

The Ghost

Thomas Ingoldsby

Table of Contents

<u>The Ghost</u>	1
<u>Thomas Ingoldsby</u>	2

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It is on my own personal reminiscences that I draw for the following story; the scene of its leading even was most familiar to me in early life. If the principal actor in it be yet living, he must have reached a very advanced age. He was often at the Hall, in my infancy, on professional visits. It is, however, only from those who 'prated of his whereabouts' that I learned the history of his adventure with

THE GHOST. There stands a City, ---neither large nor small,
Its air and situation sweet and pretty;
It matters very little---if at all---
Whether its denizens are dull or witty,
Whether the ladies there are short or tall,
Brunettes or blondes, only, there stands a city!---
Perhaps 'tis also requisite to minute
That there's a Castle and a Cobbler in it.

A fair Cathedral, too, the story goes,
And kings and heroes lie entomb'd within her;
There pious Saints, in marble pomp repose,
Whose shrines are worn by knees of many a Sinner;
There, too, full many an Aldermanic nose
Roll'd its loud diapason after dinner;
And there stood high the holy sponce of Becket,
---Till four assassins came from France to crack it.

The Castle was a huge and antique mound,
Proof against all th' artillery of the quiver,
Ere those abominable guns were found
To send cold lead through gallant warrior's liver.
It stands upon a gently rising ground,
Sloping down gradually to the river,
Resembling (to compare great things with smaller),
A well-scooped, mouldy Stilton cheese,---but taller.

The Keep, I find, 's been sadly alter'd lately,
And, 'stead of mail-clad knights, of honour jealous,
In martial panoply so grand and stately,
Its walls are fill'd with money-making fellows,
And stuff'd, unless I'm misinformèd greatly,
With leaden pipes, and coke, and coals, and bellows;
In short, so great a change has come to pass,
'Tis now a manufactory of Gas.

But to my tale.---Before this profanation,
And ere its ancient glories were cut short all,
A poor hard-working Cobbler took his station

The Ghost

In a small house, just opposite the portal;
His birth, his parentage, and education,
I know but little of—a strange, odd mortal;
His aspect, air, and gait, were all ridiculous;
His name was Mason—he'd been christen'd Nicholas.

Nick had a wife possessed of many a charm,
And of the Lady Huntingdon persuasion;
But, spite of all her piety, her arm
She'd sometimes exercise when in a passion;
And, being of a temper somewhat warm,
Would now and then seize, upon small occasion,
A stick, or stool, or anything that round did lie,
And baste her lord and master most confoundedly.

No matter!—'tis a thing that's not uncommon,
'Tis what we have all heard, and most have read of,—
I mean, a bruizing, pugilistic woman,
Such as I own I entertain a dread of,
—And so did Nick, whom sometimes there would come on
A sort of fear his spouse might knock his head off,
Demolish half his teeth, or drive a rib in,
She shone so much in 'facers' and in 'fibbing.'

"There's time and place for all things," said a sage,
(King Solomon, I think,) and this I can say,
Within a well-roped ring, or on a stage,
Boxing may be a very pretty Fancy,
When Messrs. Burke or Bendigo engage;
—'Tis not so well in Susan, Jane, or Nancy;—
To get well mill'd by any one's an evil,
But by a lady—'tis the very Devil.

And so thought Nicholas, whose only trouble
(At least his worst) was this his rib's propensity,
For sometimes from the alehouse he would hobble,
His senses lost in a sublime immensity
Of cogitation—then he couldn't cobble—
And then his wife would often try the density
Of his poor skull, and strike with all her might,
As fast as kitchen wenches strike a light.

Mason, meek soul, who ever hated strife,
Of this same striking had the utmost dread,
He hated it like poison—or his wife—
A vast antipathy!—but so he said—
And very often for a quiet life
On these occasions he'd sneak up to bed,
Groped darkling in, and, soon as at the door
He heard his lady—he'd pretend to snore.

The Ghost

One night, then, ever partial to society,
 Nick, with a friend (another jovial fellow),
Went to a Club—I should have said Society—
 At the 'City Arms,' once called the Porto Bello;
A Spouting party, which, though some decry it, I
 Consider no bad lounge when one is mellow;
There they discuss the tax on salt, and leather,
And change of ministers, and change of weather.

In short, it was a kind of British Forum,
 Like John Gale Jones's, erst in Piccadilly,
Only they managed things with more decorum,
 And the Orations were not quite so silly;
Far different questions, too, would come before 'em,
 Not always Politics, which, will ye nill ye,
Their London prototypes were always willing,
To give one quantum suff. of—for a shilling.

