

# THE GHOST.

By OLIVER ONIONS.



EARLY in the November afternoon Williams the gardener had gathered together all the wet leaves and brushwood, all the tangle of dead runners and creepers that for weeks had littered the kitchen-garden, and all the house-

hold rubbish that the maids wanted to be rid of, and had made a great fire beyond the end of the toolhouse. He had started it by driving three short sticks into the ground so that they leaned together like the tripod on which the gipsies who had once encamped on the Common had boiled their kettle; and when the little flame had begun to twist and lick, and the twigs to crackle inside it, Johnnie Williams (the gardener's son) and Eddy had helped to stack all the broken pea-sticks and the drier branches about it like an Indian wigwam. Soon the fire had begun to draw with a hollow sound; Williams had set a few bricks and a sodden old log on the side away from the wind, to make a rough hearth; and from the great stack of fuel he had brought straggling pitchfork-loads, pressing all close with his heavy boot. Johnnie Williams, who was tremendously strong—or, at least, Eddy thought so, because he wore thick boots and corduroys like his father—trimmed the fire with a thick rose-stake; and Eddy potted about till he found a nice light pea-stick, and poked and stirred at the jolly fire here and there, and thrust back unconsumed ends, and made openings into its fierce red heart, and danced with delight as the flames caught the straw and husks of the runners, and wept with the strong smoke in his eyes, till the end of his pea-stick caught and burned, and he marched about with it all red and glowing. Then the fire grew too hot to approach, except on the side from which the wind blew.

The smell of the wet wood brought John

over from the plantation; and "Hurrah! Roast potatoes!" John cried, and ran off to the kitchen to get some. They crouched down, turning their faces away, and set the potatoes in the grey ash that the wind fanned every moment into beautiful bright salmon and pinks and roses; and their eyes ran and smarted with the pungent smoke. In five minutes they had the potatoes out, to see if they were cooked. They were all raw, and burnt their mouths; and when they had set them back again, Eddy gazed into the fire.

"There's a big book upstairs 't they burn people in fires," he said by and by, "'n a man put his hand in first, 'cos it had written . . . something . . . 'n he was all burnt up. He *was*, John; 'n it was at . . . some place. . . . George said so."

"Pooh! Let's be firemen. We'll be firemen, an' then the potatoes will be done, better than silly boiled ones. Come on!"

The gardener's boy grinned. "We haven't made this fire for you boys to play," he said swaggeringly; "we're working"; and at that moment Williams came up with his pitchfork and flung on a load of soaked stuff, that hissed and spluttered and gave out a dense volume of white smoke. He flung on another and another. "Aha, we're working!" said Johnnie Williams; and Eddy looked disconsolately at the beautiful fire, all spoiled. The gardener began to bank it up with earth; and the white smoke rose in clouds against the grey sky, and hid the copse and the trees of the paddock, and rolled away over the pond and the plantation, leaving wisps trailing behind it in the grass, like combed wool.

"You needn't think *you're* doing a lot of work, anyway, Johnnie Williams," John growled. And Johnnie grinned again, while Eddy watched the smoke that the cold surface of the water flattened out over the pond.

"'F we'd had lots, like that, for the battle, it would have been like a fog," he said wistfully.

"He's baked the potatoes up, too," John grumbled. "You are rotten, Johnnie Williams—I say, Eddy!"

"What, John?"



"From the great stack of fuel he had brought struggling pitchfork-loads."

"I know! They're earthing turnips down the road. Let's get some turnips, an' we'll eat them, an' then we'll make a ghost."

Eddy looked at him for a moment and then said timidly: "What's a ghost, John?"

"Doesn't know what a ghost is! Come on—I'll show you!"

Down the road, across a dip of the land, the red sun showed like a blood-orange; it turned the back of the horse in the field to a rich russet, and outlined the cart and glowed on the clayey garments of the men. One man was just tilting the cart and starting

the horse, and the great turnips came rumbling and bounding out, some rolling yards away. A great earth-bank, higher than the boys and a dozen yards long, ran alongside the ploughed-up clods; and the straw with which the turnips were covered was gathered at intervals into little wisps that stuck up out of the bank like chimneys.

"What are they for, John?" Eddy asked, as the man righted the cart again with a jolt.

"So's the air can get in, of course. Pick a big one." He rolled the turnips



"Eddy watched the smoke that the cold surface of the water flattened out over the pond."

about and selected one nearly as big as his head, all tinged with green down one side. Then he got out his penknife.

Eddy was earnestly considering what a ghost was, and what made the name so odd; and then he remembered where he had heard it before. It had been on Sundays, in the church; and he had had a vague, comfortable idea of something large and mild, gracious and beaming and golden. John was hacking round his turnip with his penknife; the cut showed a pale gold yellow in the sun; so no doubt it was the stuff ghosts were made of. But still Eddy was a little doubtful, and by and by he ventured to say: "Aren't they bigger'n that, John?"

