

The Dancing Partner

By GUY L. HELMS

YES," said Chief Miller, "ghosts are always traceable to some human agency. The agent may not be responsible, as is often the case, and when such an instance occurs it makes a much deeper impression than does the premeditated plot. Now take this Heddon case for an example, it has the whole town upset. I remember another time—" he paused to light the never finished cigar while we waited hopefully for him to begin one of his justly famous stories.

We had just come in from the scene of the complicated Heddon murder case. The chief was feeling especially good and we knew he had finally reached a satisfactory solution of the mysterious crime.

Miller was a fine old man with snow white hair. Chief of the city force for many years he was the veteran, and the hero although he would never admit it, of many blood-curdling adventures. He was wont to relate some of the more interesting of these at times when he was elated over the solution of a problem. He was a wonderful story teller and we showed our immediate interest by straightening in our chairs the better to catch every word. No one spoke for fear that the tale would not be forthcoming. He hated interruptions of any kind.

"I remember" he continued, "when a certain young fellow's hair turned white from the effects of a tangle which, though directly responsible, the persons implicated had in no way planned the action.

"I used to live in the South, you know, and among the lower, and even some of the middle class, superstition holds sway to this day. In 1880, when this incident happened, it was much worse.

"I was a lad of twenty-two and engaged to the prettiest and sweetest girl in all the world. We, my mother, my father, and myself, were simple country folk living on the remnant of what had once been a large old southern plantation. Our darkies were of the old slavery type, extremely superstitious and very easily scared. Outside of those two faults and the race habit of stealing they were mostly interested in the welfare of 'Missy,' 'Ol Massa' and 'Marse

Gus.' So when my engagement was to be announced nothing would do but that they should hold a 'chivaree' in the negro quarter.

"Instead of the usual custom the announcement dinner and dance was to be at my father's house. After dinner and before the dancing started we were all going down to Mammy Lou's to watch the negroes at their party, always an interesting and entertaining thing to see.

"Everything at the dinner went smoothly and after making public the announcement which was already in the hands of the public, as is usually the case, we started for the cabin where Mammy Lou lived. Mammy had opened her house to all the nearby 'cullud pussons' that night and the party was in full swing.

"But things were not going as they should. I noticed the restlessness among Mammy's black guests as soon as I stepped across the threshold. Mother noticed it too for she immediately asked me to find the cause of the uneasiness among the negroes who were generally so carefree. Mammy, good old soul that she was, did not want to worry her 'Marse Gus' on the first night of his life and I was unable to get a single word of explanation out of her. 'Go on Marse Gus' she replied to my questioning, 'dey's just shy, dat's all; nuffin but dey ain't quainted yet.' This about darkies who had known each other since childhood. But nothing could be learned from her so I tried one of the bucks who seemed to be the center of the uneasiness. I got him off to one side and found that he was the direct cause since the night before he had seen the Fulton cemetery ghost, a ghost which every negro in the section absolutely knew existed. Among the negroes the ghost had been the topic of conversation at every gathering for the past six weeks. The fellow who claimed to have seen the apparition the night before was a strapping black, afraid of nothing under the sun, but he visibly trembled when he told me of his experience. I knew him to be as truthful as the usual run of blacks were and therefore gave some credence to his story. I knew there was something behind it. I found that something later.

"Just as the black was finishing his tale the door swung open and Mammy Lou's son John, fell across the doorstep.

"No mortal can ever picture the fear showing in the face turned toward me in a mute plea for protection. His eyes were protruding from his head and only the whites were showing, like those of a drunken man. His face was the ashen grey color of the whitewashed walls of the cabin. He uttered inarticulate sounds between the rasping sobs of his breath. His body was racked by great gasps that shook him all over. He was the very image of terror, stark, unspeakable horror. Not a word could he form but crawled to me as a whipped dog crawls to its master.