It more resembled one of later date,
 And tenfold talent, as I'm told, in Bow Street,
Where kindlier natured souls do congregate,
 And, though there are who deem that same a low street,
Yet, I'm assured, for frolicsome debate
 And genuine humour it's surpaass'd by no street,
When the 'Chief Baron' enters, and assumes
To 'rule' o'er mimic 'Thesigers' and 'Broughams.'

Here they would oft forget their Rulers' faults,
 And waste in ancient lore the midnight taper,
Inquire if Orpheus first produced the Waltz,
 How Gas-lights differ from the Delphic Vapour,
Whether Hippocrates gave Glauber's Salts,
 And what the Romans wrote on ere they'd paper;
This night the subject of their disquisitions
Was Ghosts, Hobgoblins, Sprites, and Apparitions.

One learned gentleman, 'a sage grave man,'
 Talk'd of the Ghost in Hamlet, 'sheath'd in steel;'—
His well-read friend, who next to speak began,
 Said, 'That was Poetry, and nothing real;'
A third, of more extensive learning, ran
 To Sir George Villiers' Ghost, and Mrs. Veal;
Of sheeted Spectres spoke with shorten'd breath,
And thrice he quoted 'Drelincourt on Death.'

Nick smoked, and smoked, and trembled as he heard
 The point discuss'd, and all they said upon it,
How, frequently, some murder'd man appear'd,
 To tell his wife and children who had done it;
Or how a Miser's ghost, with grisly beard,
 And pale lean visage, in an old Scotch bonnet,

The Ghost

Wander'd about, to watch his buried money!
When all at once Nick heard the clock strike one,—he

Sprang from his seat, not doubting but a lecture
Impended from his fond and faithful she;
Nor could he well to pardon him expect her,
For he had promised to 'be home to tea;'
But having luckily the key o' the back door,
He fondly hoped that, unperceived, he
Might creep up stairs again, pretend to doze,
And hoax his spouse with music from his nose.

Vain, fruitless hope!—The weary sentinel
At eve may overlook the crouching foe,
Till, ere his hand can sound the alarum-bell,
He sinks beneath the unexpected blow;
Before the whiskers of Grimalkin fell,
When slumb'ring on her post, the mouse may go;—
But woman, wakeful woman, 's never weary,
—Above all, when she waits to thump her deary.

Soon Mrs. Mason heard the well known tread,
She heard the key slow creaking in the door,
Spied, through the gloom obscure, towards the bed
Nick creeping soft, as oft he had crept before;
When bang, she threw a something at his head,
And Nick at once lay prostrate on the floor;
While she exclaim'd, with her indignant face on,—
"How dare you use your wife so, Mr. Mason?"

Spare we to tell how fiercely she debated,
Especially the length of her oration,—
Spare we to tell how Nick expostulated,
Roused by the bump into a good set passion,
So great, that more than once he execrated,
Ere he crawl'd into bed in his usual fashion;
The Muses hate brawls; suffice it then to say,
He duck'd below the clothes—and there he lay!

'Twas now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards groan, and graves give up their dead,
And many a mischievous enfranchised Sprite
Had long since burst his bonds of stone or lead,
And hurried off, with schoolboy-like delight,
To play his pranks near some poor wretch's bed,
Sleeping perhaps serenely as a porpoise,
Nor dreaming of this fiendish Habeas Corpus.

Not so our Nicholas, his meditations
Still to the same tremendous theme recurr'd,
The same dread subject of the dark narrations,

The Ghost

Which, back'd with such authority, he'd heard;
Lost in his own horrific contemplations,
He ponder'd o'er each well-remember'd word;
When at the bed's foot, close beside the post,
He verily believed he saw—a Ghost!

Plain, and more plain, the unsubstantial Sprite
To his astonish'd gaze each moment grew;
Ghastly and gaunt, it rear'd its shadowy height,
Of more than mortal seeming to the view,
And round its long, thin, bony fingers drew
A tatter'd winding-sheet, of course all white;
The moon that moment peeping through a cloud,
Nick very plainly saw it through the shroud!

And now those matted locks, which never yet
Had yielded to the comb's unkind divorce,
Their long-contracted amity forget,
And spring asunder with elastic force;
Nay, e'en the very cap, of texture coarse,
Whose ruby cincture crown'd that brow of jet,
Uprose in agony—the Gorgon's head
Was but a type of Nick's up-squatting in the bed.

From every pore distill'd a clammy dew,
Quaked every limb,—the candle, too, no doubt,
En règle, would have burnt extremely blue,
But Nick unluckily had put it out;
And he, though naturally bold and stout,
In short, was in a most tremendous stew;—
The room was filled with a sulphureous smell,
But where that came from Mason could not tell.