"What?" said John, digging his fingers into the cut and breaking off a woody slice.

"Ghosts. Aren't they ever so big?"

"Rather, some of 'em," John replied. "Here you are. We'll eat this one and get another."

"Yes, John. 'N what do they do—ghosts?"

"Do?—Ah! You'll see!—Scare people to death, they do, an' haunt 'em, an' all sorts of things. An' they live in churchyards an' places at midnight; an' Ellen says she once saw one that went 'Moo-o-o!'—like that—an' it had a white sheet on——"

"Had it?" said Eddy, awestruck. . . " 'N what did Ellen do when it said . . . that . . . ?"

"Why, she nearly died, of course; she was horribly frightened, an' so'd you have been."

"No, I wouldn't," said Eddy tremulously.

"Oh, of course *you* wouldn't!" John replied. "I say—you can get a candle, can't you?"

"What for?"

"Why, to make the ghost; their eyes shine dreadfully, an' you have to have a candle."

"Yes," said Eddy; and then his own eyes shone, and he clapped his chubby hands.

" 'N, John! we'll put it behind the

hedge, by the little gate, 'n frighten Williams 'n Johnnie because they spoiled our fire, won't we?"

"Yes; come on!"

As they walked they ate the wedges that John half cut, half broke from the spare turnip. John grumbled because the turnip was cold and Williams had banked up the hot potatoes. The elms at the roadside were grey and bare, and the scanty brown leaves of the oaks rustled and shivered. As they approached home, they saw the opaque white smoke of the fire again, rolling like endless white curls; and they took the turnip to the toolhouse.

John sent Eddy into the kitchen for a large table-knife, and a spoon to scrape with. He cut a hole in the top of the turnip big enough to admit the bowl of the spoon, but it was terribly hard work to scoop it out inside. It was a large and very hard turnip, and John's wrist ached with working it; and soon he broke off, to try to sharpen the edge of the spoon on the oilstone, as George had done the gouges. "I know!" he said suddenly; "we'll cut it in two, an' scrape out half each, an' then tie it together again with string." He gave Eddy the spoon and took one of Williams's trowels, and that way they got on much more quickly. They ate the woody chips and scallops till they were no longer hungry for turnip, and John said the pigs could have the rest. He sent Eddy off for the candle-end, and he wasn't to say what it was for.

"Ellen nearly died, didn't she, John?" Eddy said solemnly, nodding once or twice as John turned the halves of the turnip this way and that against the toolhouse window.

"She'd have died in another minute; it was awful," John replied.

"'N did the candle inside make its eyes all horrible?"

"There's all sorts of ghosts; I don't know whether it was that sort."

"Will ours be the sort that says 'Moo-o-o'?"

"Of course it won't; *we* shall have to scrouch down in the hedge an' say that when they come."

"Ooo-o-o!" said Eddy. "I hope Williams nearly dies, John; 't'll serve him right, won't it?"

"I bet Johnnie Williams nearly does."

John bored the eyes himself, and cut a gash for a month, making jagged teeth in it as you do with the rind of an orange. He rummaged about till he found the lid of a small tin can, and he stuck its edge firmly

inside one half of the turnip and fastened his end of candle on it by melting some of the tallow. He had to handle the head very carefully, for they had scraped it very thin and pared the outside down like an apple; and then with the string he bound the two halves firmly together. Williams came in as he was doing this, and took Master John by the ear.

"Look there, my lad!" he cried, pointing to the litter of parings on the floor; "one body's work, ye are! Who said ye could come into my toolhouse making your nasty boggarts? Now fetch a bucket and clear up every bit o' that mess!"

"I shan't!" said John; and Johnnie Williams pulled a face behind his father's arm.

"Fetch a bucket at once!" So John, after a few saucy answers, gathered up the parings and carried them outside.

"P'raps he'll *quite* die!" Eddy whispered gleefully when Williams had turned his back. "Is a ghost the same as a nasty boggart, John?"

The light of the short afternoon began to fail, and the crows to fly homeward to the plantation. Over the turnip-field the sun became a smoky, bulging disc, and then showed only a rusty upper edge almost lost in the mists. Lapwings wheeled and cried plaintively across the ploughed land; the cart rumbled off down the road; and a light appeared in a kitchen window. The boys got an old besom and an apron, finished their spectre, and set it behind the hedge near the wicket-gate; and then a maid sought them and bore them off to tea.

