



Library podcast

Virtual Thrilling Tales: The Inexperienced Ghost by H.G. Wells

Hello, and Welcome to Thrilling Tales, Seattle Public Library's Storytime for Grownups: I'm your librarian reader, David Wright. Today we'll have just one more tale to round out our session of Winter Holiday ghost stories – and one more story by H.G. Wells. This past Xmas eve, I had the pleasure of reading this story to family and friends who had gathered from far and wide over Zoom. Now I'd like to share it with you.

And now, *The Inexperienced Ghost*, by H.G. Wells.

The scene amidst which Clayton told his last story comes back very vividly to my mind. There he sat, for the greater part of the time, in the corner of the authentic settle by the spacious open fire, and Sanderson sat beside him smoking the Broseley clay pipe that bore his name. There was Evans, and that marvel among actors, Wish, who is also a modest man. We had all come down to the Mermaid Club that Saturday morning, except Clayton, who had slept there overnight—which indeed gave him the opening of his story. We had golfed until golfing was invisible; we had dined, and we were in that mood of tranquil kindness when men will suffer a story. When Clayton began to tell one, we naturally supposed he was lying. It may be that indeed he was lying—of that the reader will speedily be able to judge as well as I. He began, it is true, with an air of matter-of-fact anecdote, but that we thought was only the incurable artifice of the man.

"I say!" he remarked, after a long consideration of the upward rain of sparks from the log that Sanderson had thumped, "you know I was alone here last night?"

"Except for the domestics," said Wish.

"Who sleep in the other wing," said Clayton. "Yes. Well—" He pulled at his cigar for some little time as though he still hesitated about his confidence. Then he said, quite quietly, "I caught a ghost!"

"Caught a ghost, did you?" said Sanderson. "Where is it?"

And Evans, who admires Clayton immensely and has been four weeks in America, shouted, "CAUGHT a ghost, did you, Clayton? I'm glad of it! Tell us all about it right now."

Clayton said he would in a minute, and asked him to shut the door.

He looked apologetically at me. "There's no eavesdropping of course, but we don't want to upset our very excellent service with any rumors of ghosts in the place. There's too much shadow and oak paneling to trifle with that. And this, you know, wasn't a regular ghost. I don't think it will come again—ever."

"You mean to say you didn't keep it?" said Sanderson.

"I hadn't the heart to," said Clayton.

And Sanderson said he was surprised.

We laughed, and Clayton looked aggrieved. "I know," he said, with the flicker of a smile, "but the fact is it really WAS a ghost, and I'm as sure of it as I am that I am talking to you now. I'm not joking. I mean what I say."

Sanderson drew deeply at his pipe, with one reddish eye on Clayton, and then emitted a thin jet of smoke more eloquent than many words.

Clayton ignored the comment. "It is the strangest thing that has ever happened in my life. You know, I never believed in ghosts or anything of the sort, before, ever; and then, you know, I bag one in a corner; and the whole business is in my hands."

He meditated still more profoundly, and produced and began to pierce a second cigar with a curious little stabber he affected.

"You talked to it?" asked Wish.

"For the space, probably, of an hour."

"Chatty?" I said, joining the party of the sceptics.

"The poor devil was in trouble," said Clayton, bowed over his cigar-end and with the very faintest note of reproof.

"Sobbing?" someone asked.

Clayton heaved a realistic sigh at the memory. "Good Lord!" he said; "yes." And then, "Poor fellow! yes."

"Where did you strike it?" asked Evans, in his best American accent.

"I never realized," said Clayton, ignoring him, "the poor sort of thing a ghost might be," and he hung us up again for a time, while he sought for matches in his pocket and lit and warmed to his cigar.

“I took an advantage,” he reflected at last.

We were none of us in a hurry. “A character,” he said, “remains just the same character for all that it's been disembodied. That's a thing we too often forget. People with a certain strength or fixity of purpose may have ghosts of a certain strength and fixity of purpose—most haunting ghosts, you know, must be as one-idea'd as monomaniacs and as obstinate as mules to come back again and again. This poor creature wasn't.” He suddenly looked up rather queerly, and his eye went round the room. “I say it,” he said, “in all kindliness, but that is the plain truth of the case. Even at the first glance he struck me as weak.”

