

26 Ravished by a Glass Tube in the Tower of London

The Tower of London is renowned for its many ghosts. Knights in armour, headless figures, and countless dead prisoners including the famous Anne Boleyn.

This tale, however, is quite different from any other, for the ghost appeared as a kind of swirling glass-like tube. Even more strange is that the story dates from 1817, and was originally related by Mr Swifte, keeper of the crown jewels.

One version of the story repeated in *Haunted Homes & Family Legends* gives part of Swifte's account:

In 1814 I was appointed Keeper of the Crown Jewels in the Tower, where I resided with my family till my retirement in 1852. One Saturday night in October 1817, about 'the witching hour', I was at supper with my wife, her sister, and our little boy, in the living-room of the Jewel House, which then comparatively modernised is said to have been the 'doleful prison' of Anne Boleyn, and of the ten bishops whom Oliver Cromwell piously accommodated therein...

Swifte goes on to describe the room as being irregularly shaped with three doors and two 9 foot x 2 foot windows, having between them a stone chimney which projected into the room, and upon which was a large oil painting. He tells that on the night in question both windows were covered by heavy cloth curtains and the doors were closed. Two candles provided the only light.

I sate [*sic*] at the foot of the table, my son on my right hand, his mother fronting the chimney piece, and her sister on the opposite side. I had offered a glass of wine and water to my wife, when on putting it to her lips, she paused, and exclaimed, 'Good God! what is that?' I looked up, and saw a cylindrical figure like a glass tube, seemingly about the thickness of my arm, and hovering between the ceiling and the table; its contents appeared to be a dense fluid, white and pale azure, like to the gathering of a summer-cloud, and incessantly mingling within the cylinder. This lasted about two minutes, when it began slowly to move before my sister-in-law; then, following the oblong shape of the table, before my son and myself; passing behind my wife, it paused for a moment over her right shoulder [observe, there was no mirror opposite to her in which she could behold it]. Instantly she crouched down, and with both hands covering her shoulder, she shrieked out, 'O Christ! it has seized me!'

Swifte goes on to tell of striking out at the strange ghostly figure, which was seen only by himself and his wife, and that neither his son nor his sister-in-law observed the figure. The servants were called to attend to Mrs Swifte, who later suffered no ill effects from the visitation.

There are many and varied accounts of this particular haunting, and they have been added to and altered over the years. Though Swifte's own version should be the most authentic, it would seem that his account omitted details, in order to protect his wife's modesty.

Another version of the tale, given by one of the servants involved, was repeated in another nineteenth century book, *Fantasms of Old London*. It closely follows that related by Swifte himself, but it does enlarge upon the story and gives a fascinating insight into the events of that night.

... we arrived in the room to find Mr Swifte in much agitation, ushering his son and his sister-in-law out of the room, telling them to wait in the children's room upstairs. Mrs Swifte lay upon the floor, her whole bodice agape and her breast bare, showing red risen teeth marks upon them, which were repeated upon her shoulders and neck. She was thrashing around as if engaged in close relations with a lover, but these movements quickly subsided upon our

arrival. Shortly she came fully round, adjusted her clothing and calmly began to tell us what she had perceived in the moments before.

It would seem that a kind of spirit or ghost had come upon her in the shape of a glass roll which swirled within with strange gasses or clouds. Though she could not see him, nor hear him, she perceived in her mind, non the less, a bluff, hearty man, behind her who told her he must have her body, despite the company of her family. Within seconds he had seized her shoulder and pulled open her bodice, all the while biting passionately at her skin. Though Madam went on to tell us in immodest fashion of all that took place, she begged that nothing should be repeated to others for fear her husband's and her own honour be at stake. I can only now tell you this which is common knowledge, but can repeat no more of the events of that night, save that Mrs Swifte appeared to be completely normal and suffered no ill effects or further visits from the wild spirit.

What is one to make of such a strange story? Twentieth century 'sci-fi' imagery in the nineteenth century? A sexual attack by an unknown entity before husband and family? A ghost whose physical body and voice cannot be seen or heard, yet can be visualized and experienced via the mind?

It is difficult to imagine an elaborate hoax which involved a woman deliberately acting in such a way before her own son and sister, yet the question remains: Why were only Mr and Mrs Swifte aware of the ghost, whilst the sister-in-law and son were not? Why, one must ask, should Mrs Swifte go into minute detail when relating her experience to the servants? Was this pre-planned for a purpose, or was Mrs Swifte simply being genuine and honest towards her trusted maids? (One at least does seem to have revealed only what she thought was common knowledge.)

If it had been a hoax, surely a more conventional type of ghost, perhaps a cavalier or a headless figure, would have been more believable to a nineteenth century maid than a floating glass tube filled with vapour? What is more, both Swifte and his wife were well-respected people in a

responsible position, and unlikely to want to jeopardize their standing, let alone risk losing Mr Swifte's well-paid position at the tower.

All in all, the mystery remains unsolved. In the light of the evidence presented to us, we must accept that a very unusual type of haunting did actually take place. A haunting that is perhaps unique not only in the records of ghostly happenings in the tower, but also amongst the thousands of strange and ghostly tales that have been told through the centuries. It remains as mystifying now as it must have been to the nineteenth century keeper of the crown jewels – A glass tube ghost coming to ravish your wife on a cold Saturday night is certainly no ordinary occurrence.

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