In Eddy's little nursery-room the lamps were already lighted on the walls, and a merry fire danced and twinkled on the bright bars of the high steel fire-guard. Their feet were cold and their hands purple, for it was a raw afternoon; and the window showed a chilly grey-blue square. As they had tea, Eddy noticed how quickly this square became dimmer and darker, and how pleasantly the firelight wavering on the ceiling was reflected in it.

By and by he pushed his plate aside and looked at John; his brows were drawn upward a little.

"I say, John," he said, "shall we have a soldier-battle?"

"We're going out to do the ghost; it's nearly dark now," John replied.

"It isn't nearly midnight," said Eddy, a little troubled; "we might have just a short soldier-battle——"

"Ghosts *are* better at midnight," John mused; "but they won't let us stay up. They stop haunting people when the cock crows; they have to go back to the churchyard then."

"I should like just a *little* soldier-battle."

"All right."

There was a little square table with a green cloth in the nursery-room, and George, away at Oxford, had shown Eddy how to put books and lumpy things under the cloth, so as to make green hills and valleys. Eddy got out the soldiers from the cupboard, and they shared them and marshalled their forces; but somehow Eddy did not enjoy the battle very much. He was beginning to wish they hadn't made a ghost. Ghosts are one thing in the afternoon, but different when the November night seems to come all of a sudden. He kept saying the word over to himself; but instead of becoming more familiar, it seemed to become less so. With the darkening evening it was no longer fair and mild and beaming, but a grinning, flapping thing that said "Moo-o o!" and scared people to death. They finished the battle, and Eddy said quaveringly: "'N wouldn't it be fun to get *all* the toys out 'f the cupboard, John, 'n have them on the floor?"

"Bother the toys! It's dark now; let's put the ghost up!"

"Yes. . . . Why do they call them nasty boggarts, John?"

"Oh, that's only Williams."

"Aren't there any kind ghosts, John?"

"Why, you're frightened!" John exclaimed.

"No, I'm not; 'n you'll *never* play with the toys when I want —"

"You are—you are! I said you would be, an' you said you wouldn't! Frightened of a turnip ghost, 'at you've made yourself!"

"I'm not frightened 'f anything you're not!"

"Then come on, if you aren't. I have to go home all through the plantation, an' I won't have Williams with me, an' I won't run or anything! I dare you! Moo-o-o!"

"I dare, then; I dare, I dare!"

As they passed through the kitchen, one of the maids called after them.

"You're not to go out again, Master Eddy; and Williams must take Master John home."

"I shan't have Williams to take me home, an' we're going out!" John replied defiantly; and he purloined a box of matches as the maid resumed her work.

A single inky band, low in the sky, was all

that was left of the November day; the rest—the hedge beyond the toolhouse, the dark orchard, the kitchen-garden where the glass of a single cucumber-frame glimmered—was a huddle and throng of shadows. The ashen-grey smoke that still poured from the fire was visible for a yard or two and then was lost. It seemed to have suddenly got very chilly as well as very dark; and Eddy kept one hand on the wall as far as the corner of the scullery buildings. In letting it go at the corner, Eddy felt that he was parting company with everything that was pleasant and comfortable and known, and entering a dreary region where at any moment a ghost might rise over a wall or hedge, and lurking in the shadows were the shapes of people who had been frightened to death. He followed John timorously, his fingers fumbling with one another; and by and by he caught John's hand.

"John," he said, with a little catch in his throat, ". . . 'f I *come*, I'm not frightened, am I?"

John made no reply. They passed the fire, reached the wicket-gate, and John let go Eddy's hand. The gate gave a click and closed behind them. John advanced along the hedge, his hands putting aside the damp, whipping twigs, and Eddy followed a step at a time.

"Hallo!" John exclaimed suddenly in surprise, "why, it's gone!"

Eddy gave a quick little sigh; but he would not have admitted that he was unspeakably thankful. "It's gone back to the churchyard," he said. "Let's go home, John."

"Somebody's taken it. I bet it's Johnnie Williams——!"

"Has he?" Eddy whispered aghast. "'N didn't he drop dead?"

"Did you drop dead, stupid, when you helped to make it? I'm going to find it; you can stop here if you're frightened."

"I—I—you're bigger 'n me, John——" Eddy said in a faltering voice.

"Well, come on, then."

They searched the entire length of the hedge, but found no ghost. They advanced a dozen yards into the orchard, but it was not there. It was not to be seen about the clayey part that sloped down to the pond; and when they crawled through the gap in the fence, they could not see it as they looked towards Duck Point. "I don't care; I'm going to get it," John muttered determinedly. "Ugh! What's that?" But it was only the old drake, who, hearing steps, screamed harshly in the night.



"One man was just tilting the cart."