All motionless the Spectre stood, and now
Its rev'rend form more clearly shone confest;
From the pale cheek a beard of purest snow
Descended o'er its venerable breast;
The thin grey hairs, that crown'd its furrow'd brow,
Told of years long gone by.—An awful guest
It stood, and with an action of command,
Beckon'd the Cobbler with its wan right hand.

'Whence, and what art thou, Execrable Shape?'
Nick might have cried, could he have found a tongue,
But his distended jaws could only gape,
And not a sound upon the welkin rung;
His gooseberry orbs seem'd as they would have sprung
Forth from their sockets,—like a frighten'd Ape,
He sat upon his haunches, bolt upright,
And shook, and grinn'd, and chatter'd with affright.

The Ghost

And still the shadowy finger, long and lean,
Now beckon'd Nick, now pointed to the door;
And many an ireful glance, and frown, between,
The angry visage of the Phantom wore,
As if quite vex'd that Nick would do no more
Than stare, without e'en asking, 'What d'ye mean?'
Because, as we are told,—a sad old joke too,—
Ghosts, like the ladies, never speak till spoke to.

Cowards, 'tis said, in certain situations,
Derive a sort of courage from despair,
And then perform, from downright desperation,
Much more than many a bolder man would dare.
Nick saw the Ghost was getting in a passion,
And therefore, groping till he found the chair,
Seized on his awl, crept softly out of bed,
And follow'd quaking where the Spectre led.

And down the winding—stair, with noiseless tread,
The tenant of the tomb pass'd slowly on,
Each mazy turning of the humble shed
Seem'd to his step at once familiar grown,
So safe and sure the labyrinth did he tread
As though the domicile had been his own,
Though Nick himself, in passing through the shop,
Had almost broke his nose against the mop.

Despite its wooden bolt, with jarring sound,
The door upon its hinges open flew;
And forth the Spirit issued,—yet around
It turn'd as if its follower's fears it knew,
And, once more beckoning, pointed to the mound,
The antique Keep, on which the bright moon threw
With such effulgence her mild silvery gleam,
The visionary form seem'd melting in her beam.

Beneath a pond'rous archway's sombre shade,
Where once the huge portcullis swung sublime,
Mid ivied battlements in ruin laid,
Sole, sad memorials of the olden time,
The Phantom held its way,—and though afraid
Even of the owls that sung their vesper chime,
Pale Nicholas pursued, its steps attending,
And wondering what on earth it all would end in.

Within the mouldering fabric's deep recess
At length they reach a court obscure and lone;—
It seem'd a drear and desolate wilderness,
The blacken'd walls with ivy all o'ergrown;
The night—bird shriek'd her note of wild distress,
Disturb'd upon her solitary throne,

The Ghost

As though indignant mortal step should dare,
So led, at such an hour, to venture there!

--The Apparition paused, and would have spoke,
Pointing to what Nick thought an iron ring,
But then a neighbouring chaunticleer awoke,
And loudly 'gan his early matins sing;
And then 'it started like a guilty thing,'
As his shrill clarion the silence broke.
--We know how much dead gentlefolks eschew
The appalling sound of 'Cock--a--doodle--do!'

The Vision was no more--and Nick alone--
'His streamers waving' in the midnight wind,
Which through the ruins ceased not to groan;
--His garment, too, was somewhat short behind,--
And, worst of all, he knew not where to find
The ring, which made him most his fate bemoan.--
The iron ring,--no doubt of some trap door,
'Neath which the old dead Miser kept his store.

'What's to be done?' he cried; 'Twere vain to stay
Here in the dark without a single clue--
Oh for a candle now, or moonlight ray!
'Fore George, I'm vastly puzzled what to do.'
(Then clapp'd his hand behind)--"Tis chilly too--
I'll mark the spot, and come again by day.
What can I mark it by?--Oh, here's the wall--
The mortar's yielding--here I'll stick my awl!'

Then rose from earth to sky a withering shriek,
A loud, a long--protracted note of woe,
Such as when tempests roar, and timbers creak,
And o'er the side the masts in thunder go;
While on the deck resistless billows break,
And drag their victims to the gulfs below;--
Such was the scream when, for the want of candle,
Nick Mason drove his awl in up to the handle.

Scared by his Lady's heart--appalling cry,
Vanish'd at once poor Mason's golden dream--
For dream it was;--and all his visions high,
Of wealth and grandeur, fled before that scream--
And still he listens with averted eye,
When gibing neighbours make 'the Ghost' their theme;
While ever from that hour they all declare
That Mrs. Mason used a cushion in her chair!