

THE GHOSTS OF NETHER TALKINGTON.

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NETHER TALKINGTON is a quaint old red-built, red-tiled townlet. It is the seat of the camel-hair paint-brush industry, but at the time this story opens it had another and

more singular claim to distinction. It was the only place in the kingdom that possessed a genuine ghost. There have been many reputed ghosts up and down the country, but their existence has never been satisfactorily proved. These fictions show their presence by absurdly stumping on bare boards, clanking heavy chains, breaking crockery, moving heavy furniture, and by giving utterance to weird and uncouth sounds—manifestations utterly without rhyme or reason, and which cannot in any one case be traced to a *bonâ fide* spirit.

Not so was it with the ghost of Nether Talkington. It was a genuine Elizabethan relic, the shade of an old squire who had come to a bad end after leading an awful life, and the Nether Talkingtonians were very proud of it. It resided at the Grange, at the far end of the town. For generations no mortal being had lived there. It was specially set apart for the ghost, the local authority arranging that the moat was always filled with stagnant water, and that the place was kept in the desolate condition so appropriate to its tenant.

It was an ideal place for a ghost to dwell in, and the shade of the Squire evidently thought so, for it never left the spot. Summer and winter it was to be found there by all desirous of an interview, and many were those who came.

Nether Talkington owed much of its prosperity to the ghost, for never a day passed without visitors turning up for the purpose of interviewing it, and on some days they came in shoals. Matters had much improved in this respect since the Physical

Research Society had investigated the phenomenon and pronounced it genuine; for this had introduced a big American custom, and in the summer large parties came from Stratford on their way to London.

It was a harmless ghost, and of a taciturn disposition. Sometimes it would speak, but



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on those occasions its language was chiefly maledictory. It was extremely methodical in its habits, and was to be seen any time

between midnight and cock-crow, and between nine and ten p.m. In the early hours it sat in the dining-room smoking a fantastic



“The report spread that the ghost was missing!”

pipe that had been given to the Squire by his friend Sir Walter Raleigh, and the evening hour it spent in perambulating the terrace by the sun-dial on the look-out for a lady who had made an appointment some three hundred years ago which she had failed to keep.

This methodical arrangement of the ghost had existed, according to authentic accounts, from the Squire's death, at the end of the sixteenth century; and his shade had never varied its programme within living memory. Conceive, therefore, the consternation that reigned in Nether Talkington when the report spread that the ghost was missing! A large party of visitors from Tontine, Dak., had called upon it at two a.m. and the guide had been unable to give them value for their shillings. They waited till four o'clock, but to no purpose; and although their money was returned they left Nether Talkington the

next morning in high dudgeon. That night a missionary and a photographer, armed with a flash-light apparatus, were in waiting by the sun-dial, but they waited in vain.

The disappearance of the ghost was a severe blow to the town, for the shilling admission had eased the burden of taxation for its inhabitants, and then there was the loss of prestige. But it was particularly hard on the landlord of the “White Swan.” He had paid a heavy price for the business some two years ago on the basis of custom to be brought by the ghost, and without that he might as well put up his shutters; for the gentlemen who sold the camels' hair went to the opposition house. There was also a butcher, a baker, possibly a candlestick maker, sundry cooks, waiters and chambermaids on whom the matter would press hard, to say nothing of the boots, while the guide to the Grange found starvation staring him in the face; for he had seen perpetual tips ahead and had made no provision for the unexpected.

As the matter was one of importance to the whole community no objection was raised when, at the next Parish Council meeting, minehost of the “White Swan,” Roger Wharton by name, referred to the subject. He pointed out that the ghost of the Grange had brought honour and renown to the town, and had incidentally lightened the taxes. Was it



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right that they should meekly allow it to abscond, thereby reducing Nether Talkington from its unique position to the level of its

neighbours, and without a struggle submit to the grievous imposition of heavy rates?

The Vicar, who was in the chair, agreed as to the lamentable state of things consequent on the disappearance of the ghost, but submitted that nothing could be done. They had no legal or moral power over the shade of the Squire. It had made no agreement to reside in the Grange for perpetuity, and although it had certainly behaved unhandsomely in absconding without a moment's warning, they had no redress.

