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The Chicken-Hearted Ghost

by DAL STIVENS

*There are drawbacks in
being chicken-hearted—
if you're the specter type.*

FURIOUS FRED WAS RETURNING one night to his hut in the scrub after a long session at the sly wine shanty, and was hoisting himself up the path through marsh when he came on a notice. It was written in foot-high letters in charcoal on several pieces of white cardboard and was tacked with a rusty nail to a gum tree. It read: DON'T BE SCARED WHEN YOU SEE ME.

Furious Fred tapped each of his six teeth before going on. He climbed thirty yards and came on another notice. This was also in foot-high letters and read: I'M AS SCARED AS YOU ARE. Furious read it three times and went on. Soon he came to another notice: I SCARE MYSELF, TOO.

"I can't imagine what this is about," said Furious to himself, speaking aloud as was occasionally his wont.

"I-I-I'll t-tell you," said a small nervous voice behind him.

Furious turned and there, crouching on the track, was a ghost, shining like a piece of fungus, all five foot five of him. He wore a suit that might have been blue serge once, and an old-fashioned derby hat.

"What do you want?" asked Furious. "You gave me quite a jolt."

"I-I t-tried to warn you," said the ghost. "P-please help me."

The ghost waved a hand imploringly before his eyes and then in the same instant began to gibber and whipped the hand away.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Furious.

"I-I-It's I-like I-I s-s-said," said the ghost. "I s-scared myself. T-that h-hand of m-m-mine looked t-terrible, w-with that h-horrible gr-gr-green-yellow light."

The ghost got some control of himself by gulping hard. "When I was alive a ghost story would keep me awake all night and now I find myself one—a ghost, I mean. I haven't slept for a month—not since I became—well, spectral."

The ghost was wringing his hands, though with some difficulty, because they kept passing through each other, like drifts of greenish yellow fog.

"I'm sorry to hear that, spook," said Furious. "But what can I do about it? You'll have to pull yourself together. Be a man and keep a stiff upper lip."

© 1958, by Dal Stevens

"Whoever heard of a ghost with a stiff upper lip?" cried the ghost and burst into tears.

Furious was so moved he tried to pat the ghost. His hand went through at shoulder level and the ghost's misty body broke into two halves and eddied about in the wind before settling together again.

"I was just using a figure of speech, spook," said Furious. "Get a grip on yourself, face up to things, get some backbone . . ."

He broke off because the ghost was *boo-booing* louder than ever. Furious started to pat him once more, remembered, and restrained himself. He sat down on a log and motioned for the ghost to join him. The ghost wafted over to the log, the mist swirled like a settling pool and then, in about twenty seconds, there was the ghost squatting alongside Furious.

"If you weren't a spook I could give you a Scotch and soda," said Furious, thinking hard.

"It's this haunting," said the ghost, gaining more courage. "I'm supposed to scare the daylight out of people—if you'll forgive the mixed metaphor. They should run like hell, but all the running is done by myself. Of course, I don't run in the usual sense of the word, but you get what I mean?"

Furious nodded.

"I must be a failure, that's all."

"Oh, no, you're not," said Furious. "You really frightened me tonight, in spite of the notices you so thoughtfully put up."

"That's all very well!" said the ghost in the loudest voice he had so far achieved. "But I was scared, too. How can I have any self-respect?"

"I see what you mean, spook," said Furious, filling his briar pipe and wrinkling his forehead as he thought. "I suppose you are a proper spook?"

"I don't know but I hope so," said the ghost.

"You ought to be able to make yourself vanish then," said Furious. "You wouldn't scare yourself that way."

"You've hit it!" cried the ghost. "Here goes!" He stood up. Instantly his form began to waver and twist, his greenish-yellow forehead knotted and his lips tightened to a thin line. After a moment he asked, "How am I doing?"

"Not too good," said Furious. "You look almost the same to me."

The ghost tried harder and grew a little black in the face. But if anything he remained as substantial as ever. He kept it up for ten minutes and then sat down, puffing, on the log.

"I'm a failure there, too," he said and burst into tears again.

"Nothing was built in a day, spook," said Furious. "You practice it and you'll vanish all right. And now, if you'll excuse me, I must get home and grab myself some shut-eye."

Furious saw no more of the ghost for a week and then one night as he was coming back from the shanty, he saw a notice in two-foot letters in charcoal on a piece of cardboard: *I'VE DONE IT!*

"Perseverance always succeeds!" said Furious to himself, or so he thought.

"You're telling me!" said a small voice, right in front of him. "I no longer scare myself and now I can scare others. Eecch! Eecch!"

"You got a cold, spook?" asked Furious. He pulled a spotted bandana handkerchief out of his pocket and held it to the ghost and then, remembering, stuffed it away in the hip pocket of his dungarees.

"No, why do you ask?" asked the ghost.

Furious thought he could see a faint green mist moving against the base of an old dead gum tree.

"You sneezed," said Furious.

"That wasn't a sneeze," said the ghost and burst out sobbing. "I was trying out a screech."

"You'll have to do better than that, shade," said Furious. "That kind of screech wouldn't scare anybody." He sat down on a log and waved to the ghost to do the same.

