

The Haunted Man: A Christmas Story By Ch-r-s D-c-k-n-s

By Bret Harte

THE FIRST PHANTOM

Don't tell me that it wasn't a knocker. I had seen it often enough, and I ought to know. So ought the three o'clock beer, in dirty highlows, swinging himself over the railing, or executing a demoniacal jig upon the doorstep; so ought the butcher, although butchers as a general thing are scornful of such trifles; so ought the postman, to whom knockers of the most extravagant description were merely human weaknesses, that were to be pitied and used. And so ought, for the matter of that, etc., etc., etc.

But then it was *such* a knocker. A wild, extravagant, and utterly incomprehensible knocker. A knocker so mysterious and suspicious that Policeman X 37, first coming upon it, felt inclined to take it instantly in custody, but compromised with his professional instincts by sharply and sternly noting it with an eye that admitted of no nonsense, but confidently expected to detect its secret yet. An ugly knocker; a knocker with a hard, human face, that was a type of the harder human face within. A human face that held between its teeth a brazen rod. So hereafter in the mysterious future should be held, etc., etc.

But if the knocker had a fierce human aspect in the glare of day, you should have seen it at night, when it peered out of the gathering shadows and suggested an ambushed figure; when the light of the street lamps fell upon it, and wrought a play of sinister expression in its hard outlines; when it seemed to wink meaningly at a shrouded figure who, as the night fell darkly, crept up the steps and passed into the mysterious house; when the swinging door disclosed a black passage into which the figure seemed to lose itself and become a part of the mysterious gloom; when the night grew boisterous and the fierce wind made furious charges at the knocker, as if to wrench it off and carry it away in triumph. Such a night as this.

It was a wild and pitiless wind. A wind that had commenced life as a gentle country zephyr, but wandering through manufacturing towns had become demoralised, and reaching the city had plunged into extravagant dissipation and wild excesses. A roystering wind that indulged in Bacchanalian shouts on the street corners, that knocked off the hats from the heads of helpless passengers, and then fulfilled its duties by speeding away, like all young prodigals—to sea.

He sat alone in a gloomy library listening to the wind that roared in the chimney. Around him novels and story-books were strewn thickly; in his lap he held one with its pages freshly cut, and turned the leaves wearily until his eyes rested upon a portrait in its frontispiece.

And as the wind howled the more fiercely, and the darkness without fell blacker, a strange and fateful likeness to that portrait appeared above his chair and leaned upon his shoulder. The Haunted Man gazed at the portrait and sighed. The figure gazed at the portrait and sighed too.

'Here again?' said the Haunted Man.

'Here again,' it repeated in a low voice.

'Another novel?'

‘Another novel.’

‘The old story?’

‘The old story.’

‘I see a child,’ said the Haunted Man, gazing from the pages of the book into the fire—‘a most unnatural child, a model infant. It is prematurely old and philosophic. It dies in poverty to slow music. It dies surrounded by luxury to slow music. It dies with an accompaniment of golden water and rattling carts to slow music. Previous to its decease it makes a will; it repeats the Lord’s Prayer, it kisses the “boofer lady.” That child—’

‘Is mine,’ said the phantom.

‘I see a good woman, undersized. I see several charming women, but they are all undersized. They are more or less imbecile and idiotic, but always fascinating and undersized. They wear coquettish caps and aprons. I observe that feminine virtue is invariably below the medium height, and that it is always babyish and infantine. These women—’

‘Are mine.’

‘I see a haughty, proud, and wicked lady. She is tall and queenly. I remark that all proud and wicked women are tall and queenly. That woman—’

‘Is mine,’ said the phantom, wringing his hands.

‘I see several things continually impending. I observe that whenever an accident, a murder, or death is about to happen, there is something in the furniture, in the locality, in the atmosphere that foreshadows and suggests it years in advance. I cannot say that in real life I have noticed it—the perception of this surprising fact belongs—’

‘To me!’ said the phantom. The Haunted Man continued, in a despairing tone:

‘I see the influence of this in the magazines and daily papers: I see weak imitators rise up and enfeeble the world with senseless formula. I am getting tired of it. It won’t do, Charles! It won’t do!’ and the Haunted Man buried his head in his hands and groaned. The figure looked down upon him sternly: the portrait in the frontispiece frowned as he gazed.