Other speakers followed. It was proposed that a sub-committee should be appointed to deal with the matter, and names were suggested; but on these councillors asking in what direction they were to pursue their inquiries, and what were their powers, no satisfactory answer could be given, so they refused to act, and the matter was left precisely where it was before.

A fortnight passed. The ghost did not return. Visitors ceased to flock to Nether Talkington, the staff of the "White Swan" was reduced, and the guide to the Grange was admitted to the workhouse.

The next meeting of the Parish Council took place, and the Squire's ghost stood again on the agenda paper. When this point was reached the Chairman said that the ghost was still missing, and he understood that Councillor Timperley wished to say something on the subject.

Councillor Sam Timperley, the principal greengrocer of the place, stood up.

"Yes, Mr. Chairman," he said, "I have something to say, and before I say it I shall have to give you a little information about myself. You all know that I am a vegetarian, but perhaps it will be news to you that I am something more. I'm a Buddhist."

If he had stated that he was an anarchist he could not have caused more consternation. A general murmur of surprise and disgust ran round the table, and his immediate neighbours edged away from him. Undeterred by this manifestation of feeling the greengrocer went on—

"Yes, I'm a Buddhist, and I'm proud of it! and if you knew what it meant you'd all be one."

"Never!" came in a firm tone from Councillor Mudford, the local chemist.

"You'd all be one," repeated Timperley, glaring at his interrupter. "Now you none of you know what a Buddhist is, and I'll leave it to you to find out for yourselves, but I'll just tell you this much. When a

Buddhist has gone through a certain course of training he can disintegrate himself, that is, he can make his astral shape or spirit leave his body and travel where it likes. I can do this."

"Oh, oh!" cried the assembled councillors in derision.

"I can do this, I say," calmly continued the greengrocer, "and I am prepared, on certain terms, to do it for the benefit of Nether Talkington. The Squire's ghost is somewhere about, and though a human being cannot find it an astral shape can. Set a spirit to catch a spirit. I am prepared to disintegrate myself and let my astral shape search for the Squire; and if he's anyway like reasonable I'll engage to bring him back."

"Gentlemen," said the Vicar, rising, "I think we had better proceed to the next business. I have always had a sincere respect for Mr. Timperley, but I think he is not himself to-night. What he has just said convinces me that he is at present suffering from some extraordinary hallucination. I have no doubt it is only temporary, and we must all hope that he will soon be restored to his normal mental state. Nothing can be gained by discussing what we have just heard, and with your permission we will now pass on to the drainage question."

"Mr. Chairman," said Timperley in firm tones, "I protest against your imputations. I am as clear in my head as anyone here, and as free from hallucinations as the best of you. What I have said I repeat. I am prepared to let my astral shape travel in search of the Squire's ghost; and that I can do it I know, for yesterday it made its first journey into space, and with perfect success. Yesterday, gentlemen, Sam Timperley's spirit left his body and after wandering at will came back, and Sam Timperley's spirit will do it again if necessary."

"Perhaps you'll tell us what you saw on your trial trip," said one councillor with a sneer.

"I don't think you'd like me to do so, Mr. Sellars," said Timperley gravely. "Unseen I visited the houses of all I see present to-night, and I found a skeleton in the cupboard of each house."

"Then you took a great liberty, Timperley," said the chemist.

"I found a skeleton in the cupboard in each house," continued Timperley, looking fixedly at the speaker, "and some, Mr. Mudford, were very big ones!"

Mr. Mudford shifted uneasily in his chair but remained silent.

"No, gentlemen," the greengrocer went on, "I'm not deceiving you, for I can do what I propose. Anyway you will be no losers, for if I don't succeed matters will be no worse. If I do, Nether Talkington will regain its lost position." Saying which Mr. Timperley resumed his seat.

"Gentlemen," said the Chairman, "you've heard Councillor Timperley's proposal. I for my part cannot for a moment believe in the possibility of what he asserts. Still if he wishes to attempt the impossible I do not see that we can object. In fact it is a matter that rests solely with Mr. Timperley, and there was no need for him to bring it before us at all."

The greengrocer rose again: "I said I was prepared to do it on certain terms. It is not an easy thing to do, and the disintegration of a personality is attended with grave risk. Cases are on record in which the body has succumbed under the strain, and the astral shape, unable to return to it, has to wander for ever without a home. My body is not a strong one. I gave it a severe wrench yesterday, and

I am not prepared to run the risk again for nothing. My terms are that if I bring the ghost back I shall receive half the future receipts for admission to the Grange."

