

Ghosts of Granada

From: Margaret Merry

We sailed from Plymouth, in the wake of those great adventurers Charles Darwin, Francis Drake and the Pilgrim Fathers, to begin our new life in Spain. Disembarking from the ferry in the grey gloom of a late November morning, we drove through France and spent the night near the Spanish border before continuing our journey the following day. Despite the torrential rain and sleety showers which accompanied us for most of the way, our drive from one end of the country to the other was uneventful and as we descended through the sierras of Granada, towards our destination on the Costa Tropical, we saw the sea, below a cloudless blue sky, sparkling in the distance. We had made it! Everything had gone remarkably well and we congratulated ourselves accordingly. Furthermore, the house which we had rented in the resort town of Salobrea while waiting for our own to be built seemed to fit our requirements perfectly: it was situated in a quiet corner of a much sought-after, mountainside urbanization overlooking the sea; it had a garage in which to store the bits and pieces we'd brought with us; parking for our two cars; a spacious, securely fenced garden for our two dogs. We had a celebratory meal that night in a restaurant in the town and went to bed.

Not long after we'd settled ourselves down to sleep, I became aware of a noise. It was as though the wind were rattling a door or a window which hadn't been properly closed; strange, because there was no wind that night. The sound persisted and because I knew I'd never get to sleep while it continued, I made Digby, my husband, get out of bed and go to investigate. Complaining, he groped around for the light switch, couldn't find it, so stumbled out of the bedroom into the darkness. The next moment, there was a loud thud followed by a bellow of pain; he had fallen down the short flight of marble stairs leading from the bedrooms into the living room. I was not sympathetic and told him it was his own fault for drinking too much; after all, he'd known that the stairs

were there. He protested that it was nothing to do with how much hed drunk: something had propelled him down those stairs. Yes, I replied, acidly, the drink.

Digby spent a night of extreme discomfort and was in so much pain the next day that he had to consult a doctor who took an X-ray and confirmed that hed broken two ribs. It was not a good start to our Spanish adventure and I was still convinced that the cause of his accident was due to drinking too much wine. Then, a few days later while I was walking down the same marble stairs, carrying an armful of washing, I experienced a curious sensation: it was though I were on board a ship which had made a sudden, almost imperceptible roll. Disconcerted, I clutched the wall and cautiously continued my descent; two days later, the same thing happened again. Digby had been right after all: there was something very funny about those stairs.

Despite suffering a not inconsiderable amount of pain, Digby went to work every day at the family-owned estate agency with which hed been liaising for some while, dealing with English clients. Meanwhile, I took the opportunity to explore the area, walking for miles every day with the dogs. It was a relief to get out of that house and I was always reluctant to return to it due to a feeling of unease, which I couldn't explain, as I climbed the steps to the front door. By now, we were well into December and the days were becoming shorter. One evening, just as it had begun to grow dark, the lights went out. Thinking it might be a power cut, I peered outside and saw that all the other houses on the mountain were lit up. I flicked the trip switch up and down but to no avail; I tried all the switches in the fuse box, but still nothing happened. Finally, I decided to drive myself down to Salobrea and ask Digby to call the electricity company. Someone called later that evening; he opened the fuse box, flicked the trip and immediately trhe lights came on. I felt very foolish. A few days later, the same thing happened again. As I groped my way into the kitchen, feeling around in the darkness for a candle, I sensed, for no accountable reason, a sudden, cold rush of fear. By now, we'd had a telephone installed so I was able to call Digby; he summoned a friend, an electrician, who came round immediately and, just as before, restored the lights by operating the trip. Again, I felt very foolish.

