

How He Caught the Ghost

By Anonymous

“Yes, the house is a good one,” said the agent; “it’s in a good neighborhood, and you’re getting it at almost nothing; but I think it right to tell you all about it. You are orphans, you say, and with a mother dependent on you? That makes it all the more necessary that you should know. The fact is, the house is said to be haunted—”

The agent could not help smiling as he said it, and he was relieved to see an answering smile on the two faces before him.

“Ah, you don’t believe in ghosts,” he went on; “nor do I, for that matter; but, somehow, the reputation of the house keeps me from having a tenant long at a time. The place ought to rent for twice as much as it does.”

“If we succeed in driving cut the ghost, you will not raise the rent?” asked the boy, with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

“Well, no—not this year, at any rate,” laughed the agent. And so the house was rented; and the slip of a girl and the tall lad, her brother, went their way.

Within a week the family had moved into the house, and were delighted with it. It was large and cool, with wide mails and fine stairways, and with more room than they needed. But that did not matter in the least, for they had always been cramped in small houses, suffering many discomforts; and they never could have afforded such a place as this if it had not been “haunted.”

“Blessings on the ghost!” cried Margaret, gaily, as she ran about as merry as a child. “Who would be without a ghost in the house, when it brings one like this?”

“And it is so near your school,” said the mother; “and I used to worry so over the long walk; and David can come home to lunch now, and you don’t know what a pleasure that will be.”

“It seems to me,” David gravely explained, “that if I should meet the ghost I would treat him with the greatest politeness and encourage him to stay. We shall not miss the room he takes, shall we? I think it would be well to set aside that room over yours, Maggie, for his ghostship’s own, for we shall not need that, you know. Besides, the door doesn’t shut, and he can go in and out without breaking the lock.”

And then they all laughed and had a great deal of fun over the ghost, which was a great joke to them.

They were very tired that night and slept soundly all night long. When they met the next morning there was more laughter about the ghost which was shy about meeting strangers, probably, and had made no effort to introduce himself. For the next three days they were all hard at work, trying to bring chaos into something like order; and then it was time for the school to open, and Margaret was to begin teaching, and David inserted an advertisement in the city papers for a maid-of-all-work, who might help their mother in their absence.

For one whole day prospective colored servants presented themselves and announced:

“Is dis de house whar dey wants a worklady? No, ma’am, I ain’ gwine to work in dis house. Ketch me workin’ in no ha’nted house.”

After which they each and all departed, and others came in their stead. One was secured after a while, but no sooner had she talked across the fence with a neighbor’s servant than she, too, departed.

“Never mind, children,” said Mrs. Craig, wearily, “I would much rather do the work than be troubled in this way.”

So the maid-of-all-work was dismissed and the Craig family locked the doors and went to their rooms, worn out with the day’s anxieties.

They had been in the house four days, and there had been neither sight nor sound of the ghost. The very mention of it was enough to start them all to laughing, for they were thoroughly practical people, with a fondness for inquiring into anything that seemed mysterious to them and for understanding it thoroughly before they let it go.

David was soon sleeping the sound sleep of healthy boyhood, and all was silent in the house, when Margaret stole softly into his room and laid her hand on his arm. He was not easy to waken, and several minutes had passed before he sat up in bed with an articulate murmur of surprise.

“Hush!” said Margaret, in a whisper, with her hand on his lips. “I want you to come into my room and listen to a sound that I have been hearing for some time.”

“Doors creaking,” suggested David, as he began to dress.

“Nothing of the kind,” was all she said.

They walked up the stairway, and along the upper hall to the door of the unused room. Something was wrong with the lock and the door would not stay fastened, as I have said.

Something that was not fear thrilled their hearts as they pushed the door further ajar, and stood where they could see every foot of the vacant floor. One of their own boxes stood in the middle of the room, but aside from that, nothing was to be seen, and they looked at one another in silence.

“Hold the lamp a minute, Maggie,” David said, at last, and then he went all over the room, and looked more particularly at its emptiness, and even felt the walls.

“Secret panels, you know,” he said, with a smile, but it was a very puzzled smile indeed.

“I can’t see what it could have been,” Margaret said, as they went down the stairs.

“No, I can’t see, either, but I’m going to see,” said David. “That was a chain, and chains don’t drag around by themselves, you know. A ghost could not drag a chain, if he were to try.”

“The conventional ghost very often drags chains,” said Margaret, as she closed the door of her room.

And then she lay awake all night and listened for the conventional ghost that dragged a chain, but it seemed that the weight of the chain must have wearied him, for he was not heard again.

The mother had slept through it all, and next morning they gave her a vivid account of the night’s adventure.

“Perhaps it was someone in the house,” she said, in alarm. There were no ghosts within the bounds of possibility, so far as she was concerned, but burglars were very possible, indeed.