"Oh, oh! I dare say. Why not take the lot?" and kindred sarcasms burst from the councillors assembled.

"I am running a risk, Mr. Chairman," repeated Councillor Timperley, "and I expect to be paid for it. If I don't make the attempt you won't get the ghost back, that's a dead certainty. It is simply a question whether you will take fifty per cent. of future receipts or be content with nothing."

The matter was put very plainly by the little greengrocer, and on reflection the reasonableness of his offer was apparent. After some discussion it was finally agreed, with one dissentient, the implacable Mudford, that if, after a further week's waiting, the ghost did not appear, Councillor Timperley was at liberty to make his attempt to bring it back on the terms he had proposed.

The week passed, and still the Grange remained without its tenant. The next evening Councillor Sam Timperley entered it on his daring venture. Several fellow-councillors accompanied him to the door,

but at his special request they did not go any farther. He appeared at a window to wave his final adieus, and then darkness and mystery settled over Nether Talkington Grange.

Popular feeling was greatly excited that night, and many were the rumours afloat. One respectable ratepayer said that he had met the Squire's ghost in the outskirts of the town with a gun under its arm taking a short cut across the fields in the direction of the

Grange, and those that heard this trembled for the fate of Sam Timperley. Others said that at a later hour they had seen the spirit of the disintegrated greengrocer diving into the moat in its search for the missing one, and that they waited in vain for its reappearance; but these and other reports appeared trivial when confronted with the actualities of the morrow.

At nine a.m., according to arrangement, the clerk to the Parish Council entered the Grange to see how it fared with Sam Timperley's body. He heard voices as he entered, and had he not recognised the



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greengrocer's he would probably have run away. As it was he courageously proceeded to the room from which they came. He opened the door very gently and peered inside. The sight that met his eyes was enough to unnerve the strongest; for there, sitting in a chair, was the animated body of Sam Timperley engaged in lively controversy with the spirit of its owner, which was pacing the room in terrible distress.

"I tell you, Squire," said the spirit, "it's an unkind trick you have played me. I came after you to bring you back to your friends and to the old home where you have been contented and happy for so long, and where you will be cared for and well looked after for the rest of your days; and there you go and repay me by robbing me of my poor body that never did you any harm in its life."

"Gadzooks, sir!" replied the body. "I thank you for your courteous intent, but I shall not leave this body of yours now that I have obtained possession of it.

It's a rare chance, good sir, a chance that does not come more than once in the lifetime of a poor ghost, to find an untenanted body awaiting an owner. Your awkward position distresses me grievously, but as you seem to think I have been happy and contented here there is

no reason why you should not experience the same feelings when occupying my old position."

"But, Squire," pleaded the spirit in piteous entreaty, "it isn't right. I appeal to your sense of honour. Now, is it?"

The body waved its hands blandly.

"I think that is outside the question at issue, sir," it said. "You evidently did not

attach much value to your body or you would not have been so ready to leave it. Mind you, although I now have 'a local habitation and a name,' as Will hath it, my own position is by no means an enviable one. Your body does not suit me, sir."

"You won't be at all comfortable in it, Squire," said Timperley eagerly. "It only just fitted me, and you're a much larger man. You'll never be thoroughly at home in it."

"Well, I must make the best of it," said the body resignedly. "No doubt this carcass of yours will stretch a bit; but it's terribly dry inside. I warrant me it's long since you had a stoup of honest Canary or good red Burgundy.

Canst tell me where I may get a tankard of home brewed?"

"Oh, you mustn't drink wine!" cried the spirit in alarm. "You really mustn't. My constitution can't stand it! I've been a teetotal-vegetarian for many years."



"He fled precipitately."

"And what may that be, sir?" asked the body.

"My body is not accustomed to either beer, wine, or animal flesh. Water, lemonade and milk for liquids, and porridge, vegetables and rice puddings for solids, that has been my fare, and is what you must take."

An expression of unutterable contempt passed over the body's face. "I'm afraid you have been too modest, sirrah," it said with withering sarcasm. "We must try the effect of good ale and wine, of roast beef and pork on this precious body of yours."

