

The Ghost

by Mrs. Henry Wood

The moon was high in the heavens, lighting up the tower of the cathedral, illuminating its pinnacles, glittering through the elm trees, bringing forth into view even the dark old ivy on the preberdal houses. A fair night—all too fair for the game that was going to be played in it.

When the Helstoneleigh college boys resolved upon what they were pleased to term a “lark”—and, to do them justice, they regarded this, their prospective night’s work, in no graver light—they carried it out artistically, with a completeness, a skill, worthy of a better cause. Several days had they been hatching this—laying their

plans, arranging the details; it would be their own bungling fault if it miscarried. But the college boys were no bunglers.

Stripped of its details, the bare plot was to exhibit a "ghost" in the cloisters, and to get Charley Channing, a harmless but timid fellow scholar, to pass through them. The boys had been too wise to let it come to the knowledge of their seniors; and the most difficult part of the business had been old Ketch, the caretaker—but that was managed.

The moonlight shone peacefully on the college, and the conspirators were stealing up, by ones and twos, to their place of meeting round the dark trunks of the elm trees. Fine as it was overhead, it was less so underfoot. The previous day had been a wet one, the night had been wet, and also the forepart of the present day. Schoolboys are not particularly given to reticence, and a few more than the original conspirators had been taken into the plot. They were winding up now, in the weird moonlight, for the hour was approaching.

At this point we must pay a visit to Mr. Ketch in his lodge at his supper hour. Mr. Ketch had changed his hour for that important meal. Growing old with age or with lumbago, he found early rest congenial to his bones, as he informed his friends; so he supped at seven, and retired afterwards. Since the summer he had taken to having his pint of ale brought to him, deeming it more prudent not to leave his lodge and the keys to fetch it. This was known to the boys, and it rendered their plans a little more difficult.

Mr. Ketch, I say, sat in his lodge, having locked up the cloisters about an hour before, sneezing and wheezing, for he was suffering from a cold, caught the day previously in the wet. He was spelling over a weekly twopenny newspaper, borrowed from the public-house, by the help of a flaring tallow candle and a pair of spectacles, of which one glass was out. Cynically severe was he over everything he read, for it was in the nature of Mr. Ketch to be. As the three-quarters past six chimed out from the cathedral clock, his door was suddenly opened, and a

voice called out "Beer!" Mr. Ketch's supper ale had arrived.

But the arrival did not give the gentleman pleasure, and he started up in what we might call a fury. Dashing his one-eyed glasses on the table, he attacked the man—

"What d'ye mean with your 'beer' at this time o' the evening? It wants a quarter to seven! Haven't you got no clock at your place? D'ye think I shall take it in now?"

"Well, it just comes to this," said the man, who was the brewer at the public-house, and made himself useful at odd jobs in his spare time, "if you don't like to take it in now, you can't have it at all, of my bringing. I be a-going up to t'other end of the town, and shan't be back this side of ten."

Mr. Ketch, with much groaning and grumbling, took the ale and poured it into a jug of his own—a handsome jug, that had been in the wars and lost its spout and handle—giving back the public-house jug to the man. "You serve me such an impudent trick again as to bring my ale a quarter of an hour beforehand, that's all!" snarled he.

The man received the jug and went off whistling; he had the pleasure of knowing Mr. Ketch and his temper well. That gentleman shut his door with a bang, and proceeded to get out his customary bread and cheese. Not that he had any great love for a bread-and-cheese supper; as a matter of taste he would very much have preferred something more dainty; only dainties and Mr. Ketch's pocket didn't agree.

"They wants to be took down a notch, that public—sending out a man's supper beer a quarter afore seven, when it ain't ordered to come till seven strikes. Much they care if it stops a-waiting and a-flattening, and gets undrinkable! Be I a slave that I should be forced to swaller my supper afore my tea have well gone down, just to please them? They have got a sight too much custom, that's what it is."

He took a slight draught of the offending ale, and was critically surveying the loaf before applying to it that green-handled knife of his, when a second summons was heard at the door—a very timid one this time.

Mr. Ketch flung down the bread and the knife. "What's the reason I can't get a meal in quiet? Who is it?"

There was no response to this, save a second faint tapping.

"Come in!" roared out he. "Pull the string o' the latch."

But nobody came in, in spite of this lucid direction; and the timid tapping, which seemed to proceed from very small knuckles, was repeated again. Mr. Ketch was fain to go, grunting, and open it.

A young damsel of eight or so, in a tattered tippet and a large bonnet—probably her mother's—stood there curtsying. "Please, sir, Mr. Ketch is wanted."

Mr. Ketch was rather taken aback at this strange address, and surveyed its messenger in astonishment. "Who be you? And who wants him?" growled he.