He punctuated with the help of his cigar.

“I came upon him, you know, in the long passage. His back was towards me and I saw him first. Right off I knew him for a ghost. He was transparent and whitish; clean through his chest I could see the glimmer of the little window at the end. And not only his physique but his attitude struck me as being weak. He looked, you know, as though he didn't know in the slightest whatever he meant to do. One hand was on the panelling and the other fluttered to his mouth. Like—SO!”

“What sort of physique?” said Sanderson.

“Lean. You know that sort of young man's neck that has two great flutings down the back, here and here—so! And a little, meanish head with scrubby hair—And rather bad ears. Shoulders bad, narrower than the hips; turn-down collar, ready-made short jacket, trousers baggy and a little frayed at the heels. That's how he took me. I came very quietly up the staircase. I did not carry a light, you know—the candles are on the landing table and there is that lamp—and I was in my list slippers, and I saw him as I came up. I stopped dead at that—taking him in. I wasn't a bit afraid. I think that in most of these affairs one is never nearly so afraid or excited as one imagines one would be. I was surprised and interested. I thought, 'Good Lord! Here's a ghost at last! And I haven't believed for a moment in ghosts during the last five-and-twenty years.'”

“Um,” said Wish.

“I suppose I wasn't on the landing a moment before he found out I was there. He turned on me sharply, and I saw the face of an immature young man, a weak nose, a scrubby little moustache, a feeble chin. So for an instant we stood—he looking over his shoulder at me and regarded one another. Then he seemed to remember his high calling. He turned round, drew himself up, projected his face, raised his arms, spread his hands in approved ghost fashion—came towards me. As he did so his little jaw dropped, and he emitted a faint, drawn-out 'Boo.' No, it wasn't—not a bit dreadful. I'd dined. I'd had a bottle of champagne, and being all alone, perhaps two or three—perhaps even four or five—whiskies, so I was as solid as rocks and no more frightened than if I'd been assailed by a frog. 'Boo!' I said. 'Nonsense. You don't belong to THIS place. What are you doing here?'

“I could see him wince. 'Boo-oo,' he said.

“Boo—be hanged! Are you a member?’ I said; and just to show I didn't care a pin for him I stepped through a corner of him and made to light my candle. ‘Are you a member?’ I repeated, looking at him sideways.

“He moved a little so as to stand clear of me, and his bearing became crestfallen. ‘No,’ he said, in answer to the persistent interrogation of my eye; ‘I'm not a member—I'm a ghost.’

“Well, that doesn't give you the run of the Mermaid Club. Is there any one you want to see, or anything of that sort?’ and doing it as steadily as possible for fear that he should mistake the carelessness of whisky for the distraction of fear, I got my candle alight. I turned on him, holding it.

‘What are you doing here?’ I said.

“He had dropped his hands and stopped his booing, and there he stood, abashed and awkward, the ghost of a weak, silly, aimless young man. ‘I'm haunting,’ he said.

“You haven't any business to,’ I said in a quiet voice.

“I'm a ghost,’ he said, as if in defense.

“That may be, but you haven't any business to haunt here. This is a respectable private club; people often stop here with nursemaids and children, and, going about in the careless way you do, some poor little mite could easily come upon you and be scared out of her wits. I suppose you didn't think of that?’

“No, sir,’ he said, ‘I didn't.’

“You should have done. You haven't any claim on the place, have you? Weren't murdered here, or anything of that sort?’

“None, sir; but I thought as it was old and oak-panelled—’

“That's NO excuse.’ I regarded him firmly. ‘Your coming here is a mistake,’ I said, in a tone of friendly superiority. I feigned to see if I had my matches, and then looked up at him frankly. ‘If I were you I wouldn't wait for cock-crow—I'd vanish right away.’

