

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

## More Ghosts

### 'Tis an Honest Ghost

#### Hamlet

Some years ago I spent a summer at the Old Sweet Springs in the Virginia mountains. It is the most pleasant of all the Virginia resorts. I was greatly invigorated by the bath; but the sounds of revelry by night as at all such places, deprived me of the quiet sleep which was essential to my complete restoration. All the long days I tramped the mountains, growing stronger every hour, & I found a favorite resting place in a little valley which lay about a mile and a half from the Springs. It contained not more than 50 or 60 acres: but the foot-hills on either side rose gently, and then, slopes were not very densely wooded. It was a grazing-place for several hundred sheep which kept the grass closely clipped and there were no briars or weeds except an occasional tuft of iron weed or a stock of mullen. On the south side of the valley there stood the walls of a deserted dwelling-house; and a few old, knotty apple trees were still alive. Not far from the house there were some ten or twelve old, tumble-down grave-stones which were the only remaining indications which the sheep and time had left of the last resting place of the people who once lived in the stone house. The walls of the house were very thick; it had been divided into a number of rooms on the first floor, but the partitions had mostly disappeared; while the upper part which was a half-story was divided into two rooms only. One very large with a huge fire-place at one end. The roof was made of open clapboards, and was still watertight. During the day it was a most charming place to while away the time, and I felt into a desire a purpose to sleep there if I could make the arrangements. At the Springs a colored man, Uncle Phillip told me that the Valley belongs to Col. Byrne the proprietor of the Resort and the Colonel assured me that he had no objections to my sleeping there; and said that Phillip should clean out the large upper room and put a cot in for me; but he said that I would be satisfied with one night of it.

Phillip and I went to work with a will. He said that he had never seen a snake or a lizard or a spider about the old house which were the only things I disliked. And when he had scrubbed the oaken floor, swept down and white-washed the walls, cleaned out the fireplace, and the flue, put in a cot, two chairs, a small stand, one tallow candle, a jug of water, and a basin, and provided a lot of wood for a fire, I was entirely set up – my little grip-sack contained every thing else that was wanted. The windows were entirely gone and as the mountain air gets cool in the night, I knew that a fire would not be amiss. Besides I am a fire-worshiper. There is nothing so cheering to the spirits as a bright, open blaze.

Old Phillip was all the time awfully silent and solemn about my trying to sleep there and he left me in the evening as if he should never see me again. When I turned in, it was the perfection of a sleeping place. The air was delicious and the stillness so soothing that I fell at once into a profound slumber. At some time in the dead of night the embers in the fire-place having burned through fell, and brightened up the blaze which awoke me. I

always awake easily and suddenly. Turning my face towards the fire, what was my astonishment to observe a man sitting in one of the chairs. He was facing the fire, and seemed to be enjoying it. He extended his feet towards it and frequently rubbed his hands and held his open palms forward as if to warm them. He was an elderly man, and was dressed in the style that was fashionable between the days of the Continentals and our time, – in such clothes as gentlemen wore from 1810 to 1830. The coat was a blue scissor-tail with brass buttons, – the collar very high behind. He wore a buff waistcoat and leggins buttoned at the sides. His head was bare. His countenance was clear and pleasing, although at the same time very like the face of a dead man. He moved about and looked at the fire and at the bright walls of the room with evident satisfaction; and planting his back toward the blaze he parted his coat-tails and stood warming his posterior in a way so natural that I made up my mind to speak to him. He had not noticed me or my bed.

In the South it used to be customary in addressing a strange gentleman to give him a title high or low in rank as one wished to be more or less respectful. I thought that the rank of colonel would about fit my strange visitor and I slowly raised my head and shoulders while I rested on my elbow; and then taking a full breath and trying to speak out clearly, I said, “Colonel, the fire is pleasant.” but before the words were out, the Colonel disappeared. I saw him pass sidewise away from the firelight, but after that I saw nothing with a shivering chill traversing my spinal cord. I slipped down under the bed-clothes and lay motionless and very much awake until morning dawned and then I slept soundly for several hours. I rose about 10 o'clock, but saw no signs of my visitor except that my shirt which was on the chair he occupied, had evidently been sat upon. I met Uncle Phillip near the house on his way for me. We walked to the Springs together. He was silent and seemed to be satisfied when I told him I had passed a pleasant night. At dinner I sat with a party of friends when I saw Col. Byrne approaching with a quizzical look. I raise my forefinger and forestalled an interview by saying “Colonel, if you ask me no questions, I will tell you no lies.”

That evening Phillip went with me toward my lodging and I took occasion to ask him if he had ever heard of ghosts being about the old house and he told me that many years before that time a young man from New Orleans had come to the Springs bringing with him a quadroon woman and that Col. Byrne would not allow the woman at the Springs that the young man had given him fifty dollars to find a place where she might sleep and that he had fixed up the same room in the old stone house for her. In the middle of the first night of her occupancy she had rushed in her night clothes to his cabin in speechless fright. She became insane and was taken to the asylum at Staunton. The young Creole appeared at the office at the Springs before breakfast the next morning, paid his account, and disappeared forever. He left however, much of his luggage in his room where the woman had been established. Phillip's explanation was that they had seen ghosts; and he said that Col. Byrne believed it. Nothing could induce the Colonel to go into that valley after nightfall.

