

Ghosts

By Guy de Maupassant

Just at the time when the Concordat was in its most flourishing condition, a young man belonging to a wealthy and highly respectable middle-class family went to the office of the head of the police at P----, and begged for his help and advice, which was immediately promised him.

“My father threatens to disinherit me,” the young man began, “although I have never offended against the laws of the State, of morality, or against his paternal authority, merely because I do not share his blind reverence for the Catholic Church and her clergy. On that account he looks upon me, not merely as Latitudinarian but as a perfect Atheist, and a faithful old manservant of ours, who is much attached to me, and who accidentally saw my father’s will, told me in confidence that he had left all his property to the Jesuits. I think this is highly suspicious, and I fear that the priests have been maligning me to my father. Until less than a year ago, we used to live very quietly and happily together, but ever since he has had so much to do with the clergy, our domestic peace and happiness are at an end.”

“What you have told me,” replied the official, “is as likely as it is regrettable, but I fail to see how I can interfere in the matter. Your father is in full possession of all his mental faculties, and can dispose of all his property exactly as he pleases. I think that your protest is premature; you must wait until his will can legally take effect, and then you can invoke the aid of justice. I am sorry to say that just now I can do nothing for you.”

“I think you will be able to,” the young man replied; “for I believe that a very clever piece of deceit is being carried on.”

“How? Please explain yourself more clearly.”

“When I remonstrated with him, yesterday evening, he referred to my dead mother, and at last assured me, in a voice of the deepest conviction, that she had frequently appeared to him, had threatened him with all the torments of the damned, if he did not disinherit his son, who had fallen away from God, and leave all his property to the Church. Now I do not believe in ghosts.”

“Neither do I,” the police director replied, “but I cannot well do anything on such grounds, having nothing but superstitions to go upon. You know how the Church rules all our affairs since the Concordat with Rome, and if I investigate this matter and obtain no results, I am risking my post. It would be very different if you could adduce any proofs for your suspicions. I do not deny that I should like to see the clerical party, which will, I fear, be the ruin of Austria, receive a staggering blow; try, therefore, to get to the bottom of this business, and then we will talk it over again.”

About a month passed, without the young Latitudinarian being heard of. Suddenly, he came one evening, in a great state of excitement, and told the Inspector that he was in a position to expose the priestly deceit which he had mentioned, if the authorities would assist him. The police director asked for further information.

“I have obtained a number of important clues,” said the young man. “In the first place, my father confessed to me that my mother did not appear to him in our house, but in the churchyard where she is buried. My mother was consumptive for many years, and a few weeks before her death she went to the village of S----, where she died and was buried. In addition to this, I found out from our footman that my father has already left the house twice, late at night, in company of X----, the Jesuit priest, and that on both occasions he did not return till morning. Each time he was remarkably uneasy and low-spirited after his return, and had three masses said for my dead

mother. He also told me just now that he has to leave home this evening on business, but, immediately after he told me that, our footman saw the Jesuit go out of the house. We may, therefore, assume that he intends this evening to consult the spirit of my dead mother again, and this would be an excellent opportunity to solve the matter, if you do not object to opposing the most powerful force in the Empire for the sake of such an insignificant individual as myself."

"Every citizen has an equal right to the protection of the State," the police director replied; "and I think that I have shown often enough that I am not wanting in courage to perform my duty, no matter how serious the consequences may be. But only very young men act without any prospects of success, because they are carried away by their feelings. When you came to me the first time, I was obliged to refuse your request for assistance, but to-day your request is just and reasonable. It is now eight o'clock; I shall expect you in two hours' time, here in my office. At present, all you have to do is to hold your tongue; everything else is my affair."

As soon as it was dark, four men got into a closed carriage in the yard of the police-office, and were driven in the direction of the village of S----. Their carriage, however, did not enter the village, but stopped at the edge of a small wood in the immediate neighborhood. Here all four alighted: the police director, accompanied by the young Latitudinarian, a police sergeant, and an ordinary policeman, the latter however, dressed in plain clothes.

"The first thing for us to do is to examine the locality carefully," said the police director. "It is eleven o'clock and the exorcisers of ghosts will not arrive before midnight, so we have time to look round us, and to lay our plans."

The four men went to the churchyard, which lay at the end of the village, near the little wood. Everything was as still as death, and not a soul was to be seen. The sexton was evidently sitting in the public house, for they found the door of his cottage locked, as well as the door of the little chapel that stood in the middle of the churchyard.

"Where is your mother's grave?" the police director asked. As there were only a few stars visible, it was not easy to find it, but at last they managed it, and the police director surveyed the neighborhood of it.