‘Wretched man,’ said the phantom, ‘and how have these things affected you?’

‘Once I laughed and cried, but then I was younger. Now, I would forget them if I could.’

‘Have then your wish. And take this with you, man whom I renounce. From this day henceforth you shall live with those whom I displace. Without forgetting me, ’twill be your lot to walk through life as if we had not met. But first you shall survey these scenes that henceforth must be yours. At one tonight, prepare to meet the phantom I have raised. Farewell!’

The sound of its voice seemed to fade away with the dying wind, and the Haunted Man was alone. But the firelight flickered gaily, and the light danced on the walls, making grotesque figures of the furniture.

‘Ha, ha!’ said the Haunted Man, rubbing his hands gleefully; ‘now for a whiskey punch and a cigar.’

THE SECOND PHANTOM

One! The stroke of the far-off belt had hardly died before the front door closed with a reverberating clang. Steps were heard along the passage; the library door swung open of itself, and the Knocker—yes, the Knocker—slowly strode into the room. The Haunted Man rubbed his eyes—no! there could be no mistake about it—it was the Knocker’s face, mounted on a misty, almost imperceptible body. The brazen rod was transferred from its mouth to its right hand, where it was held like a ghostly truncheon.

'It's a cold evening,' said the Haunted Man.

'It is,' said the Goblin, in a hard metallic voice.

'It must be pretty cold out there,' said the Haunted Man, with vague politeness. 'Do you ever—will you—take some hot water and brandy?'

'No,' said the Goblin.

'Perhaps you'd like it cold, by way of change?' continued the Haunted Man, correcting himself, as he remembered the peculiar temperature with which the Goblin was probably familiar.

'Time flies,' said the Goblin coldly. 'We have no leisure for idle talk. Come!' He moved his ghostly truncheon toward the window, and laid his hand upon the other's arm. At his touch the body of the Haunted Man seemed to become as thin and incorporeal as that of the Goblin himself, and together they glided out of the window into the black and blowy night.

In the rapidity of their flight the senses of the Haunted Man seemed to leave him. At length they stopped suddenly.

'What do you see?' asked the Goblin.

'I see a battlemented medieval castle. Gallant men in mail ride over the drawbridge, and kiss their gauntleted fingers to fair ladies, who wave their lily hands in return. I see fight and fray and tournament. I hear roaring heralds bawling the charms of delicate women, and shamelessly proclaiming their lovers. Stay. I see a Jewess about to leap from a battlement. I see knightly deeds, violence, rapine, and a good deal of blood. I've seen pretty much the same at Astley's.'

'Look again.'

'I see purple moors, glens, masculine women, barelegged men, priggish bookworms, more violence, physical excellence, and blood. Always blood—and the superiority of physical attainments.'

'And how do you feel now?' said the Goblin.

The Haunted Man shrugged his shoulders.

'None the better for being carried back and asked to sympathise with a barbarous age.'

The Goblin smiled and clutched his arm; they again sped rapidly through the black night, and again halted.

'What do you see?' said the Goblin.

'I see a barrack room, with a mess table, and a group of intoxicated Celtic officers telling funny stories, and giving challenges to duel. I see a young Irish gentleman capable of performing prodigies of valour. I team incidentally that the acme of all heroism is the cornetcy of a dragoon regiment. I hear a good deal of French! No, thank you,' said the Haunted Man hurriedly, as he stayed the waving hand of the Goblin, 'I would rather *not* go to the Peninsula, and don't care to have a private interview with Napoleon.'

Again the Goblin flew away with the unfortunate man, and from a strange roaring below them, he judged they were above the ocean. A ship hove in sight, and the Goblin stayed its flight. 'Look,' he said, squeezing his companion's arm.

The Haunted Man yawned. 'Don't you think. Charles, you're rather running this thing into the ground? Of course, it's very moral and instructive, and all that. But ain't there a little too much pantomime about it? Come now!'

'Look!' repeated the Goblin, pinching his arm malevolently. The Haunted Man groaned.

'Oh, of course, I see Her Majesty's ship *Arethusa*. Of course I am familiar with her stern First Lieutenant, her eccentric Captain, her one fascinating and several mischievous midshipmen. Of course, I know it's a splendid thing to see all this, and not to be sea-sick. Oh, there the young

gentlemen are going to play a trick on the purser. For God's sake, let us go,' and the unhappy man absolutely dragged the Goblin away with him.