"Pandemonium broke loose. Instantly every negro in the house became imbued with the terror showing so plainly in John's face. Every voice was raised in howls for mercy although not a thing was to be seen. What there was to be afraid of no one knew nor cared. The unknown quality only intensified their fear. They gathered in a shivering black group, holding on to each other for dear life and whimpering like lost children. All calls for water for the helpless negro on the floor went unheeded. No one of them would stir.

"Finally I managed to bring John to himself enough to get the words 'Fulton,' 'gràveya'd', and 'ghos' out of him while he groveled on the floor at my feet. Nothing more could he say.

"'He has seen the ghost,' said my mother. And I knew that was what had happened.

I KNEW something must be done at once. The negroes wouldn't be fit for night work, nor any other kind of work to tell the truth, until the ghost had been proven non-existent. Besides, my sweetheart with her girl friends and their escorts were watching me. I knew they were wondering what I would do. A spirit of bravado took hold of me and on the spur of the moment I declared myself in on the worst fright it has ever been my lot to receive.

"'John,' I said, 'I am going over to that graveyard and get your ghost for my dancing partner tonight.'

"Mammy went straight up in the air when I made this assertion. Like a

tigress she was at me, holding my arms and clawing me in the struggle to dissuade me from the trip. With all her puny old strength she hung on, begging, crying, that I should not go. Mammy had been my foster mother, as many a negro has been to her 'Massa's' son, and she loved me more than she did her own black children, as much as my own mother did. She knew in her old heart that I was going to worse than death and her whole soul went into the plea. She was aided in her efforts by every one in the house except my male friends and they had an idea that it was a fitting adventure for a soon-to-be bridegroom. And to top it off they had the nerve to tell me that I wouldn't carry out my boast—that I was afraid to go. Of course that clinched the case, I would have gone had I known the ghost really existed. So telling Mose, Mammy's husband, to saddle my horse, I started to the house for my pistols.

"As I was getting my guns, I told my father where I was bound and what I was going for. Of course he laughed and bade me be on my way—such was ever the way of my dad. Then to the barn where I found my friends had saddled Button for me.

"Mother, Margaret, and some of the other girls tried to persuade me to give up the mad idea of a two mile ride to the graveyard on such a mission, but I could not turn back after making such a foolish declaration in spite of the fact that I was already sick of it. I was too proud to turn back now. Amid the pleas to be careful from the women and the good natured jibes of the men, I started on my quest for a supernatural dancing partner.

"As I rode I reviewed the numerous stories which were being circulated about the ghost, all told along the same line. It seemed that on certain occasions the white figure with out-stretched arms was sure to appear and chase every lone traveler along the road which ran parallel to the cemetery. Sometimes two or three persons had seen the ghost on the same night—never together though. It only appeared to those who traveled alone.

"There was no doubt that something was seen and that it had the whole countryside aroused, not only the ignorant negroes but the whites as well. As for that something being a spirit I was doubtful, more than doubtful, I scoffed at the idea. Nevertheless as I went over the different stories a feeling came over me that I was doing something I could have just as well left to someone else. I began to get just a little nervous as I neared my objective, but though I

wished myself well out of the escapade, my foolish pride would not allow me to turn back after going so far. I couldn't bear the thought of my friends' ridicule and there was nothing to do but go on with the mad adventure.

"I can see that graveyard now as plainly as I did on that night forty-two years ago, so indelibly is the picture impressed on my memory. The moon was up, but a dew-mist hung close to the ground touching everything with a weird, ghostly grayness which is made especially for such adventures. The effect of the moonlight through the mist added momentarily to the nervousness that seemed to be enveloping me. The quiet night, the sudden harsh chirp of a cricket, the throaty whine of a tree-frog, all flooded me with a sense of the unreal. I had heard the same sounds every night of my life without paying the slightest attention to them and saw no reason why they should fill me with dread and uneasiness on this night. I had a feeling of impending disaster when I entered the gates of the cemetery.