"Please, sir, it's a gentleman as is a-waiting at the big green gates," was the reply. "Mr. Ketch is to go to him this minute—he told me to come and say so; and if you didn't make haste, he should be gone."

"Can't you speak consistent?" snarled Ketch. "Who is the gentleman?"

"Please, sir, I think it is the bishop."

This put Ketch in a fluster. The "big green gates" could only have reference to the private entrance to the bishop's garden, which entrance his lordship used when attending the cathedral. That the bishop was in Hellestoneleigh Ketch knew. He had arrived that day, after a short absence. What on earth could he want with *him*? Never doubting, in his hurry, the genuineness of the message, Ketch pulled his door to, and stepped off, the young messenger having already decamped. The green gates were not one minute's walk from the lodge—though a projecting buttress of the cathedral prevented the one being in sight of the other—and old Ketch gained them and looked around.

Where was the bishop? The iron gates, the garden, the white stones at his feet, the towering cathedral aloft, all lay cold and calm in the moonlight, but of human sound or sight there was none. The gates were locked when he

came to try them and he could not see the bishop anywhere.

He was not likely to see him. Steven Bywater, the lad who took upon himself much of the plot's acting part—of which, to give him his due, he was boldly capable—had been on the watch in the street near the cathedral for a messenger that would suit his purpose. Seeing this young damsel hurrying along with a jug in her hand, possibly to buy beer for *her* home supper, he waylaid her.

“Little ninepins, would you like to get threepence?” asked he. “You shall have it if you'll carry a message for me close by.”

“Little ninepins” had probably never had a whole threepenny piece to herself in her young life; she caught at the tempting suggestion, and Bywater drilled into her his instructions, finding her excessively stupid over the process. Perhaps that was all the better. “Now mind, you are *not* to say who wants Mr. Ketch unless he asks,” repeated he for about the fifth time, as she was departing to do the errand. “If he asks, say you think it's the bishop.”

So she went and delivered it. But had old Ketch's temper allowed him to go into minute questioning, he might have discovered the trick. Bywater stealthily followed the child near the lodge, screening himself from observation; and as soon as old Ketch hobbled out of it, he popped in, snatched the cloister keys from their nail, and deposited a piece of paper, folded as a note, on Ketch's table. Then he made off.

Back came Ketch after a while. He did not quite know what to make of it, but rather inclined to the opinion that the bishop had not waited for him. “He might have wanted me to take an errand round to the deanery,” soliloquised he. And this thought had caused him to tarry about the gate, so that he was absent from his lodge quite ten minutes. The first thing he saw on entering was the bit of paper on the table. He seized and opened it, grumbling aloud that folks used his home just as they pleased, going in and out without reference to his presence or his absence. The note, written in pencil,

purported to be from an acquaintance, one Joseph Jenkins. It ran as follows:

“My old father is coming up to our place
tonight to eat a bit of supper, and he
says he should like you to join him, which
I and Mrs. J. shall be happy if you will,
at seven o’clock. It’s tripe and onions.

Yours
J. Jenkins

Now, if there was one delicacy known to this world more delicious to old Ketch’s palate than another it was tripe, seasoned with plenty of onions. His mouth watered as he read. He was aware that it was—to use the phraseology of Helstoneleigh—“tripe night.” On two nights in the week tripe was sold in the town ready dressed, onions and all. This was one; and Ketch anticipated a glorious treat. In too great a hurry to cast so much as a glance round his lodge (crafty Bywater had been deep), not stopping even to put up the loaf and the cheese and the green-handled knife, only drinking the beer, away hobbled Ketch as fast as his lumbago would allow him, locking safely his door, and not having observed the absence of the keys.

“He ain’t a bad sort, Joe Jenkins,” allowed he, conciliated beyond everything at the prospect the invitation held out, and talking to himself as he limped away towards the street. “He don’t write a bad hand neither! It’s a plain un—not one o’ them new-fangled scrawls that you can’t read. Him and his wife held up their heads a cut above me—oh, yes they have, though, for all Joe’s humbleness. Old Jenkins has always said we’d have a supper together some night, him and me; I suppose this is it.”

The first chimes of the cathedral clock gave notice of the hour seven! Old Ketch broke out all in a heat, and tried to hobble along. Seven o’clock! What if, through being late, his share of the tripe and onions should be eaten!

Peeping out every now and then from the deep shade

cast by one of the angles of the cathedral, and as swiftly and cautiously drawn back again, was a trencher, apparently watching Ketch. As soon as that functionary was fairly launched on his way, the trencher came out entirely, and went flying at a swift pace round the college to the Boundaries.

Bywater, by the help of the filched keys, was now safe in the cloisters, absorbed with his companions in the preparation for the grand event of the night. In point of fact, they were getting up Pierce senior. Their precise mode of doing that need not be given. They had requisites in abundance, having disputed among themselves which should be at the honour of the contribution, and the result was an over prodigality.

