

The Discontented Ghosts

"I'm sick of this business," said the first Ghost querulously, as he flipped the ash of his ghostly cigarette over the edge of the tombstone on which he was seated.

"I heartily endorse the sentiment of your words," responded the second Ghost, an academic, unsubstantial-looking creature with a mournful mustache. "I, too, am disgusted with the conditions under which we are bound."

It was a perfect night for ghosts. The ragged clouds permitted the moon to be seen only at intervals, and a fitful wind moaned and howled among the tossing trees. The occasional glows of moonlight revealed an old fence, and the crumbling tombstones on which the two shivering ghosts were crouched.

"W-what's more," continued the ghost with the cigarette, "it's confoundedly cold and windy. The gosh-awful stupidity of humans to think that ghosts can't feel cold! Br-r-r! I'd gladly give my Union Card for a long pull of hot rum." In a nearby tree an owl hooted questioningly.

"That reminds me," said the second Ghost in his scholarly voice. "Were you at the Union Meeting last evening?"

"Yes, I was!" exploded the other. "Of all the crazy tricks! What the dickens do they mean, doing away with minimum ages? Do you think I get any enjoyment out of frightening little girls and boys under seven years of age? Bah!"

"The ghost business is in a bad way," said the academic ghost gravely. "Hardly anybody takes us seriously any more. I fear that we are rapidly becoming obsolete. Yes, indeed, we are but shades of our former selves." And he laughed shrilly at his unconscious pun.

"I don't like it," growled Number One, hurling his cigarette viciously into the grass. "I've always had a liking for little shavers. I don't mind throwing a scare into gloomy misers and simpering old maids, but I draw the line at little 'uns. I have a heart, I have."

"S-s-s-s-t! Someone's coming!"

Light footsteps became audible. The two ghosts huddled on their tombstones, gazing fearfully in the direction of the sound.

"It—it's your turn. You frighten—frighten him," chattered the First Ghost.

"I—don't feel well. Perhaps you had better go. Suppose it's a grown-up person? He—he might chase us."

"Gwan, pluck up your courage. It's only a boy. He won't hurt you."

The Second Ghost, thus urged by his fellow, advanced trembling into the road. The figure of a small boy had appeared out of the darkness. The white-shrouded ghost lifted his arms and emitted a half-hearted groan.

"Come on," commanded the boy in a hoarse bass voice. "Take off that sheet and quit your foolin'."

The ghost, nonplussed for a moment, decided to make a second attempt. Summoning all his courage, he gave vent to a sepulchral "Boo!"

"Aw, cut it out," responded the victim scornfully. "If you can't do any better than that you'd better quit. Git, gwan, scat!"

The boy advanced threateningly. The poor ghost, almost paralyzed with terror, fled into the cemetery and huddled behind his tombstone. The boy continued on his way, whistling.

Several minutes passed. Finally the Second Ghost advanced timidly from his hiding place.

"Where are you?" he whispered.

"H—here," said the First Ghost, coming cautiously from behind a tree.

"Is he gone? Are you sure he's gone?"

"Yes, it's all right. My, what a fright! Have you a cigarette?" The First Ghost passed over a ghostly package, and soon twin spirals of ghostly smoke curled up in the moonlight.

"Better button up that neck of yours, professor. You'll catch cold. You're sniffing already. Oh, I wish the night were over. I'm cold, and hungry, and sleepy. I'd like to get a nice soft job of haunting; but I guess they've all been taken up long ago. I know a number of old houses that just cry out to be haunted, but I suppose each one has its ghost."

"Not so," returned the Second Ghost. "They have no ghosts."

"No?" said his companion joyfully. "Then I see where I get a job. I'll put in my application to the Council tomorrow night at the meeting. Gee!"

"Don't do it," warned the academic gentleman gloomily. "I applied for a haunting job two years ago, and lasted six days. The day of haunted houses is over. The ghosts can't stand the pace."

"No? How come?"

"Two years ago," began the Second Ghost, after a preliminary snuffle, "I was assigned to a house in West Rembrooke. I arrived there at midnight, and went at once to the second floor. There I spent the next three hours, groaning conscientiously in every bedroom. There were no lights on, and as my eyesight is very weak I could not discover whether there was anyone there or not. When my throat got too sore I desisted and returned to Headquarters. It was not until the next night that I learned the entire family had been dancing on the lower floor from nine in the evening until five the next morning. I was bitterly disappointed."