One day, I returned from a shopping trip to find that my little Jack Russell, Charlie, had disappeared. While searching for him in the garden, I heard him barking in the distance and discovered that, somehow, he'd found his way into the walled garden of the unoccupied house next door, further up the road. There was no way I could get him out; I had to phone Digby who, in turn, called a couple of builder friends who came round at once with a ladder, the only way by which the dog could be retrieved. How he'd got into the neighbour's garden was a complete mystery. Again and again I walked around the boundaries of our rented house, looking for a gap in the fence through which Charlie might have wriggled through, but found nothing. Anyway, I asked myself, even if he had managed to get out, how did he find his way into the other garden? It was completely surrounded by a high wall and the only access was by means of an iron gate which even a small cat couldn't have squeezed through. It was an upsetting incident, not least because of the unpleasant and overpowering sensation that, when I'd first discovered Charlie in that garden and had tried to find a way of getting him out, I'd had the distinct impression that there was something close by, revelling in my distress.

Curious things continued to happen in the house. Objects would disappear unaccountably then turn up somewhere else; often, there was that same vague, yet disconcerting, sensation that something was there, resenting our presence. On several occasions I found myself glancing over my shoulder, convinced that I was not alone. At first, Digby and I had said nothing to each other because we both felt rather foolish but by now we were compelled to admit that we disliked the atmosphere in the house and neither of us was happy living there. All the same, we had no choice but to stick it out: after all, we'd paid three months rent and gone to the expense of installing a telephone and a satellite dish for the television. But after a few weeks, our two dogs began to show signs of stress. The older dog, a stout-hearted bull terrier, acquired the habit of incessantly nibbling at his front paws and one day I returned from shopping to find, yet again, the Jack Russell had disappeared. I searched the garden and the road outside but there was no sign of him, nor could I hear him barking. I returned to the house, thinking that he might be asleep somewhere, and eventually discovered him crouched on the floor in one

of the bedrooms, shaking with fright. A few days later the old bull terrier, who'd always been impeccably clean in the house, had an inexplicable lapse and made a mess on the floor of the same room, on exactly the same spot that I'd found Charlie in a distressed state. It was while I was bending down to clean up that I realised just how cold the room was. I would have liked to keep it permanently closed, since we never used it, but the door handle was broken and so it was difficult to keep the dogs out. Less than a week later, the same thing happened. Again, as I bent down to clean the floor, I experienced the same, overwhelming sensation of profound coldness. This made no sense considering that it was late afternoon and the last rays of the setting sun were streaming in through the window. I hurried out of the room, found a piece of string and secured the broken handle so that the door couldn't be opened. I did not want to enter that room again.

One day, Digby came home after a meeting with a colleague in the business of property rental. She'd asked him where we were staying and when he told her, she said that her husband had done some work on the same property and hated going there because of the feeling of unease he always experienced while he was there. She knew the history of the house and told Digby that the family who owned it had realised their dream of living in that location but, shortly afterwards, the husband became depressed and committed suicide by throwing himself from an apartment block. His widow and two little girls didn't want to remain in the house and so it was let. When I heard this, I felt a cold thrill of horror run up my spine and the hairs on the back of my neck bristled. It appeared that our imaginations hadn't run away with us: there really was something very peculiar about that house. Nevertheless, neither of us was prepared to admit that we were victims of supernatural happenings; there had to be a scientific explanation. We knew that there were numerous geological fault lines in the area and judging from the large cracks in the concrete walls surrounding the terraced gardens of our house, it was evidently built on one. Perhaps these fault lines caused interruptions in magnetic fields which, in turn, affected our brain function - or something...

Christmas had come and gone and with the emergence of spring, the days grew warmer and the birds began to sing. It was then that I realised no birds ever came into our garden, despite the fact that it was well stocked with mature shrubs and trees. At least the lengthening days meant that we were able to spend more time outdoors. This was a great relief, since the atmosphere inside the house continued to oppress us. I had begun to have unpleasant dreams and the feeling that our presence was resented intensified. I was convinced that something was intent on doing us harm, especially after an electrician was summoned in order to investigate a problem with the cooker. He discovered a bare, loose wire in the dark recesses of a cupboard and informed me, cheerfully, that if I'd touched it with damp hands, it would have been curtains for me. From then onwards, I took extra care with all electrical appliances. When the first three months of our tenancy were nearly over, we decided that we'd cut our losses and find somewhere else. The stress of living under the perpetual cloud of anxiety induced by the atmosphere in that house was intolerable.