“He looked embarrassed. ‘The fact IS, sir—’ he began.

“I'd vanish,’ I said, driving it home.

“The fact is, sir, that—somehow—I can't.’

“You CAN'T?’

“No, sir. There's something I've forgotten. I've been hanging about here since midnight last night, hiding in the cupboards of the empty bedrooms and things like that. I'm flurried. I've never come haunting before, and it seems to put me out.'

“Put you out?'

“Yes, sir. I've tried to do it several times, and it doesn't come off. There's some little thing has slipped me, and I can't get back.'

“That, you know, rather bowled me over. He looked at me in such an abject way that for the life of me I couldn't keep up quite the high, hectoring vein I had adopted. 'That's queer,' I said, and as I spoke I fancied I heard someone moving about down below. 'Come into my room and tell me more about it,' I said. 'I didn't, of course, understand this,' and I tried to take him by the arm. But, of course, you might as well have tried to take hold of a puff of smoke! I had forgotten my number, I think; anyhow, I remember going into several bedrooms—it was lucky I was the only soul in that wing—until I saw my traps. 'Here we are,' I said, and sat down in the arm-chair; 'sit down and tell me all about it. It seems to me you have got yourself into a jolly awkward position, old chap.'

“Well, he said he wouldn't sit down! he'd prefer to flit up and down the room if it was all the same to me. And so he did, and in a little while we were deep in a long and serious talk. And presently, you know, something of those whiskies and sodas evaporated out of me, and I began to realize just a little what a thundering rum and weird business it was that I was in. There he was, semi-transparent—the proper conventional phantom, and noiseless except for his ghost of a voice—flitting to and fro in that nice, clean, chintz-hung old bedroom. You could see the gleam of the copper candlesticks through him, and the lights on the brass fender, and the corners of the framed engravings on the wall,—and there he was telling me all about this wretched little life of his that had recently ended on earth. He hadn't a particularly honest face, you know, but being transparent, of course, he couldn't avoid telling the truth.”

“Eh?” said Wish, suddenly sitting up in his chair.

“What?” said Clayton.

“Being transparent—couldn't avoid telling the truth—I don't see it,” said Wish.

“I don't see it,” said Clayton, with inimitable assurance. “But it IS so, I can assure you nevertheless. I don't believe he got once a nail's breadth off the Bible truth. He told me how he had been killed—he went down into a London basement with a candle to look for a leakage of gas—and described himself as a senior English master in a London private school when that release occurred.”

“Poor wretch!” said I.

“That's what I thought, and the more he talked the more I thought it. There he was, purposeless in life and purposeless out of it. He talked of his father and mother and his schoolmaster, and all who had ever been anything to him in the world, meanly. He had been too sensitive, too nervous; none of them had ever valued him properly or understood him, he said. He had never had a real friend in the world, I think; he had never had a success. He had shirked games and failed examinations. 'It's like that with some people,' he said; 'whenever I got into the examination-room or anywhere everything seemed to go.' Engaged to be married of course—to another over-sensitive person, I suppose—when the indiscretion with the gas escape ended his affairs. 'And where are you now?' I asked. 'Not in—?’

“He wasn't clear on that point at all. The impression he gave me was of a sort of vague, intermediate state, a special reserve for souls too non-existent for anything so positive as either sin or virtue. / don't know. He was much too egotistical and unobservant to give me any clear idea of the kind of place, kind of country, there is on the Other Side of Things. Wherever he was, he seems to have fallen in with a set of kindred spirits: ghosts of weak young men, who were on a footing of Christian names, and among these there was certainly a lot of talk about 'going haunting' and things like that. Yes—going haunting! They seemed to think 'haunting' a tremendous adventure, and most of them did it all the time. And so primed, you know, he had come.”

“But really!” said Wish to the fire.

