



# Our Haunted House on the Hudson

*What is it like to live with invisible (most of the time) companions? According to this family, haunting is for savoring—when the spirits are friendly*

BY HELEN HERDMAN ACKLEY

I SAW OUR HOUSE for the first time on a hot July day in 1967. A bedraggled old Victorian, it had stood vacant for seven years. Its waist-high lawn clutched about a sturdy stone foundation; its wood-shingled roof was awry. But as I followed the real-estate agent and

my husband, George, into the spacious hall, I knew I was home.

George, already working in New York City, moved into the house as soon as the final papers were signed. My job was to shuttle between our Maryland farm and our new home, closing one while renovating the

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other. One afternoon the neighborhood children broke up a lively ball game to question me. Yes, we *had* bought the house. Yes, we *did* have children—four—although they wouldn't arrive for another week. When I told them they could look through the house, two of the kids hung back. The others giggled. "They think there's ghosts in there. They're scared. Did you know you bought a haunted house?"

Later in the day, the plumber who was re-creating the water system asked me, "Are you planning to be here long, Mrs. Ackley?"

"Until 4:30, Bob. I have to pick up my husband at five. What's the matter? Have you run into problems?"

Bob hesitated. "It's not that, Mrs. Ackley. I keep hearing footsteps on

the stairs and walking around overhead. I must have run up and down those steps six times the other day, and I couldn't find anybody. I'm ready to go now, but I don't want to leave you here alone."

I looked at Bob, standing there, young, nearly six feet tall, solidly built. His concern was real.

I managed a smile. "Don't worry, Bob. I might as well get used to being here alone."

That night I told George about the two conversations as we got ready for bed. He nodded his head gravely and pulled up the covers. Sliding in beside him, I realized the hall light was burning. With a groan I started up.

"Where are you going?" George demanded.



## OUR HAUNTED HOUSE ON THE HUDSON

"To turn off the light, of course."

"Leave it on."

I looked at him. "Since when have you slept with a light on?"

"Since the first night I moved in here, and I don't want to discuss it. Good night!" He turned over, his back to me.

As I dropped off to sleep, I wondered what it was with these crazy men and this lovely old house. I got nothing but good vibes. So we lived with the footsteps, and I have found it reassuring to have such a vigilant patrolman on duty 24 hours a day. Anyway, all old houses creak.

**FOOTSTEPS.** A light-fixture cord swaying over the family dinner table on a windless day, then stopped in mid-swing as if by some unseen hand.

French doors suddenly flung open. A casement window gaping. These performances were not given on command, but several friends did see the phenomena. George nailed the casements shut, and Cynthia, our oldest daughter—then 15—quietly closed the French doors when she found them ajar.

**GEORGE TRAVELS FREQUENTLY**, and at such times I may read into the early morning and even pace about the house with the lights out. One winter night, I stood at the window in the dining room looking out at our view of the Hudson River.

The leaves were gone from the trees, and shore lights shone across the water. The diamond necklace of the Tappan Zee Bridge undulated

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## HAUNTED HOUSE

with light over the still river. As I stood storing the magnificent memory, a chill engulfed my left side. Someone was standing beside me. Very close beside me. Every hair on my neck and scalp stirred as I slowly turned my head. No body stood there, but an entity certainly did occupy that space.

"It's beautiful on the river, isn't it?" I asked aloud. (It isn't that I was calm, but I do react steadily in times of stress.) As I spoke, my hair eased back into place, and I felt no threat in the presence beside me. We stood looking out the window for a few more minutes. Then I turned to leave. My invisible companion turned with me and walked beside me across the room. I hesitated at the door. So did the other.

"Thank you for sharing the view with me. I'm going to bed now. Good night." I walked alone down the hall to my bedroom, quivering, and closed the door behind me. Somehow I got to sleep and slept soundly all night.

CYNTHIA had never been hard to arouse in the mornings, but now she began to get up and dress even before George and I rolled out of bed. "It's spooky, Mother," she explained. "Every morning at exactly the same time my bed starts shaking. And if I don't get up right away, the bed shakes even harder."

Cyn was not scared or even upset. She had just hoped to sleep in later during the pending Christmas holiday. The plan we hit upon was not



*"Footsteps on the stairs . . . watching eyes . . . voices in empty rooms . . ."*

logical, perhaps, but it worked. Cynthia explained the situation to her invisible alarm clock, out loud, before going to bed that night. And during the vacation Cyn slept in every morning.

OVER THE YEARS, we have made many changes in our house. Many times I've been sure that no self-respecting ghost would put up with the hammering, dust and confusion, but odd things continued to occur. The living-room window flew up unexpectedly, startling many a guest. We initiated would nonchalantly murmur, "That's enough, now!" while closing the window. That would usually suffice for the eve-

ning. After we had painted the woodwork and the window lock was newly engaged, untoward motion ceased. But sometimes, in the summer, I like to unlock that window and let the ghosts have at it.

ONE DAY I attacked the battleship-gray living room. Paint time was at hand, and I was perched atop an eight-foot stepladder when I felt watching eyes. The feeling was not unfamiliar, but it was still a bit unnerving. I knew George was at work and the kids were in school.