In the event, it all turned out very well. There was a house available to let just a stones throw from the boundary of the land on which our own house was being built and even though it was very small, we seized the opportunity to rent it: even a caravan or a tent would have been preferable to the other place. We moved in on the first of March, a glorious day - warm, sunny and, surely, a good omen. A few days prior to leaving the other house, the plumbing under the kitchen sink had begun to leak slightly. Before we left, we searched everywhere but could find no way of turning off the water supply and as we took our departure, the leak suddenly grew worse and my last sight of the interior, as I closed the front door, was of a spreading pool of water moving slowly towards me as though it were driving me away in a final gesture of deep resentment. We settled into the little house, aptly named El Refugio, and were very content for the next three months after which, at last, we moved into our new home.

We have been living in the province of Granada for six years now and from regular reading of the Spanish press I've discovered that not only are the

people very superstitious but also that they take matters concerning the supernatural seriously. Our regional newspapers regularly publish reports about inexplicable happenings and strange manifestations; Granada, it seems, is full of ghosts. In fact, the provincial government, the Ayuntamiento de Granada, organises guided tours of haunted buildings in the city of Granada comprising seven destinations: the Hospital Real, where the spirit of San Juan de Dios manifests itself; La Diputacin, where the ghost of a woman claiming vengeance for the injustice she suffered drifts about; the Centro Materno Infantil, where, it is claimed, an apparition of the same person appears in two different places at the same time; The Hospital Clinico, where a woman dressed in black has been haunting the building since 1978; the Conservatorio de Msica, in the rooms of which may be heard the ghostly melodies of the Russian composer Scriabin who, it is said, manifested himself after his death in the form of his own music and in the Real Chancillera, which is haunted by the ancient spirit of a warlock known as El Verdugo de la Audencia (The Court Executioner). Finally, to restore peace of mind to those who might be disturbed by such a concentration of ghostly encounters, there is a visit to the Casa Castril del Museo Arqueolgico where, in the summer of 1998, there was an apparition of a woman of such exquisite beauty that even now, it seems, contemplation of her is rewarded with tranquility of the spirit.

According to an expert in parapsychology, the ghostly manifestations in the city of Granada are due to two factors: firstly, its antiquity and the many cultures which have inhabited it and, secondly, the electromagnetic forces of the mineral-rich (including gold - an important component) waters of the River Darro which run under the city. Indeed, there have been numerous reports of inexplicable happenings occurring in buildings situated along its course. Before I came to live in Spain and despite having grown up in Cornwall, which has more than its fair share of spooks and spectres, I was always very sceptical about anything to do with the supernatural. However, since settling in Granada, with all its ghosts, and having had the experience of living in a house which, I'm convinced, was pervaded by some malign influence, I've become much more open-minded.

Three years ago we moved from the coast up into the mountains. Our house, above the little village of Gujar Alto, is in an idyllic setting with sublime views of the sierras, in all their lovely shades of blue and violet, fading into the distance. We are presided over by an imposing, flat-topped mountain which, although it appears serene and beautiful, was once witness to a horrible and bloody battle between Moorish and Christian armies in 1569. After a days combat, with no victory for either side, the Moorish soldiers retreated to the summit to join the women, children and elderly people who had taken refuge there. Deciding that it would be futile to continue the battle, the men left under cover of darkness to a village in the next valley and entrusted those who were unable to follow to the clemency of the Christians. There was to be no mercy, however: the Christian soldiers put to death all the adults and threw the children over the steepest side of the mountain into a ravine which is still called today the Ravine of the Dead. If ever a place deserved to be haunted, it would, surely, be this. Yet, I have walked all over the mountains around my home and not once have I encountered even a hint of a bad vibe. There are no ghosts here: only peace and serenity.