"I'll stand," said the ghost, between sobs. "If you can call it that. If I had a sitting rear-end I mightn't be able to vanish again. Eeeecch!"

"Not impressive," said Furious. "You'd better call it off, spookie."

"I couldn't do that!" cried the ghost, in the loudest voice he had yet achieved. "Whoever heard of a ghost who didn't scare people? It's my destiny."

"Duty is duty," said Furious. "You go off and practice hard. And now, if you don't mind, I'll hit the hay."

One night, a week later, Furious was returning from the shanty an hour or so before his usual time. He'd spent most of his dough, but still had a raging thirst. In spite of his bad temper he kept his eyes peeled for a notice from the ghost.

He had almost reached his hut without seeing one and was shaking his head and murmuring to himself, "Poor chap, he's just not cut out for it," when suddenly there was a terrifying screech right in his ear.

Furious was so startled he sprang up in the air, thrashing his legs violently. He sat down hard on the ground, sprang up immediately and began to perform again, jumping up and down on his hat and speaking his mind about the ghost. At the end of ten minutes he cooled down abruptly and said, "Good for you, spook!"

"Yes, I wasn't bad, was I?" said the ghost. A vapor wavered and threw a faint shadow in the moonlight.

"Now, don't get a swelled head, ghostie," said Furious. "You've got a long way to go yet." Furious tapped three of his teeth. "You've got to scare someone else, shade." Furious made his teeth ring before he added, "Suppose you try the shanty-keeper."

Furious coughed to clear his throat. "I'm as dry as an old bone in a drought."

"I'd never scare him," said the ghost. "Let me try something easier."

"Nothing could be easier," said Furious. "A screech like the one you handed me just now and he'd clear out into the scrub. I could do with a free drink or two. So I'll tag along and watch you turn him to putty. He'll look to me then for support."

"You're honest about this?" asked the ghost.

"You bet I am," said Furious. "Why shouldn't I be?"

After some more encouraging words from Furious they set off for the shanty. Furious walked quickly but the ghost lagged behind and Furious had to keep urging him along. Near the shanty, the ghost began to whimper. Furious, whose thirst was

worse by this time, went hostile and shouted at him, "What's the matter with you, shade?"

"It's not professional," said the ghost.

"What's not professional?" asked Furious.

"Screeches only," said the ghost. "A ghost shouldn't scare people with screeches alone—not in our best circles anyway. Our clients should see a ghost, too. When one of our number shows himself and screeches, his clients get so terrified they try to climb up the wall."

"The ghost paused. "I'll never achieve such heights, of course. But you know what I mean."

Furious thought it out and in the end he hit on the idea of wearing a sheet himself while the ghost provided the screeches and groans.

No light was showing in the shanty when they got there finally.

"He sleeps round the back," said Furious, leading the way in the sheet. "I've got a hell of a thirst." He found the window, pushed it up and climbed in. The ghost hung back and then floated in through the wall, very slowly, and stood behind Furious.

"Now!" hissed Furious and began to flap his arms. The ghost made no sound except a whimper of fear. "Screech, ghostie!" urged Furious. He flapped his arms and then to encourage the ghost began to screech and groan. He broke off to mutter at the ghost, "You milk-sop!"

"Eeeccch!" cried Furious.

The shanty-keeper stirred, shouting, "Where's my shot gun!"

Something foggy brushed across Furious and fled whimpering out through the wall. Furious screeched once more and followed the ghost. He barked his shins getting through the window, raced off and tripped over the sheet. He got up, threw away the sheet and scrambled across the clearing.

B-a-n-n-g-g! went the shanty-keeper's gun, which was loaded with bird shot.

Furious clapped a hand to his hip-pocket and ran faster after the ghost whose progress ahead was marked by loud yelps. As soon as he was clear of the shanty Furious performed, discussing the ghost's pedigree and failings.

He alternately jumped on his hat and scratched his rump, while the ghost hovered around, sniveling. A quarter of an hour passed before the ghost could get a word in edgeways.

"I'm truly ashamed, Furious . . ." he began.

"It's a (adjective) wonder you've got the nerve to show your (adjective) face at all!" said Furious. "Scared of a (adjective) shanty-keeper . . ."

"It wasn't him that scared me," said the ghost.

"Who, then?" asked Furious.

"You!" said the ghost. "Your screeches and groans!"

Furious upbraided the ghost for only ten minutes because he was touched by the ghost bursting into sobs.

"You'll make a go of it yet, ghostie," said Furious, kindly. He started to sit down on a log and then remembered. He rubbed his hip-pocket. "Perseverance and backbone—just keep those two things in mind. In the end, you're bound to succeed."

After some more heartening words from Furious, who felt handicapped because he couldn't pat the other on the shoulder, the ghost went off promising to succeed.

Whether he did or not, Furious doesn't know. The ghost never appeared again. Furious has his own ideas about it.

"I expect the poor fellow was too (adjective) ashamed to come back," he often tells himself. "Or it might even be possible for a ghost to scare himself to death. Yes, it could happen."