When they next halted, it was at the edge of a broad and boundless prairie, in the middle of an oak opening.

'I see,' said the Haunted Man, without waiting for his cue, but mechanically, and as if he were repeating a lesson which the Goblin had taught him—'I see the Noble Savage. He is very fine to look at! But I observe under his war paint, feathers, and picturesque blanket—dirt, disease, and an unsymmetrical contour. I observe beneath his inflated rhetoric deceit and hypocrisy. Beneath his physical hardihood, cruelty, malice, and revenge. The Noble Savage is a humbug. I remarked the same to Mr. Catlin.'

'Come,' said the phantom.

The Haunted Man sighed, and took out his watch. 'Couldn't we do the rest of this another time?'

'My hour is almost spent, irreverent being, but there is yet a chance for your reformation. Come!'

Again they sped through the night, and again they halted. The sound of delicious but melancholy music fell upon their ears.

'I see,' said the Haunted Man, with something of interest in his manner, 'I see an old moss-covered manse beside a sluggish, flowing river. I see weird shapes: witches, Puritans, clergymen, little children, judges, mesmerised maidens, moving to the sound of melody that thrills me with its sweetness and purity.

'But, although carried along its calm and evenly-flowing current, the shapes are strange and frightful: an eating lichen gnaws at the heart of each; not only the clergymen, but witch, maiden, judge, and Puritan, all wear Scarlet Letters of some kind burned upon their hearts. I am fascinated and thrilled, but I feel a morbid sensitiveness creeping over me. I—I beg your pardon.' The Goblin was yawning frightfully. 'Well, perhaps we had better go.'

'One more, and the last,' said the Goblin. They were moving home. Streaks of red were beginning to appear in the eastern sky. Along the banks of the blackly flowing river, by moorland and stagnant fens, by low houses, clustering close to the water's edge, like strange mollusks, crawled upon the beach to dry; by misty black barges, the more misty and indistinct seen through its mysterious veil, the river fog was slowly rising. So rolled away and rose from the heart of the Haunted Man, etc., etc.

They stopped before a quaint mansion of red brick. The Goblin waved his hand without speaking.

'I see,' said the Haunted Man, 'a gay drawing-room. I see my old friends of the club, of the college, of society, even as they lived and moved. I see the gallant and unselfish men whom I have loved, and the snobs whom I have hated. I see strangely mingling with them, and now and then blending with their forms, our old friends Dick Steele, Addison, and Congreve. I observe, though, that these gentlemen have a habit of getting too much in the way. The royal standard of Queen Anne, not in itself a beautiful ornament, is rather too prominent in the picture. The long galleries of black oak, the formal furniture, the old portraits, are picturesque, but depressing. The house is damp. I enjoy myself better here on the lawn, where they are getting up a Vanity Fair. See, the bell rings, the curtain is rising, the puppets are brought out for a new play. Let me see.'

The Haunted Man was pressing forward in his eagerness, but the hand of the Goblin stayed him, and pointing to his feet, he saw between him and the rising curtain, a new-made grave. And

bending above the grave in passionate grief, the Haunted Man beheld the phantom of the previous night.

The Haunted Man started, and—woke. The bright sunshine streamed into the room. The air was sparkling with frost. He ran joyously to the window and opened it. A small boy saluted him with ‘Merry Christmas.’ The Haunted Man instantly gave him a Bank of England note. ‘How much like Tiny Tim, Tom, and Bobby that boy looked—bless my soul, what a genius this Dickens has!’

A knock at the door, and Boots entered.

‘Consider your salary doubled instantly. Have you read *David Copperfield*?’

‘Yezzur.’

‘Your salary is quadrupled. What do you think of *The Old Curiosity Shop*?’

The man instantly burst into a torrent of tears, and then into a roar of laughter.

‘Enough! Here are five thousand pounds. Open a porterhouse, and call it, “Our Mutual Friend.” Huzza! I feel so happy!’ And the Haunted Man danced about the room.

And so, bathed in the light of that blessed sun, and yet glowing with the warmth of a good action, the Haunted Man, haunted no longer, save by those shapes which make the dreams of children beautiful, re-seated himself in his chair, and finished *Our Mutual Friend*.