Then Margaret and David both laughed more than ever.

“What fun it would be,” said David, “for a burglar to get into this house and try to find something worth carrying away!”

So they went on to the next night, all three fully determined to spend the night in listening for the ghost, and running him to earth if possible.

But it was Margaret that heard the ghost, after all. She had been sleeping and was suddenly startled wide awake, and there, overhead, was the sound of the chain dragging; and just as she was on the point of springing out of bed to call her brother, the chain seemed to go out of the upper room. She lay still and listened, and in a moment she heard it again.

It was coming down the stairs.

There was no carpet on the stairs, and she could hear the chain drop from step to step, until it had come the whole way down. There it was, almost at the door of her room, and something that was strangely like fear kept her lying still, listening in horrified silence.

Then it went along the hall, dragging close to the door; and then further away; and back and forth for awhile; and then it began dragging back up the stairs again. Step by step she could hear it drawn over the edge of every step—and by the time it had reached the top she remembered herself and called David.

Again did the brother and sister make a tour of the upper room, within the lamp. Not only that, but they looked into every nook and corner of the upper part of the house, and at last came back, baffled. They had seen nothing extraordinary, and they had not heard a sound.

“I’m going to see that ghost to-night,” David said to his sister the next evening.

“How?”

“I’m going to sit up all night at the head of the stairs. Don’t say anything about it to mother; it might make her uneasy.”

So, after the household were all quiet, David slipped into his place at the head of the stairs, and sat down to his vigil, he had placed a screen at the head of the stairway so that it hid him from view—as if a ghost cared for a screen—and he established himself behind it, and prepared to be as patient as he could.

It seemed to him that hours so long had never been devised as those the town clocks tolled off that night. He bore it until midnight moderately well, because, he argued with himself, if there were any ghosts about they would surely walk then; but they were not in a humor for walking; and still the hours roiled on without any developments. He took the fidgets, and had nervous twitches all over him, and at last he could endure it no longer, and had leaned his head back against the wall and was going blissfully to sleep when—

He heard a chain dragging just beyond the open door of that unused room.

In spite of himself a shiver ran down his back.

There was no mistaking it; it was a real chain, if he had ever heard one. More than that, it had left the room, and was coming straight towards the stairs. The hall was dark, and it was impossible for him to see anything, although he strained his eyes in the direction of the sound. And even while he looked it had passed behind the screen, and was going down the stairs, dropping from step to step with a clank.

Half way down a narrow strip of moonlight from a stair-window lay directly across the steps. Whatever the thing was, it must pass through that patch of light, and David leaned forward and watched.

Down it went from step to step, and presently it had slipped through the light, and was down; and a little later it came back again, through the light, and up the stairs, and back into that unused room.

And then David slapped his knees jubilantly, and ran down to his room, and slept all the rest of the night.

Next morning he was very mysterious about his discoveries of the night before.

“Oh, yes, I saw the ghost,” he said to Maggie. “There; don’t ask so many questions; I’ll tell you more about it to-morrow, maybe.”

And that was all the information she could get from him. It was very provoking.

That day David made a purchase down town and brought home a bulky bundle, which he hid in his own room and would not let his sister even peep at.

“I’m going to try to catch a ghost to-night,” he said, “and you know how it is; if I brag too much beforehand, I shall be sure to fail.”

He was working with something in the hall after the others had retired; but he did not sit up this time. He went to bed, and Margaret listened at his door and found that he was soon asleep.

But away in the night they were all awakened by a squealing that brought them all into the hall in a great hurry; and there, at the head of the stairs, they found the huge rat-trap that David had set a few hours before, and in the midst of the toils was a rat.

“Why, David,” exclaimed the mother, “I didn’t know that there was a rat in the house.”

And then, all at once, she saw that there was a long chain hanging from a little iron collar around the creature’s neck, and she and Margaret cried together.

“And this was the ghost!”

Such a funny ghost when they came to think of it—this poor rat, with a nest in some hole of the broken chimney. He had been someone’s pet, once, perhaps; and now, the households he had broken up, the nights he had disturbed, the wild sensations he had created—it made his captors laugh to think that this innocent creature had been the cause of the whole trouble.

“I’ll get a cage for him, and take care of him for the rest of his life,” said David. “We owe him so much that we can’t afford to be ungrateful.”

The next morning he took the ghost-in-a-cage and showed it to the agent, and gave him a vivid account of the capture.

“So, you have a good house for about half price, all on account of that rat,” exclaimed the agent, grimly. “Young man—but never mind, you deserve it. What are you working for now? Six dollars a week? If you ever want to change your place—suppose you come around here. I think you need a business that will give you a chance to grow.”

And the agent and David shook hands warmly over the cage of the “ghost.”