The Unquiet Office

by Marion Pitman

Five of us went back to Maud Rogers’ flat after the meeting. Rogers asked us to behave ourselves, as she had a maiden aunt staying with her; this produced a certain amount of ribaldry.

“Honestly,” she said, “You women are impossible. Aunt Irene’s a perfectly respectable person, she was a classics tutor at St Ann’s, she’s just retired. I don’t really know her—Father doesn’t approve of her. She asked if she could stay for a bit while she looks round for a flat in Town. Don’t embarrass me, all right?”

We promised to be good. When we got to the flat we were talking about a man at Compton’s office who kept on about how the country had gone to the dogs since women got the vote, and blaming women for the General Strike, and the Russian revolution—I mean, honestly, how mad can you get?

So Rogers made coffee, and we all sat down, and Rogers asked us not to smoke, in case Aunt Irene came in; and we got on to men in the office generally, and I mentioned the chap at Osborne’s who was worried about ghosts. At that point the front door opened, and an elderly woman came in.

She was tall, and quite thin, very smartly if eccentrically dressed, with silver hair in a small bun. Rogers leapt to her feet:

“Aunt Irene! Have you been out?”

“Irene, dear, three syllables, it’s from the Greek. Obviously I’ve been out. I went to the cinema. A dramatisation of Bram Stoker’s novel Dracula, I don’t know if you’ve read it. It was very popular at one time, with a rather remarkable actor by the name of Lugosi. Quite nonsensical, of course, but very entertaining—and quite sensual, in an allusive way. How was your meeting?”

“Oh, you know, it was a meeting. Would you like some coffee?”

Miss Rogers accepted coffee, and Maud introduced us.

We all sat down, and conversation rather languished until Edith Compton said,

“Well, go on, Jane, tell us about the ghosts.”

Miss Rogers looked politely interested, so I started again, with a “new readers begin here” for her benefit—“I work at Osborne’s, the publishers; their offices are in an old building, eighteenth century, and a chap who joined the firm last month reckons it’s haunted. I never heard anything about it before; but he says he’s felt a presence in his office and in the corridor, and he won’t stay after it gets dark. Which is all right in the summer, but it’s going to make things a bit difficult in winter. He’s trying to get old Osborne to move him to a different office, but Osborne’s a militant rationalist, and he’s dead against ‘encouraging superstition’, so I’m afraid Mr. Marston may not be with us long. Which is a pity, because he seems a decent sort, and it’s quite refreshing to have someone on the staff who’s under fifty, besides me.”

“But what about the ghost?” asked Miss Rogers, “Does he know anything about it?”

Mabel Frome giggled (she’s a terrible giggler, I don’t know how Compton puts up with it), and I frowned and said, “Well—I didn’t ask him. I never really thought…”

“It’s important to find out as much as possible, if you hope to do anything about it.” Miss Rogers seemed perfectly serious. “If you can give me the address, I could try to find out if there are any previous reports of haunting. And do ask Mr. Marston if he senses anything about the presence.”

“But—” I was definitely taken aback by this, “Miss Rogers, Osborne’s have been in the place for twenty years or more, since about 1910. Surely if there was a ghost, someone would have said something before?”

“Not necessarily; not if there hasn’t been a sensitive person in that particular room. And even if there has, they might have hesitated to say anything, given Mr. Osborne’s views.”

Frome giggled again, and said, “Are you a psychical research expert, Miss Rogers?”
Miss Rogers smiled—“I wouldn’t say that, but one… comes across things.”

I gave her the address—I mean, Osborne’s address is public property—and we talked about other things for a while. I rather took to Miss Rogers, in spite of her odd manner and apparent belief in spooks, and when the party was breaking up—quite soon, as most of us had to go to work the next day—I said,

“Why don’t you come and see me in the office next week? If you come about one o’clock, Marston, who has the haunted office, will be taking his lunch hour. You could see the place for yourself.”

“Thank you, I will, if you think it acceptable. I don’t want to intrude on your work.”

“Not at all; if anyone asks, you’ve come to talk about the book you’re writing.” I smiled, and she said in mock horror,

“My dear girl, I shouldn’t dream of writing a book! There are far too many unnecessary books already, written by people who ought to know better!”

“Well, I can try to persuade you to change your mind. How about Tuesday?”

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