“These are the impressions he gave me, anyhow,” said Clayton, modestly. “I may, of course, have been in a rather uncritical state, but that was the sort of background he gave to himself. He kept flitting up and down, with his thin voice going talking, talking about his wretched self, and never a word of clear, firm statement from first to last. He was thinner and sillier and more pointless than if he had been real and alive. Only then, you know, he would not have been in my bedroom here—if he HAD been alive. I should have kicked him out.”

“Of course,” said Evans, “there ARE poor mortals like that.”

“And there's just as much chance of their having ghosts as the rest of us,” I admitted.

“What gave a sort of point to him, you know, was the fact that he did seem within limits to have found himself out. The mess he had made of haunting had depressed him terribly. He had been told it would be a 'lark'; he had come expecting it to be a 'lark,' and here it was, nothing but another failure added to his record! He proclaimed himself an utter out-and-out failure. He said, and I can quite believe it, that he had never tried to do anything all his life that he hadn't made a perfect mess of—and through all the wastes of eternity he never would. If he had had sympathy, perhaps—.

He paused at that, and stood regarding me. He remarked that, strange as it might seem to me, nobody, not anyone, ever, had given him the amount of sympathy I was doing now. I could see what he wanted straight away, and I determined to head him off at once. I may be a brute, you know, but being the Only Real Friend, the recipient of the confidences of one of these egotistical weaklings, ghost or body, is beyond my physical endurance. I got up briskly. 'Don't you brood on these things too

much,' I said. 'The thing you've got to do is to get out of this get out of this—sharp. You pull yourself together and TRY.' 'I can't,' he said. 'You try,' I said, and try he did."

"Try!" said Sanderson. "HOW?"

"Passes," said Clayton.

"Passes?"

"Complicated series of gestures and passes with the hands. That's how he had come in and that's how he had to get out again. Lord! what a business I had!"

"But how could ANY series of passes—?" I began.

"My dear man," said Clayton, turning on me and putting a great emphasis on certain words, "you want EVERYTHING clear. I don't know HOW. All I know is that you DO—that HE did, anyhow, at least. After a fearful time, you know, he got his passes right and suddenly disappeared."

"Did you," said Sanderson, slowly, "observe the passes?"

"Yes," said Clayton, and seemed to think. "It was tremendously queer," he said. "There we were, I and this thin vague ghost, in that silent room, in this silent, empty inn, in this silent little Friday-night town. Not a sound except our voices and a faint panting he made when he swung. There was the bedroom candle, and one candle on the dressing-table alight, that was all—sometimes one or other would flare up into a tall, lean, astonished flame for a space. And queer things happened. 'I can't,' he said; 'I shall never—!' And suddenly he sat down on a little chair at the foot of the bed and began to sob and sob. Lord! what a harrowing, whimpering thing he seemed!

"'You pull yourself together,' I said, and tried to pat him on the back, and... my confounded hand went through him! By that time, you know, I wasn't nearly so—massive as I had been on the landing. I got the queerness of it full. I remember snatching back my hand out of him, as it were, with a little thrill, and walking over to the dressing-table. 'You pull yourself together,' I said to him, 'and try.' And in order to encourage and help him I began to try as well."

"What!" said Sanderson, "the passes?"

"Yes, the passes."

"But—" I said, moved by an idea that eluded me for a space.

"This is interesting," said Sanderson, with his finger in his pipe-bowl. "You mean to say this ghost of yours gave away—"

“Did his level best to give away the whole confounded barrier? YES.”

“He didn't,” said Wish; “he couldn't. Or you'd have gone there too.”

“That's precisely it,” I said, finding my elusive idea put into words for me.

“That IS precisely it,” said Clayton, with thoughtful eyes upon the fire.

For just a little while there was silence.

“And at last he did it?” said Sanderson.

“At last he did it. I had to keep him up to it hard, but he did it at last—rather suddenly. He despaired, we had a scene, and then he got up abruptly and asked me to go through the whole performance, slowly, so that he might see. 'I believe,' he said, 'if I could SEE I should spot what was wrong at once.' And he did. 'I know,' he said.

