

THE LAWYER AND THE GHOST

CHARLES DICKENS

I KNEW A MAN – forty years ago – who took an old, damp, rotten set of chambers, in one of the most ancient Inns, that had been shut up and empty for years and years before. There were lots of stories about the place, and it certainly was far from being a cheerful one; but he was poor, and the rooms were cheap, and that would have been quite a sufficient reason, if they had been ten times worse than they really were.

The man was obliged to take some moldering fixtures, and, among the rest, was a great lumbering wooden press for papers, with large glass doors, and a green curtain inside; a pretty useless thing, for he had no papers to put in it; and as to his clothes, he carried them about with him, and that wasn't very hard work either.

Well, he moved in all his furniture – it wasn't quite a truck-full – and had sprinkled it about the room, so as to make the four chairs look as much like a dozen as possible, and was sitting down before the fire at night, drinking the first glass of two gallons of whiskey he had ordered on credit, wondering whether it would ever be paid for, if so, in how many years' time, when his eyes encountered the glass doors of the wooden press.

"Ah," says he, speaking aloud to the press, having nothing else to speak to; "Of it wouldn't cost more to break

up your old carcass, than it would ever be worth afterward, I'd have a fire out of you in less than no time."

He had hardly spoken the words, when a sound resembling a faint groan appeared to issue from the interior of the case; it startled him at first, but thinking that it must be some young fellow in the next chamber who had been dining out, he put his feet on the fender, and raised the poker to stir the fire.

At that moment, the sound was repeated: and one of the glass doors slowly opening, disclosed a pale figure in soiled and worn apparel, standing erect in the press. The figure was tall and thin, and the countenance expressive of care and anxiety, but there was something in the hue of the skin, and gaunt and unearthly appearance of the whole form, which no being of this world was ever seen to wear.

"Who are you?" said the new tenant, turning very pale; poising the poker in his hand, however, and taking a very decent aim at the countenance of the figure. "Who are you?"

"Don't throw that poker at me," replied the form: "If you hurled it with ever so sure an aim, it would pass through me, without resistance, and expend its force on the wood behind. I am a spirit!"

"And, pray, what do you want here?" faltered the tenant.

"In this room," replied the apparition, "my worldly ruin was worked, and I and my children beggared. In this room, when I had died of grief, and long-deferred hope, two wily harpies divided the wealth for which I had contested during a wretched existence, and of which, at last, not one farthing was left for my unhappy descendants. I terrified them from the spot, and since that day have prowled by night – the only period at which I can re-visit the earth – about the scenes of my long misery. This apartment is mine: leave it to me!"

"If you insist upon making your appearance here," said the tenant, who had had time to collect his presence of mind, "I shall give up possession with the greatest pleasure, but I should like to ask you one question, if you will allow me."

"Say on," said the apparition, sternly.

"Well," said the tenant, "it does appear to me somewhat inconsistent, that when you have an opportunity of visiting the fairest spots of earth – for I suppose space is nothing to you – you should always return exactly to the very places where you have been most miserable."

"Egad, that's very true; I never thought of that before," said the ghost.

"You see, sir," pursued the tenant, "this is a very uncomfortable room. From the appearance of that press, I should be disposed to say that it is not wholly free from bugs; and I really think you might find more comfortable quarters: to say nothing of the climate of London, which is extremely disagreeable."

"You are very right, sir," said the ghost politely, "it never struck me till now; I'll try a change of air directly."

In fact, he began to vanish as he spoke: his legs, indeed, had quite disappeared!

"And if, sir," said the tenant, calling after him, "if you *would* have the goodness to suggest to the other ladies and gentlemen who are now engaged in haunting old empty houses, that they might be much more comfortable elsewhere, you will confer a very great benefit on society."

"I will," replied the ghost, "we must be dull fellows, very dull fellows, indeed; I can't imagine how we can have been so stupid."

With these words, the spirit disappeared, and what is rather remarkable, he never came back again.