"The graveyard was located in a space of almost virgin forest. Huge old elms, bent and twisted oaks, young shrubs tangled among the graves, all covered with honeysuckle vines and Virginia creeper. The tombstones gave off a ghostly gleam of whiteness due to the fact that they were almost covered with vines—the white shining through like the bones beneath them—taking on the forms of skeletons. Here and there a gray slab shone through the trees where the mist-deadened effect of the moonbeams made them stand out—truly a monument to the dead. The mist just thick enough to bring out the loneliness and decay of the place. It was Death and the abode of the Dead.

"I rode up among the graves and stopped, first thinking to dismount and thoroughly explore the shadows on foot. But while I waited all idea of getting off my horse left me, driven out by the peculiar feeling that someone was watching me. Button was displaying an unusual amount of nervousness also and I knew that he had seen or scented something out of the ordinary. A noise here, a sudden sigh of the faint breeze, the swinging of the moss-covered limbs in front of me—everything seemed to fill me with a horrible fear, not exactly a fear, but a dread of what was to follow. My heart was in my throat, nearly choking me with its quickened expansion. I started on my round of the graves expecting every minute to see the white-clad figure, and praying that I wouldn't.

"Nothing happened and I made a complete circle of the tombs without seeing anything to account for Button's nervousness, although I always had a feeling that I was being observed. Riding up to a long coffin-like tomb on my way out I stopped Button to take my bearings and have one last look around before leaving. This tomb was about two feet high, of the same width and at least six feet long, parallel to the gravel path on which my horse stood. My wondering courage began to re-assert itself and I laughed shakily to think I had put so much stock in the superstitious stories of easily frightened negroes. Then too, I was just a little elated that I had finished my ride without anything materializing.

SUDDENLY Button shied with a snort, almost unseating me. At the same instant I saw through the corner of my eye, a white figure detach itself from the tomb and leap for my horse. I could have sworn nothing was there an instant before. The figure simply came from thin air. I felt hands, bony, dead hands, tighten around my waist. My blood turned to water and my hair stood on end. My heart stopped its beat and terror seized me. Unconsciousness would have been a blessing. I tried to scream and no sound came. I tried to move my arms but horror had locked every bone in my body. I could not move. Those fearful, clammy hands were moving here and there over my body as though seeking some tender spot to settle upon.

"My horse jumped to a full run with a scream of mortal anguish that only a dying animal ever gives, a scream that sounds like the agonized cry of a woman or child in pain.

"Over my face, through my hair, crept those hands—those searching, slimy hands of horror. My head was busting with pentup fear. An unearthly shriek, like that of a lost soul, a fiendish, playful soul, exulting over its prey. The damp smell of a moldy grave burdened my gasping nostrils. I couldn't breathe.

"I pictured in my tortured mind the decayed face behind me shedding its flesh and grinning as the moldering pieces dropped at each leap of the horse. I wondered if mine would be the fate of the ghoul behind—if I too should bring terror to some living mortal. All this in a detached sort of way as though I were only a spectator.

"All this time Button was running as he had never run before. I have no recollection of coming to the house, no

thought of home ever entered my mind, only to be rid of the *thing* clinging to my back.

“Then my horse reared to a sudden stop and dropped slowly to the ground. I knew in the same detached way that he was dead—and wondered if my time had come too. I couldn’t move, I didn’t want to move. I only wanted to rest, to have it all over with. I felt the hands

steal slowly to my throat and tighten there into bands of steel. My strength, my will, my reasoning power were gone and I sank into a dreamless sleep.

“Slowly I awakened and voices made themselves clear through the haze of semi-consciousness.

“‘He found his dancing partner,’ said one.

“‘Yes,’ said another and I recognized

it as my father’s ‘but imagine riding two miles, killing a horse, and being almost choked to death by a crazy woman whom everyone thought harmless.’”

The old chief sat up in his chair and rubbed his hands through his white hair.

“I’ll tell you, boys,” he said slowly, “that ride of mine sure played the dickens with the thick head of black hair I had then.”

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