"The position is not a very favorable one for us," he said at last; "there is nothing here, not even a shrub, behind which we could hide."

But just then, the policeman reported that he had tried to get into the sexton's hut through the door or a window, and that at last he had succeeded in doing so by breaking open a square in a window which had been mended with paper, that he had opened it and obtained possession of the key, which he brought to the police director.

The plans were very quickly settled. The police director had the chapel opened and went in with the young Latitudinarian; then he told the police sergeant to lock the door behind him and to put the key back where he had found it, and to shut the window of the sexton's cottage carefully. Lastly, he made arrangements as to what they were to do, in case anything unforeseen should occur, whereupon the sergeant and the constable left the churchyard, and lay down in a ditch at some distance from the gate, but opposite to it.

Almost as soon as the clock struck half past eleven, they heard steps near the chapel, whereupon the police director and the young Latitudinarian went to the window in order to watch the beginning of the exorcism, and as the chapel was in total darkness, they thought that they should be able to see without being seen; but matters turned out differently from what they expected.

Suddenly, the key turned in the lock. They barely had time to conceal themselves behind the altar, before two men came in, one of whom was carrying a dark lantern. One was the young

man's father, an elderly man of the middle class, who seemed very unhappy and depressed, the other the Jesuit father X----, a tall, lean, big-boned man, with a thin, bilious face, in which two large gray eyes shone restlessly under bushy, black eyebrows. He lit the tapers, which were standing on the altar, and began to say a "Requiem Mass"; while the old man kneeled on the altar steps and served him.

When it was over, the Jesuit took the book of the Gospels and the holy-water sprinkler, and went slowly out of the chapel, the old man following him with the holy-water basin in one hand, and a taper in the other. Then the police director left his hiding place, and stooping down, so as not to be seen, crept to the chapel window, where he cowered down carefully; the young man followed his example. They were now looking straight at his mother's grave.

The Jesuit, followed by the superstitious old man, walked three times round the grave; then he remained standing before it, and by the light of the taper read a few passages from the Gospel. Then he dipped the holy-water sprinkler three times into the holy-water basin, and sprinkled the grave three times. Then both returned to the chapel, kneeled down outside it with their faces toward the grave, and began to pray aloud, until at last the Jesuit sprang up, in a species of wild ecstasy, and cried out three times in a shrill voice:

*"Exsurge! Exsurge! Exsurge!"*¹

Scarcely had the last words of the exorcism died away, when thick, blue smoke rose out of the grave, rapidly grew into a cloud, and began to assume the outlines of a human body, until at last a tall, white figure stood behind the grave, and beckoned with its hand.

"Who art thou?" the Jesuit asked solemnly, while the old man began to cry.

"When I was alive, I was called Anna Maria B----," replied the ghost in a hollow voice.

"Will you answer all my questions?" the priest continued.

"As far as I can."

"Have you not yet been delivered from purgatory by our prayers, and by all the Masses for your soul, which we have said for you?"

"Not yet, but soon, soon I shall be."

"When?"

"As soon as that blasphemer, my son, has been punished."

"Has that not already happened? Has not your husband disinherited his lost son, and in his place made the Church his heir?"

"That is not enough."

"What must he do besides?"

"He must deposit his will with the Judicial Authorities, as his last will and testament, and drive the reprobate out of his house."

"Consider well what you are saying; must this really be?"

"It must, or otherwise I shall have to languish in purgatory much longer," the sepulchral voice replied with a deep sigh; but the next moment the ghost yelled out in terror: "Oh! Good Lord!" and began to run away as fast as it could. A shrill whistle was heard, and then another, and the police director laid his hand on the shoulder of the exorciser with the remark:

"You are in custody."

Meanwhile, the police sergeant and the policeman, who had come into the churchyard, had caught the ghost, and dragged it forward. It was the sexton, who had put on a flowing, white dress, and wore a wax mask, which bore a striking resemblance to his mother, so the son declared.

¹ Arise.

When the case was heard, it was proved that the mask had been very skillfully made from a portrait of the deceased woman. The government gave orders that the matter should be investigated as secretly as possible, and left the punishment of Father X---to the spiritual authorities, which was a matter of necessity, at a time when priests were outside of the jurisdiction of the civil authorities. It is needless to say that Father X---was very comfortable during his imprisonment in a monastery, in a part of the country which abounded with game and trout.

The only valuable result of the amusing ghost story was that it brought about a reconciliation between father and son; the former, as a matter of fact, felt such deep respect for priests and their ghosts in consequence of the apparition, that a short time after his wife had left purgatory for the last time in order to talk with him, he turned Protestant.