The old man left me at the outer edge of the valley, and I went to the room and lighted the fire. As the evening wore on and the stars came out, I should quite as lief been at the Springs; but as I knew that Col. Byrne's eye was on me, I lack the courage to confess that

I was afraid. I turned in, however, and slept uninterruptedly for 10 hours. The sun was high up when I awoke, and the night's rest was so good that I was in good spirits all day, and entered upon the third night without a qualm. After midnight, I was rudely aroused by the hooting of an owl perched on one of the open windows. His great, fiery eyes winked ominously but he ceased to be noticed when I saw a lady sitting in one of the chairs. If it were possible, I would describe her appearance, and the effect she produced on me. In a word, she was perfection. I was filled with admiration and I may say also, adoration. The ideal of a woman which that apparition stamped upon my soul has never left me; and strange to say, it has made it impossible for me to love any woman until, in the changes and chances of this mortal life, I may meet her counterpart. I had no fear, nor any excitement except that I felt myself to be in heaven, and very near to a veritable angel. Every thing about her – dress, figure, face, expression, and movements were infinitely more lovely than the most enthusiastic flights of my imagination even in youth or in spring-time, had ever dreamed of; and the recollection of that vision has to this day afforded me more consolation and joy than I have had from all other sources combined.

The owl kept up its plaintive wail unnoticed. The lady absorbed me wholly. She leaned forward weeping; then she arose and stood with her back to the fire when I observed the man of the first night seated in the other chair. He was unperturbed, and wore rather a sour and cynical look. Then commenced a lively discussion in pantomime which was easily understood. She was complaining of something, and he gave her no satisfaction. She pleaded and he scowled. She remonstrated and he sneered. Presently, she sank to her knees before him and bent her head low down when he gave her a smart slap on the face. She slowly straightened up, with her hands folded over her face, and fell into the chair sideways supporting herself on the chair-back; and was convulsed with weeping.

After a time he got up and strode angrily about making ugly gestures; while the poor woman seemed to plead against his violence. This performance continued until a stroke of dawn glowed in the East and they receded into the dark end of the room and disappeared. The next day I lost my nerve about trying to sleep there alone, but I compromised by securing a dog for company. Col. Byrne had a large Siberian blood-hound named Wolf which had become attached to me, and had tramped with me over the hills. Wolf consented to lie in fact of the fire; in fact, he felt quite set up by having the privilege. In the night he woke me by rubbing against my cot; and he was hopelessly demoralized with terror. The man and woman were at it again, and Wolf was an awe stricken spectator. A third figure entered the scene in the shape of an aged colored man who was appealed to by the lady, and threatened with violence by the man. Presently the latter made an angry dash at the lady, when the black man drew a big knife or a sabre, and cut his head clean off at one swoop and the man fell backwards into his chair holding his own head in his knees and between his hands.

The dog crowded himself under my cot and I would have screamed from fright had I not been so carried away with interest in the beautiful woman. Her actions expressed consternation and despair. She was horrified at the murder, and was innocent of any complicity in it although it was committed at her service and in her protection. My sympathy for her made me intent on seeing what next would come; and I did not have to wait long. A plain box was brought in by other colored servants, and they wrapped the

body in a shroud fixing the head on the trunk and covering the seam with a stock and they composed it in the box and bore it away; but I noticed particularly that they put the knife under the body in the box. The woman followed, and I saw no more that night.

The next two or three nights were warm, and I did not light the fire and nobody came. Wolf slept in the room, and was not disturbed; nor was I. After that when I had a fire again, the lady came, in deep mourning. She assembled the servants and took leave of them and when they had retired she approached my bed and made some motions which I understood to be thanks for having made the fire and remained to witness what had occurred.

Some days after that, Col. Byrne gave me leave to explore the little grave yard. I learned that the family of the place was named Watkins and that the head of the house was Col. Peter Watkins and that he had been County Sheriff. We could find no head stone with his name on it; but we found a fragment of a foot-stone still marked "P. W." We dug a big round hole like a cistern; and when we came to the remains of the coffin, I sent for Col. Byrne and told him we should find a skeleton with a head severed from the body and under it we should find the blade that did the business. And sure enough, so it was. The head was lying sidewise, on its ear, and was several inches from the trunk, and under the backbone was a rusted knife made from a scythe, and was such as farmers use for chopping down corn-stocks.

The last time I was at the Old Sweet this knife was still hanging on the wall in the office; and a friend who was there two years ago saw it still in the same place. Col. Byrne was irrepressible with his questions and importunities; but he got no more out of me than that old Peter Watkins had been murdered, but not by his wife. I advised him to demolish the old house which he did, and we covered the old man's bones as they lay. Since that time I have been convinced that the death of our bodies does not terminate our existence.

Theo Kemper

Budget

Carr Editor

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