I turned my head. The room was empty. I started working again. But the eerie feeling persisted, so I spoke out loud. "I hope you like the color. Hope you're pleased with what we're doing to the house. It cer-

tainly must have been lovely when it was first built."

As I talked I kept painting, but I felt the energy of those eyes, focused on the nape of my neck. I looked over my shoulder again. "He" sat there in midair, smiling at me from in front of the cold fireplace. Hands clasped around his crossed knees, he was nodding and rocking. He faded slowly, still smiling, and was gone. But I knew then that he approved of the work our family had lavished on our mutual home.

What did he look like? He was the most cheerful and solid-looking little person I've ever seen. A cap of white hair framed his round, apple-cheeked face, and there were piercing blue eyes under thick white eyebrows. His light-blue suit was

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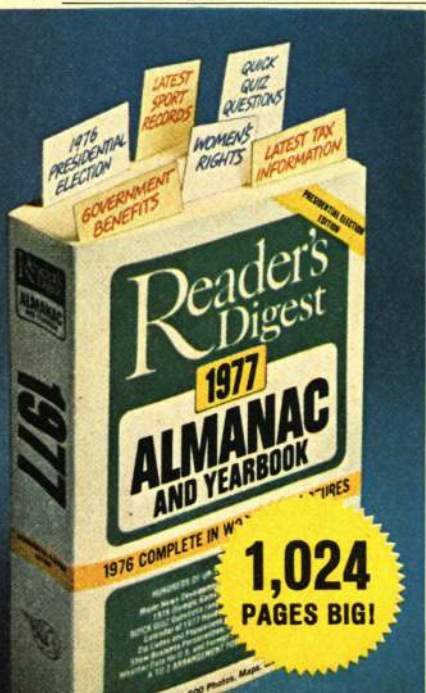
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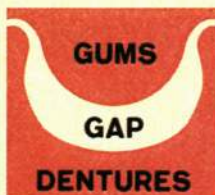




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immaculate, the cuffs of the short unbuttoned jacket turned back over ruffles at his wrists. A white ruffled stock showed at his throat. Below breeches cut to his kneecaps he wore white hose and shiny black pumps with buckles.

No, I wasn't drinking that day. No, the paint fumes hadn't got to me. No, I don't know why I saw him then—and have never seen him since. But I do know that he seemed happy to be there, and I was proud to meet him.

CYNTHIA WAS INTERESTED in my description of the gentleman because her shadowy roommate was quite different. On two or three occasions she had seen the outline of a thin hooded figure of medium height,

and was quite sure it was a woman.

Through the years, a number of our friends have told us of odd experiences they've had in our home—doors that wouldn't stay closed, voices coming from empty rooms, a sense of being watched or even warned away. But not until my cousin Alfred, his wife, Ingrid, and their daughter came to visit in 1974 did anyone outside our immediate family “meet” one of our ghosts.

At breakfast after their first night with us, Ingrid's hands shook as she held her coffee cup. She had awakened before daylight, she said, aware that someone was walking around in the room. Then, silhouetted against the French doors, she saw the figure of a man dressed in a long jacket of the Revolutionary

period. On his head was a curled, white-powdered wig.

He moved to the foot of the bed and sat down with his back toward Ingrid. The mattress gave as if someone had sat down on the edge. Then the figure opened a big book in midair. The book glowed as if it were lighted from inside. The figure turned the pages one by one as though he were looking for something. Finally he closed it, stood up, and was gone.

THERE ARE always little incidents to mull over in a house like ours. There was the time George's ham sandwich disappeared as he worked. The look on his face was bewilderment and then rage that one of us would eat his hard-earned sandwich. We never really convinced him that we hadn't touched it—although we all concluded, finally, that succulent ham sandwiches must be enticing down through the ages.

OUR GHOSTS have continued to delight us for nine years. When he's home from college, our son, George, like Cynthia, is shaken awake each day. Son William has only had his bed shaken once (when he slept in Cynthia's room), and daughter Cara Lee seldom, as she is an early riser. But Cara Lee is on the lookout for

the presence that often makes her feel that someone is sitting on the empty living-room sofa. And, just recently, my husband saw a figure in the hall which disappeared as he came up the basement steps. Only the foot was in his line of vision—clad in a soft moccasin-like slipper.

Then there are what we call our gifts from the ghosts. A pair of tiny silver tongs for Cynthia when she was married. And, later on, a small, embossed, golden baby ring, to honor the birth of our first grandchild. After every possible attempt, we have never been able to explain their appearance in our home.

We have come to savor these happenings. They give a sense of the continuity of the past with the present and with the future. These elusive spirits seem gracious, thoughtful—only occasionally frightening—and thoroughly entertaining. Now we wonder: if the time comes for us to move again, is there any way we can take our other-worldly friends with us?

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*Money Game.* In recognition of the high salaries being paid sports figures, a new award should be established—for the player who holds out for the highest salary contract each year. It would be called "The Heistman Trophy."

—Bill Edwards, quoted by Troy Gordon in *Tulsa World*