"Tough," commented the First Ghost. "Anything happen next night?"

"The next night," continued the Second Ghost, after a deep inhale, "I was on the job again, but my luck was almost as bad. The family were having a midnight lunch when I appeared in the next room and crouched by a huge radio. There I gave all my most blood-curdling sighs and groans. I did this for fifteen minutes, and then stopped to see whether there were any results. I heard the mother say 'It's all right, kidlets, he's only stopped for the station announcement. My, isn't that crooner in wonderful voice this evening?' I crept away, heart-broken."

"Go back next night?"

"No, I couldn't find the courage. But I did go to a huge old house hidden in a grove of trees. I sat down in an easy chair before a roaring fire to await the arrival of the master. The heat made me drowsy, and in a few minutes I was fast asleep. I was awakened by the tinkle of glasses, and a cheerful young voice inviting me to come and 'drink 'er down'." The Ghost smiled sheepishly. "I did."

"You did?"

"Yes. He was such a nice young man, and so very friendly. I couldn't very well refuse, could I?" What puzzled me, however, was that the young man persisted in addressing me as if I were two and sometimes three persons. He kept 'filling 'er up,' and we kept 'drinking

'er down.' At one point the young man called me his lifelong friend and clapped me on the back. But of course his hand went right through me and he fell in the fireplace. I started emptying the bottles on the flames to put them out, but soon the young man got up and we 'filled 'er up' again. By and by a very curious thing happened. The young man grew into two young men. 'Fill 'er up!' shouted the two young men, as they grew into four. As I lost consciousness, a choir of thirty-two young men was singing 'Drink 'er down!' That was a night," concluded the Second Ghost reverently. "That was a night."

"Never mind that," said the First Ghost, licking his lips feverishly. "Get on with your story. Did you do any haunting next night?"

"I did not. My tongue felt like a piece of leather, and I had a splitting headache. I spent the night resting. The night after that I went back to see the young man. He introduced me to a number of his friends, and we all 'filled 'er up' and told one another ghost stories. After that we danced until the sun rose in the east. The punch was superb. It tasted——"

"Go on," commanded the other hastily. "Next night?"

"I went back again. It appears that the young man had discovered a new way of mixing cocktails, and was anxious for me to try them. They were prime. They slipped down my throat like——"

"Cut it out," interrupted the First Ghost rudely. "Can't you leave drinking out of this? What happened next night?"

"I was too sick to notice. I was ill for weeks, and felt sure I would never be the same again. When I finally did get well, I felt unequal to the task of haunting, and sent in my resignation to Headquarters. It was accepted, and I was assigned to a groaning and booing job here in this cemetery. But I am ill content."

"S-s-sh! What's that?"

It was a white milk-wagon jolting and rumbling along the road. The two shivering ghosts hunched down out of sight until it had passed.

"Must be almost daylight," whispered the First Ghost hopefully.

"Thank Heaven," returned the Second Ghost. "I

am badly in need of a rest. What a terrible night this has been."

"Well, I'll be seeing you tomorrow night at the Council meeting. Goodbye." The First Ghost started to fade into the ground at the base of a tall tombstone.

"Wait a minute," requested his companion. "I've lost my place again. Now where on earth is my grave?" he concluded petulantly.

"When did you die?"

"In 1926."

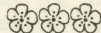
"Come on, we'll find it."

The two ghosts tiptoed cautiously down the aisle of gravestones, peering at the dates on each one. The First Ghost stopped.

"Your name Linden?"

"Yes, and that's my stone. Thank you very much. Goodbye." The academic gentleman stepped wearily up to a gravestone. The First Ghost trudged back to his place. As the first rays of the rising sun shot over a nearby hill, the figures of the two discontented ghosts slowly faded into nothingness. A few threads of ghostly cigarette smoke mingled with the morning mist and gradually dispersed in the heat of the day.

—R.S.W., '35



Just at the age 'twixt boy and youth,
When thought is speech, and speech is truth.

—Scott.

We carved not a line, and we raised not a stone,
But we left him alone with his glory.

—Charles Wolfe.