"That's seven!" exclaimed Bywater in an agony, as the clock struck. "Make haste, Pierce! The young one was to come out at a quarter-past. If you're not ready, it will ruin all."

"I shall be ready and waiting, if you don't bother" was the response of Pierce. "I wonder if old Ketch is safely off."

"What a stunning fright Ketch would be in if he came in here and met the ghost!" exclaimed Hurst. "He'd never think it was anything less than the Old Gentleman come for him."

A chorus of laughter, which Hurst himself hushed. It would not do for noise to be heard in the cloisters at that hour.

There was nothing to which poor Charley Channing was more sensitive than to ridicule on the subject of his unhappy failing—the propensity to fear; and there is no failing to which schoolboys are more intolerant. Of moral courage—that is, of courage in the cause of right—Charles had plenty; of physical courage, little. Apart from the misfortune of having had supernatural terror implanted in him in childhood, he would never have been physically brave. Schoolboys cannot understand that this shrinking from danger (I speak of palpable danger), which they call cowardice, nearly always emanates from a superior intellect. Where the mental powers are of a high order, the

imagination unusually awakened, danger is sure to be keenly perceived, and sensitively shrunk from. In proportion will be the shrinking dread of ridicule. Charles Channing possessed this dread in a remarkable degree. You may therefore judge how he felt when he found it mockingly alluded to by Bywater.

On this very day that we are writing of, Bywater caught Charles, and imparted to him in profound confidence an important secret—that a choice few of the boys were about to play old Ketch a trick, obtain the keys, and have a game in the cloisters by moonlight. A place in the play, he said, had been assigned to Charles. Charles hesitated—not because it might be wrong so to cheat Ketch (Ketch was the common enemy of the boys, of Charley as of the rest), but because he had plenty of lessons to do. This was Bywater's opportunity; he chose to interpret the hesitation differently.

“So you are afraid, Miss Charley! Ho, ho! Do you think the cloisters will be dark? That the moon won't keep the ghosts away? I say, it *can't* be true, what I heard the other day, that you dare not be in the dark, lest ghosts should come and run away with you!”

“Nonsense, Bywater!” returned Charley, changing colour like a conscious girl.

“Well, if you are *not* afraid, you'll come and join us,” sarcastically returned Bywater. “We shall have stunning good sport. There'll be about a dozen of us. Rubbish to your lessons! You need not be away from them more than an hour. It won't be *dark*, Miss Channing.”

After this nothing would have kept Charley away, fearing their ridicule. He promised faithfully to be in the cloisters at a quarter-past seven.

Accordingly, the instant tea was over, he got to his lessons. Thus was he engaged when another student, Hamish, entered.

“What sort of night is it, Hamish?” asked Charles thinking of the projected night play.

“Fine,” replied Hamish.

The silence was resumed. Hamish turned himself round to the fire and said no more. Charles's ears were listening for the quarter-past seven; and the moment it chimed out,

he quitted his work, took his trencher coat from the hall, and departed saying nothing to anybody.

He went along whistling past the deanery; it, and the cathedral tower rising above it, looked gray in the moonlight. He picked up a stone and sent it right into one of the elm trees; some of the birds, disturbed from their roost, flew out, croaking, over his head. In the old days of superstition it might have been looked upon as an ill omen, coupled with what was to follow. Ah, Charley, if you could but foresee what is before you! If Mrs. Channing, from her far-off sojourn, could but know what grievous ill is about to overtake her boy!

Poor Charley suspected nothing. He was whistling a merry tune, laughing, boy-like, at the discomfiture of the cawing rooks, and anticipating the stolen game he and his friends were about to take part in on forbidden ground.

At that minute he saw a boy come forth from the cloisters, and softly whistle to him, as if in token that he was being waited for. Charley answered the whistle, and set off at a run.

Which of the boys it was he could not tell; the outline of the form and the college cap were visible enough in the moonlight, but not the face. When he gained the cloister entrance he could no longer see him, but supposed the boy had preceded him into the cloisters. On went Charley, groping his way down the narrow passage. "Where are you?" called out he.

There was no answer. Once in the cloisters, a faint light came in from the open windows overlooking the burial-yard—a very faint light, indeed, for the buildings all round it were so high as almost to shut out a view of the sky; you must go close to the window-frame before you could see it.

"I—s-a-a-y!" roared Charley again, at the top of his voice, "where are you all? Is nobody here?"

There came neither response nor sign of it. One faint sound certainly did seem to strike upon his ear from behind; it was like the click of a lock being turned. Charley looked sharply round, but all seemed still again. The low, dark, narrow passage was behind him; the dim cloisters were before him; he was standing at the corner

formed by the east and south quadrangles, and the pale burial-ground in their midst, with its damp grass and its gravestones, looked cold and lonesome in the moonlight.

