

The Faithful Ghost

By Jerome K. Jerome

I was little more than a lad when I first met with Johnson. I was home for the Christmas holidays, and, it being Christmas Eve, I had been allowed to sit up very late. On opening the door of my little bedroom to go in, I found myself face to face with Johnson, who was coming out. It passed through me, and uttering a long low wail of misery, disappeared out of the stair-case window.

I was startled for the moment—I was only a schoolboy at the time, and I had never seen a ghost before—and felt a little nervous about going to bed. But, on reflection, I remembered that it was only to sinful people that spirits could do any harm, and so tucked myself up, and went to sleep.

In the morning I told my father what I had seen.

“Oh, yes, that was old Johnson,” he answered. “Don’t you be frightened of that; he lives here.” And then he told me the poor thing’s history.

It seemed that Johnson, when it was alive, had loved, in early life, the daughter of a former owner of our house, a very beautiful girl, whose Christian name had been Emily. Father did not know her other name.

Johnson was too poor to marry the girl, so he kissed her good-bye, told her he would soon be back, and went off to Australia to make his fortune. But Australia was not then what it became later on. Travelers through the bush were few and far between in those early days; and, even when one was caught, the portable property found upon the body was often of hardly sufficiently negotiable value to pay the simple funeral expenses rendered necessary. So that it took Johnson nearly twenty years to make his fortune.

The self-imposed task was accomplished at last, however, and then, having successfully eluded the police, and gotten out of the Colony, he returned to England, full of hope and joy, to claim his bride.

He reached the house to find it silent and deserted. All that the neighbors could tell him was that, soon after his own departure, the family had, on one foggy night, unostentatiously disappeared, and that nobody had ever seen or heard anything of them since, although the landlord and most of the local tradesmen had made searching inquiries.

Poor Johnson, frenzied with grief, sought his lost love all over the world. But he never found her, and, after years of fruitless effort, he returned to end his lonely life in the very house where, in the happy bygone days, he and his beloved Emily had passed so many blissful hours.

He had lived there quite alone, wandering about the empty rooms, weeping and calling to his Emily to come back to him; and when the poor old fellow died, his ghost still kept the business on.

It was there, father said, when he took the house, and the agent had knocked ten pounds a year off the rent in consequence.

After that, I was continually meeting Johnson about the place at all times of the night, and so, indeed, were we all. We used to walk round it or stand aside to let it pass, at first; but when we grew more at home with it, and there seemed no necessity for so much ceremony, we used to walk straight through it. You could not say it was ever much in the way.

It was a gentle, harmless old ghost, too, and we all felt very sorry for it, and pitied it. The women folk, indeed, made quite a pet of it for a while. Its faithfulness touched them so.

But as time went on, it grew to be a bit of a bore. You see it was full of sadness. There was nothing cheerful or genial about it. You felt sorry for it, but it irritated you. It would sit on the stairs and cry for hours at a stretch; and whenever we woke up in the night one was sure to hear it pottering about the passages and in and out of the different rooms, moaning and sighing, so that we could not get to sleep again very easily. And when we had a party on, it would come and sit outside the drawing-room door, and sob all the time. It did not do anybody any harm exactly, but it cast a gloom over the whole affair.

“Oh, I’m getting sick of this old fool,” said my father one evening after Johnson had been more of a nuisance than usual, and had spoiled a game of whist, by sitting up the chimney and groaning. “We shall have to get rid of him, somehow or other. I wish I knew how to do it.”

“Well,” said my mother, “depend upon it, you’ll never see the last of him until he’s found Emily’s grave. That’s what he is after. You find Emily’s grave, and put him on to that, and he’ll stop there. That’s the only thing to do.”

The idea seemed reasonable, but the difficulty in the way was that we none of us knew where Emily’s grave was any more than the ghost of Johnson himself did. Father suggested palming off some other Emily’s grave upon the poor thing, but, as luck would have it, there did not seem to have been an Emily of any sort buried anywhere for miles around. I never came across a neighborhood so utterly destitute of dead Emilies.

I thought for a bit, and then I hazarded a suggestion myself.

“Couldn’t we fake up something for the old chap?” I queried. “He seems a simple-minded old sort. He might take it in. Anyhow, we could but try.”

“By Jove, so we will,” exclaimed my father; and the very next morning we had the workmen in, and fixed up a little mound at the bottom of the orchard with a tombstone over it, bearing the following inscription:

SACRED
To The Memory Of
EMILY
Her Last Words Were:
“Tell Johnson I Love Him”

“That ought to fetch him,” mused Dad as he surveyed the work when finished. “I am sure I hope it does.”

It did.

We lured him down there that very night; and—well, there, it was one of the most pathetic things I have ever seen, the way Johnson sprang upon that tombstone and wept. Dad and old Squibbins the gardener cried like children when they saw it.

Johnson has never troubled us any more in the house since then. It spends every night now sobbing on the grave, and seems quite happy.

There still? Oh, yes. I’ll take you fellows down and show you it next time you come to our place—10 P.M to 4 A.M. are its general hours, 10 P.M. to 2 A.M. on Saturdays.