'What do you know?' said I. 'I know,' he repeated. Then he said, peevishly, 'I CAN'T do it if you look at me—I really CAN'T; it's been that, partly, all along. I'm such a nervous fellow that you put me out.' Well, we had a bit of an argument. Naturally I wanted to see; but he was as obstinate as a mule, and suddenly I had come over as tired as a dog—he tired me out. 'All right,' I said, 'I won't look at you,' and turned towards the mirror, on the wardrobe, by the bed.

“He started off very fast. I tried to follow him by looking in the looking-glass, to see just what it was had hung. Round went his arms and his hands, so, and so, and so, and then with a rush came to the last gesture of all—you stand erect and open out your arms—and so, don't you know, he stood. And then he didn't! He didn't! He wasn't! I wheeled round from the looking-glass to him. There was nothing, I was alone, with the flaring candles and a staggering mind. What had happened? Had anything happened? Had I been dreaming?... And then, with an absurd note of finality about it, the clock upon the landing discovered the moment was ripe for striking ONE. So!—Ping! And I was as grave and sober as a judge, with all my champagne and whisky gone into the vast serene. Feeling queer, you know—confoundedly QUEER! Queer! Good Lord!”

He regarded his cigar-ash for a moment. “That's all that happened,” he said.

“And then you went to bed?” asked Evans.

“What else was there to do?”

I looked Wish in the eye. We wanted to scoff, and there was something, something perhaps in Clayton's voice and manner, that hampered our desire.

“And about these passes?” said Sanderson.

“I believe I could do them now.”

“Oh!” said Sanderson, and produced a penknife and set himself to grub the dottel out of the bowl of his pipe.

“Why don't you do them now?” said Sanderson, shutting his pen-knife with a click.

“That's what I'm going to do,” said Clayton.

“They won't work,” said Evans.

“If they do—” I suggested.

“You know, I'd rather you didn't,” said Wish, stretching out his legs.

“Why?” asked Evans.

“I'd rather he didn't,” said Wish.

“But he hasn't got 'em right,” said Sanderson, plugging too much tobacco in his pipe.

“All the same, I'd rather he didn't,” said Wish.

We argued with Wish. He said that for Clayton to go through those gestures was like mocking a serious matter. “But you don't believe—?” I said. Wish glanced at Clayton, who was staring into the fire, weighing something in his mind. “I do—more than half, anyhow, I do,” said Wish.

“Clayton,” said I, “you're too good a liar for us. Most of it was all right. But that disappearance... happened to be convincing. Tell us, it's a tale of cock and bull.”

He stood up without heeding me, took the middle of the hearthrug, and faced me. For a moment he regarded his feet thoughtfully, and then for all the rest of the time his eyes were on the opposite wall, with an intent expression. He raised his two hands slowly to the level of his eyes and so began....

Now, Sanderson is a Freemason, a member of the lodge of the Four Kings, which devotes itself so ably to the study and elucidation of all the mysteries of Masonry past and present, and among the students of this lodge Sanderson is by no means the least. He followed Clayton's motions with a singular interest in his reddish eye. “That's not bad,” he said, when it was done. “You really do, you know, put things together, Clayton, in a most amazing fashion. But there's one little detail out.”

“I know,” said Clayton. “I believe I could tell you which.”

“Well?”

“This,” said Clayton, and did a queer little twist and writhing and thrust of the hands.

“Yes.”

“That, you know, was what HE couldn't get right,” said Clayton. “But how do YOU—?”

“Most of this business, and particularly how you invented it, I don't understand at all,” said Sanderson, “but just that phase—I do.” He reflected. “These happen to be a series of gestures—connected with a certain branch of esoteric Masonry. Probably you know. Or else—HOW?” He reflected still further. “I do not see I can do any harm in telling you just the proper twist. After all, if you know, you know; if you don't, you don't.”

“I know nothing,” said Clayton, “except what the poor devil let out last night.”

“Well, anyhow,” said Sanderson, and placed his pipe very carefully upon the shelf over the fireplace. Then very rapidly he gesticulated with his hands.

“So?” said Clayton, repeating.

