptions of states of mind strongly reminiscent of my own more unpleasant episodes. Picture M. R. James's unfortunate scholar Dunning, in *Casting the Runes*, on his way back from the solidly rational British Museum to his reassuringly dull suburban dwelling place, unaware that a curse has been placed upon him:

More than once on his way home that day Mr. Dunning confessed to himself that he did not look forward with his usual cheerfulness to a solitary evening. It seemed to him that something ill-defined and impalpable had stepped between him and his fellow-men – had taken him in charge, as it were.

Excursions into dangerous mental territory often start with something like that. As James says in one of the stories included here, ‘Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad’, *experto crede* – ‘believe one who has experience of this.’ That flash of personal detail, rare in James’s stories, has led some to infer that the author himself had encountered appalling supernatural events like those he describes so vividly. But James always denied it, and I believe him. The experience I think he alludes to is the mental state itself: terror, painfully heightened awareness (hypervigilance, as the specialists put it) and dreadful imaginings – half-waking nightmares beyond the conscious control of the sufferer. I have experienced the same kind of thing myself at times when I’ve sensed, however falteringly, however unwillingly, that I too was contending with something that occupied the haunted corridors of my own brain: something too dreadful to be faced directly. It’s striking how many of the finest, subtlest ghost stories leave open the question of whether the ‘ghost’ is best understood as an objective or a subjective horror – Emily Dickinson’s ‘superior spectre’. Henry James’s classic *The Turn of the Screw* springs to mind, followed speedily and stealthily by Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s taut little masterpiece *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Penelope’s Lively’s *Black Dog* poses the same question, but the other way round: initially it seems likely that the disturbance is ‘all in the mind’; but could it actually be objectively real – or is there another, still more

challenging way of looking at it? The best ghost stories often leave the reader with questions like that, questions which, however plausibly they may be answered, only lead to more questions: in Dickinson's words, 'a superior spectre – Or More – '?

Therein lies the big difference between the ghost story and the other great English-language mystery genre, the detective story. Many detective stories start by creating a sense of the uncanny, so much so that we may at first believe there really is an element of the supernatural – think of Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Agatha Christie's *The Pale Horse*, or any number of G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown stories. Then the detective gets to work; reason is applied and finally light is shone into those dark corners. Bewildering, frightening events are explained and set in order – think how many of these expertly engineered tales end with the triumphant sleuth laying it all out in clear narrative form to an enthralled audience. The rational mind – what Poirot famously called his 'little grey cells' – has triumphed.

Great ghost stories rarely start by springing the traumatic event upon us; more usually they build up to it steadily, carefully, though we may sense early on that something is seriously amiss, even – perhaps especially – when the scene set before us at the outset appears comfortable, predictable, everyday. It can be solid, orderly and well-lit as Mr. Dunning's British Museum, or cosy as the family fireside setting where W. W. Jacobs's

‘The Monkey’s Paw’ begins its steady crescendo of horror. We are lulled into a false sense of security, and so are less able to dismiss or diminish the terrible thing when it finally reveals itself.

For Robert Aickman, the still undervalued creator of what he preferred to call ‘strange stories’, there was a lot more to all this than the enjoyment of a little adrenalin-boosting fun. Aickman set out his theory in a letter he wrote on his acceptance of the World Fantasy Award in 1976:

I believe that at the time of the Industrial and French Revolutions . . . mankind took a wrong turning. The beliefs that one day, by application of reason and the scientific method, everything will be known, and every problem and unhappiness solved, seem to me to have led to a situation where, first, we are in imminent danger of destroying the whole world.

Whatever one thinks of Aickman’s comments as a philosophical or historical summary – an explanation of where humankind as a whole went astray – the notion of some kind of ‘wrong turning’ does seem to lie behind a lot of the most enduring literary ghost stories. No matter whether it involves a literal wrong turning or something more mysterious and elusive, in each case a character makes a mistake and places trust in the wrong kind of mental compass: nemesis is waiting in the wings to punish hubris. Something within us, the ‘superior spectre’, needs to be encountered and