The strange silence—it was not the silence of daylight—struck upon Charles with dismay. “You fellows there!” he called out again in desperation. “What’s the good of playing up this nonsense?”

The tones of his voice died away in the echoes of the cloisters, but of other answer there was none. At that instant a rook, no doubt disturbed by the sound, came diving down and flopped its wings across the burial-ground. The sight of something moving there nearly startled Charles out of his senses, and the matter was not much mended when he discovered it was only a bird. He turned and flew down the passage to the entrance quicker than he had come up it; but, instead of passing out, he found the iron gate closed. What could have shut it? There was no wind. And if there had been a wind ever so boisterous, it could scarcely have moved that little low gate, for it opened inwards.

Charles seized it to pull it open. It resisted his efforts. He tried to shake it, but little came of that, for the gate was fastened firmly. Bit by bit stole the conviction over his mind that he was locked in.

Then a panic seized him. He was locked in the ghostly cloisters, close to the graves of the dead—on the very spot where, as idle tales went, the monks of bygone ages came out of those recording stones under his feet and showed themselves at midnight. Not a step could he take round the cloisters but his foot must press those stones. To be locked in the cloisters might be nothing for brave, grown, sensible men, but for many a boy it would have been a great deal, and for Charles Channing it was awful.

That he was alone he never doubted. He believed—as fully as belief, or any other feeling could flash into his horrified mind and find a place in it—that Bywater had decoyed him into the cloisters and left him there. All the dread terrors of childhood rose up before him. To say that he was mad in that moment might not be quite correct, but it is certain his mind was not perfectly sane. His whole body, his face, his hair, grew damp in an instant,

as does one in mortal agony; and with a smothered cry, which was not like that of a human being, he turned and fled through the cloisters, in the vague hope to find the other gate open.

It may be difficult for some of you to understand this excessive terror, albeit the situation was not a particularly desirable one. A college boy, in these enlightened days, laughs at supernatural tales as the delusions of ignorance in ages past; but for those who have had the misfortune to be imbued in infancy with superstitions, as was Charles Channing, the terror exists still, college boys though they may be. He could not have told (had he been collected enough to tell anything) what his precise dread was as he flew through the cloisters. None can at these moments. A sort of bugbear rises up in the mind, and they shrink from it, though they see not what its exact nature may be; but it is a bugbear that can neither be faced nor borne.

Feeling like one about to die; feeling as if death, in that awful moment, might be a boon rather than the contrary, Charles sped down the east quadrangle and turned into the north. At the extremity of the north side, forming the angle between it and the west, commenced the narrow passage similar to the one he had just traversed, which led to the west gate of egress. A faint glimmering of the white-flagged stones beyond this gate gave a promise it was open. A half-uttered sound of thankfulness escaped him, and he sped on.

Ah, but what was that? What was it that he came upon in the middle of the north quadrangle, standing within the niches? A towering form, with a ghostly face, telling of the dead, a mysterious, supernatural-looking blue flame lighting it up round about. It came out of the niche and advanced slowly upon him.

An awful cry escaped from his heart, and went ringing up to the roof of the cloisters. Oh, that the dean, sitting in his deanery adjacent to the cloisters, could have heard that helpless cry of anguish! No, no; there could be no succour for a place that was supposed to be empty and closed.

Back to the locked gate with perhaps the apparition following him? Or forward *past* IT to the open door of

egress? Which was it to be? In these moments there can be no reason to guide the course; but there is instinct; and instinct took that ill-fated child to the open door.

How he got past the sight it is impossible to tell. Had it been right in front of his path he never would have got past it. But it had made a halt when just beyond the niche, not coming out very far. With his poor hands stretched out and his breath leaving him, Charles did get by, and made for the door, the ghost bringing up the rear with a yell; while those old cloister niches when he was fairly gone, grew alive with moving figures, which came out of their dark corners and shrieked aloud with laughter.

Away, he knew not whither—away, like one who is being pursued by an unearthly phantom, deep catchings of his breath, as will follow undue bodily exertion, telling of something not right within; wild, low, abrupt sounds breaking from him at intervals—thus he flew, turning to the left, which took him towards . . . the river. Anywhere from the dreaded cloisters; anywhere from the old gray ghostly edifice; anywhere in his dread and agony! He dashed past the boat-house, down the steps, turning on to the river pathway, and—

Whether the light hanging at the boat-house deceived his sight—whether the slippery mud caused him to lose his footing—whether he was running too quickly and could not stop himself in time—or whether, in his irrepressible fear, he threw himself unconsciously in, to escape what might be behind him, will never be known. Certain it is, the unhappy boy went plunging into the river, another and a last wild cry escaping him as the waters closed over his head . . .