“So,” said Sanderson, and took his pipe in hand again.

“Ah, NOW,” said Clayton, “I can do the whole thing—right.”

He stood up before the waning fire and smiled at us all. But I think there was just a little hesitation in his smile. “If I begin—” he said.

“I wouldn't begin,” said Wish.

“It's all right!” said Evans. “Matter is indestructible. You don't think any jiggery-pokery of this sort is going to snatch Clayton into the world of shades. Not it! You may try, Clayton, so far as I'm concerned, until your arms drop off at the wrists.”

“I don't believe that,” said Wish, and stood up and put his arm on Clayton's shoulder. “You've made me half believe in that story somehow, and I don't want to see the thing done!”

“Goodness!” said I, “here's Wish frightened!”

“I am,” said Wish, with real or admirably feigned intensity. “I believe that if he goes through these motions right he'll GO.”

“He'll not do anything of the sort,” I cried. “There's only one way out of this world for men, and Clayton is thirty years from that. Besides... And such a ghost! Do you think—?”

Wish interrupted me by moving. He walked out from among our chairs and stopped beside the table and stood there. "Clayton," he said, "you're a fool."

Clayton, with a humorous light in his eyes, smiled back at him. "Wish," he said, "is right and all you others are wrong. I shall go. I shall get to the end of these passes, and as the last swish whistles through the air, Presto!—this hearthrug will be vacant, the room will be blank amazement, and a respectably dressed gentleman of fifteen stone will plump into the world of shades. I'm certain. So will you be. I decline to argue further. Let the thing be tried."

"NO," said Wish, and made a step and ceased, and Clayton raised his hands once more to repeat the spirit's passing.

By that time, you know, we were all in a state of tension—largely because of the behavior of Wish. We sat all of us with our eyes on Clayton—I, at least, with a sort of tight, stiff feeling about me as though from the back of my skull to the middle of my thighs my body had been changed to steel. And there, with a gravity that was imperturbably serene, Clayton bowed and swayed and waved his hands and arms before us. As he drew towards the end one piled up, one tingled in one's teeth. The last gesture, I have said, was to swing the arms out wide open, with the face held up. And when at last he swung out to this closing gesture I ceased even to breathe. It was ridiculous, of course, but you know that ghost-story feeling. It was after dinner, in a queer, old shadowy house. Would he, after all—? There he stood for one stupendous moment, with his arms open and his upturned face, assured and bright, in the glare of the hanging lamp. We hung through that moment as if it were an age, and then came from all of us something that was half a sigh of infinite relief and half a reassuring "NO!" For visibly—he wasn't going. It was all nonsense. He had told an idle story, and carried it almost to conviction, that was all!... And then in that moment the face of Clayton, changed.

It changed. It changed as a lit house changes when its lights are suddenly extinguished. His eyes were suddenly eyes that were fixed, his smile was frozen on his lips, and he stood there still. He stood there, very gently swaying.

That moment, too, was an age. And then, you know, chairs were scraping, things were falling, and we were all moving. His knees seemed to give, and he fell forward, and Evans rose and caught him in his arms....

It stunned us all. For a minute I suppose no one said a coherent thing. We believed it, yet could not believe it.... I came out of a muddled stupefaction to find myself kneeling beside him, and his vest and shirt were torn open, and Sanderson's hand lay on his heart....

Well—the simple fact before us could very well wait our convenience; there was no hurry for us to comprehend. It lay there for an hour; it lies athwart my memory, black and amazing still, to this day. Clayton had, indeed, passed into the world that lies so near to and so far from our own, and he had gone thither by the only road that mortal man may take. But whether he did indeed pass there by that poor ghost's incantation, or whether he was stricken suddenly by apoplexy in the midst of an idle



tale—as the coroner's jury would have us believe—is no matter for my judging; it is just one of those inexplicable riddles that must remain unsolved until the final solution of all things shall come. All I certainly know is that, in the very moment, in the very instant, of concluding those passes, he changed, and staggered, and fell down before us—dead!