John stopped to think, and Eddy looked fearfully round. In the daytime he knew Duck Point, the gap in the fence, the beginning of the plantation; but he had never noticed how at night the sycamore tossed up two dark, menacing arms, as if it would fling itself on him, nor the shallow hole into which he stumbled with a little cry, as if it had been yards deep, nor the mysterious, threatening forms of the top of the beech plantation. All was changed and full of strangeness; but he would not take John's hand again, because John said he was afraid.

John stopped suddenly.

"I bet I know!" he exclaimed. "He's put it in the plantation, to frighten me when I go home!"

He lingered for a minute, as if he would turn back; and Eddy gulped with the suspense. Then suddenly he set off again. Eddy followed him, and in a few minutes they reached the edge of the dark wood. John advanced alone a dozen yards, and Eddy waited; then he heard John pushing further forward still. Suddenly there came a distant shout: "There it is! Come and look!"

There was no undergrowth among the beeches, only dead leaves that rustled and clogged your feet; but some of the branches swung and swept downwards, so that a man would have had to stoop to walk under them. Eddy's heart had given a jump at John's call, and he had set his hands against the smooth bole of the nearest beech, as if he were playing at "dodging." From tree to tree he advanced thus, craning his small face round as he came to each tree; perhaps ghosts couldn't frighten you if they only saw an edge of your face—and then, from behind the seventh tree, he saw it.

Its head was lodged against the branches, leering wickedly across them, as if over bars—a horrible sight. A dull, unearthly glare surrounded it; something grey and waving stirred half behind the bole, disappeared, and appeared again; and as Eddy sidled fearfully away from his tree, moving as if he were walking a tight-rope, the face of the ghost started out suddenly. Two shining eyes, villainously close together, were stuck high in its forehead; its jagged, luminous grin spread fiendishly half way round its face; and its sallow visage was mottled and bloated and patched. Not for his life dared Eddy have approached a yard nearer; and he waited spellbound for the "Moo-o-o!" that even fat Ellen, the buxom cook at the Court, had hardly survived.

And now that he had found it, bold John himself did not seem over-confident. He, too, hesitated, and at the sight of his timorousness, Eddy's own fears gripped his heart more tightly.

"Let's go back 'n send Williams," he whispered faintly.

"Shall we?" John replied; and then the memory of his own boasting seemed to quicken his courage a little. "No, I won't," he said shortly; "it's our ghost, an' I'm going to get it."

"Oh, don't, John!" Eddy wailed.

"I shall," said John.

The leaves swished and rustled as he diminished the distance between himself and the apparition by a yard or two. Eddy remained as rooted where he stood as the beeches themselves. "John!" he called shakily; "John!" But John was a dozen yards away. Eddy dropped to his hands and knees, for the comfort of the solid earth; he watched, fascinated by the hideous, shining face, devoured by such a fear as grown folk only know now and then in the abject cowardice that visits them in a nightmare. And soon John disappeared from his sight altogether.

But it was not the dreaded "Moo-o-o!" that came next—it was a sudden harsh clangour, the sound of a fall on the wet earth—a short cry, and then an appalling silence. Eddy cried shrilly, and then again and again. Only a low moan answered him. The boggart grinned triumphantly: it had frightened John to death, then—John, Eddy's playmate and friend, with whom he had sailed his boats and shot his air-gun and stalked the plantation for savage foes... For himself, Eddy could not have moved; but for John... he did not know whether his fears left him or not. All at once he shnt his mouth tight and ran forward.

John lay on the ground, breathing hard. Near him, in the light of the ghost, were the bucket, the two old canisters, and the piece of cord that Johnnie Williams had set, to trip whoever should approach it. Eddy called him, but he only grunted; and then Eddy, muttering to himself rapidly: "I'm not frightened, I'm not frightened, I'm not frightened," ran to the ghost. He seized the broomstick and dislodged it from the sweeping branches.

"Don't be frightened to death, John!" he cried eagerly; "it's on'y our ghost what we made, 'n it hasn't moo-o-oed—John—look!"

John stirred, moved his leg stiffly, and



"A dull, unearthly glare surrounded it."



put his hand to his barked shin and then to his bumped head. "I don't care how big Johnnie Williams is," he muttered, "I'll fight him to-morrow."

"'N look, John, you can take its string off, 'n it comes in two!" Eddy cried, tugging feverishly at the cord; "'n it can't frighten anybody to death then, 'n I'm *touching it!*"

The homely smell of a tallow candle rose, and the two halves of the turnip came apart. John muttered: "Beastly sneak, Johnnie

Williams!" and he struggled to his feet and pulled his stocking down to look at his shin. He looked up suddenly.

"I say, Eddy, you are white!" he said; "awfully funny——"

Eddy's lip trembled.

"White doesn't mean you're frightened, John, does it?" he asked wistfully.

"*Rather!*" John replied; and they took the broomstick and apron and the two halves of the turnip, and set off back through the plantation.