"Oh, but you mustn't!" cried the spirit. "If you do you'll have headaches and palpitations. Mine is not a strong body. It will go off in a fit if you drink wine."

"Egad!" cried the body in fierce anger. "Do you mean to tell me I've got into a sickly carcass like that? Is it for this I've changed my position of independence? Beshrew me if I don't so alter this body of yours that your own mother wouldn't know it! It's not a pretty one now, but it will be worse before I've done with it."

Then its eyes fell upon the clerk, who had incautiously intruded his head so as to lose nothing of what was going on.

"How now!" it cried, starting to its feet. "A listener! Who are you, varlet? Answer me, or I'll run you through with my hanger!"

But the clerk did not stay to answer or be run through. He fled precipitately, bearing the terrible news to the town that the Squire had returned and taken possession of Sam Timperley's body in its owner's absence, and now refused to give it up.

This was altogether too much for the Nether Talkingtonians to believe, and an incredulous crowd soon streamed into the Grange to see for themselves what had happened. They found the spirit of Coun-

cillor Sam Timperley on its knees uttering piteous entreaties to its own body.

Mr. Mudford was the only man among them who did not turn tail and fly. Sam Timperley was evidently in trouble, and that gave him strength to resist his first impulse to follow the others. He walked boldly into the room, and Timperley's spirit had sunk so low that it eagerly welcomed him.

"Here's Councillor Mudford," it said, rising to its feet. "You know how matters stood, Mr. Mudford. Tell the Squire he must give me back my body at once. It's a terrible position for me to be standing here out in the cold with another man in my own body. It's simply monstrous!" and tears welled to the eyes of the green-grocer's shade.

"I'm very sorry for you, Timperley," said Mr. Mudford, "but you would do it. You knew you were running a risk and you must take the consequences."

"I shall claim the fifty per cent. at any rate," said Timperley sullenly, "for I brought the Squire back."

"Nothing of the sort, sir," said the body. "I walked back last night from a friend's house of my own accord. He's been asking me for the

past ninety years to have some shooting with him, and I thought it would be discourteous to refuse him any longer."

"There, Timperley," said Mr. Mudford. "You've only hurt yourself and done no good to anyone."

"And who'll look after my business now?" whimpered the spirit.

"This gentleman, I suppose," chuckled Mudford. "He's got to earn his living somehow; your customers will never notice the change," he added consolingly.

"And Ellen!" cried the spirit. "I can't marry Ellen now!"

"Never mind," said the body, "I'll look after Ellen."



"'Never mind,' said the body, 'I'll look after Ellen.'"

Sam Timperley's spirit seemed about to faint under the overwhelming horrors of the situation, and Mr. Mudford stood gloating over its distress. At length the Squire rose and commenced to walk the body about. It moved clumsily, and its tenant cursed it loud and deep; suddenly it stopped.

"Sir," it said, addressing Mr. Mudford, "I have a craving for food. Will you favour me by directing me to a hostel possessing a good ordinary?"

"I will, with pleasure," replied Mudford. "Mr. Wharton, I am sure, will be pleased to stand you a rattling breakfast at the 'White Swan'; afterwards we'll step round to Timperley's shop and take possession, and then we'll call on Ellen."

"If you do I'll haunt you!" shrieked the poor spirit.

"Pooh!" said Mr. Mudford, snapping his fingers. "You won't frighten us; we know your weight," and linking his arm in the body's he piloted it out of the room, leaving the spirit of Councillor Sam Timperley in possession of Nether Talkington Grange.

And so the matter stands to-day. The Squire did not take up the greengrocery business—he had a soul above it—but he married Ellen, and accepted the vacant post of guide to the Grange.

It is now his pleasing duty to show to the visitors, who come in increasing crowds, the astral shape of Sam Timperley that sits there moodily brooding over its ill-luck. It is very ready to talk to anyone about its singularly unfortunate position, and the guide is always glad to join in the conversation and irritate it. The visitors are more interested than ever, and the Parish Council has doubled the charge for admission. Sometimes the spirit of Sam Timperley is absent for a few hours, and on its return it says it has just slipped across to Thibet to discuss the matter with a leading Mahatma, who has promised, when he has the time to spare, to run over and exorcise the ghost of the Squire and restore the body to its rightful owner. But the Mahatma must be a very busy individual for he has not yet found time to do it.

