

## The Ghost Who Vanished By Degrees

Some of you may have wondered what became of our College Ghost. Because we had a ghost, and there are people in this room who saw him. He appeared briefly last year at the College Dance on the stairs up to this Hall, and at the Gaudy he was seen to come and go through that door, while I was reading an account of another strange experience of mine. I did not see him then, but several people did so. What became of him?

I know. I am responsible for his disappearance. I think I may say without unwarrantable spiritual pride that I laid him. And, as is always the case in these psychic experiences, it was not without great cost to myself.

When first the Ghost was reported to me, I assumed that we had a practical joke within the college. Yet—the nature of the joke was against any such conclusion. We had had plenty of jokes—socks in the pool, fish in the pool, funny notices beside the pool, pumpkins on the roofs, ringing the bell at strange hours—all the wild exuberance, the bubbling, ungovernable high spirits and gossamer fantasy one associates with the Graduate School of the University of Toronto. The wit of a graduate student is like champagne—Canadian champagne—but this joke had a different flavor, a dash of wormwood, in its nature.

You see, the Ghost was so unlike a joker. He did not appear in a white sheet and shout “Boo!”. He spoke to no one, though a Junior Fellow—the one who met him on the stairs—told me that the Ghost passed him, softly laying a finger on its lips to caution him to silence. On its lips, did I say? Now this is of first importance: it laid its finger where its lips doubtless were, but its lips could not be seen, nor any of its features. Everybody who saw it said that the Ghost had a head, and a place where its face ought to be—but not face that anybody could see or recognize or remember. Of course there are scores of people like that around the university, but they are not silent; they are clamoring to establish some sort of identity; the Ghost cherished his anonymity, his facelessness. So, perversely I determined to find out who he was.

The first time I spotted him was in the Common Room. I went in from my study after midnight to turn out the lights, and he was just to be seen going along the short passage to the Upper Library. I gave chase, but when I reached the Upper Library he had gone, and when I ran into the entry, he was not to be seen. But at last I was on his trail, and I kept my eyes open from that time.

All of this took place, you should know, last Christmas, between the Gaudy and New Year. Our Gaudy last year was on December the seventeenth; I first saw the Ghost, and lost him, on the twenty-first. He came again on the twenty-third. I woke in the night with an odd sensation that someone was watching me, and as this was in my own bedroom I was very angry; if indeed it were a joker he lacked all discretion. I heard a stirring and—I know this sounds like the shabbiest kind of nineteenth-century romance, but I swear it is true—I heard a sigh, and then, on the landing outside my door, a soft explosion, and a thud, as though something had fallen. I ran out of my room, but there was nothing to be seen. Over Christmas Day and Boxing Day I had no news of the Ghost, but on the twenty-eighth of December matters came to a head.

December the twenty-eighth, as some of you may know, is the Feast of the Holy Innocents, traditionally the day on which King Herod slaughtered the children of Bethlehem. In the Italian shops in this city you can buy very pretty little babies, made of sugar, and eat them, in grisly commemoration of Herod's whimsical act.

I was sitting in my study at about eleven o'clock that night, reflectively nibbling at the head of a sugarbaby and thinking about money, when I noticed that the lights were on in the Round Room. It troubles me to see electric current wasted, so I set out for the Round Room in a bad humor. As I walked across the quad, it seemed that the glow from the skylight in the Round Room was more blue and cold than it should be, and seemed to waver. I thought it must be a trick of the snow, which was falling softly, and the moonlight which played so prettily upon it.

I unlocked the doors, walked into the Round Room, and there he was, standing under the middle of the skylight.

He bowed courteously. "So you have come at last," said he.

"I have come to turn out the lights," said I, and realized at once that the lights were not on. The room glowed with a fitful bluish light, not disagreeable but inexpressibly sad. And the stranger spoke in a voice which was sad, yet beautiful.

It was his voice which first told me who he was. It had a compelling, 'cello-like note which was unlike anything I was accustomed to hear inside the College, though our range is from the dispirited quack of Ontario to the reverberant splendors of Nigeria. The magnificent voice came from the part of his head where a face should be—but there was no face there, only a shadow, which seemed to change a little in density as I looked at it. It was unquestionably the Ghost!

This was no joker, no disguised Junior Fellow. He was our Ghost, and like every proper ghost he was transporting and other-worldly, rather than merely alarming. I felt no fear as I looked at him, but I was deeply uneasy.

“You have come at last,” said the Ghost. “I have waited for you long—but of course you are busy. Every professor in this university is busy. He is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth. But none has time for an act of mercy.”

It pleased me to hear the Ghost quote scripture; if we must have apparitions, by all means let them be literate.

“You have come here for mercy?” said I.

“I have come for the ordeal, which is also the ultimate mercy,” he replied.

“But we don’t go in for ordeals,” said I. “Perhaps you can tell me a little more plainly what it is you want?”

“Is this not the Graduate School?” said he.

“No indeed,” said I; “this is a graduate college, but the offices of the Graduate School are elsewhere.”

“Don’t trifle with me,” said the Ghost sternly. “Many things are growing very dim to me, but I have not wholly lost my sense of place; this is the Graduate School; this is the Examination Room. And yet”—the voice faltered—“it seemed to me that it used to be much higher in the air, much less handsome than this. I remember stairs—very many stairs...”

“You had been climbing stairs when you came to me in bedroom” said I.

“Yes,” he said eagerly. “I climbed the stairs—right to the top—and went into the Examination Room—and there you lay in bed, but I knew I had missed it again. And so there was nothing for it but to kill myself again.”

That settled it. Now I knew who he was, and I had a pretty shrewd idea where, so far as he was concerned, we both were.

Every university has its secrets—things which are nobody’s fault, but which are open to serious misunderstanding. Thirty or more years ago a graduate student was ploughed on his Ph.D. oral; he must have expected something of the kind because when he had been called before his examiners and given the bad news he stepped out on the landing and shot himself through the head. It is said, whether truly or not I cannot tell, that since that time nobody is allowed to proceed to the presentation and defense of his thesis unless there is a probability amount to a certainty that he will get his degree.

Here, obviously, was that unfortunate young man, standing with me in the Round Room. Why here? Because, before Massey College was built, the Graduate School was housed in an old dwelling on this land, and the Exam-

ination Room was at the top of the house, as nearly as possible where my bedroom is now. Before that time the place had been the home of one of the Greek-letter fraternities—the Mu Kau Mu, I believe it was called.

“The Examination Room you knew has gone,” said I. “If you are looking for it, I fear you must go to Teperman’s wrecking yard, for whatever remains of it is there.”

“But is this not an Examination Room?” said the Ghost. I nodded. “Then I beg you, by all that is merciful, to examine me,” he cried, and to my embarrassed astonishment, threw himself at my feet.

“Examine you for what?” I said.

“For my Ph.D.,” wailed the Ghost, and the eerie, agonized tone in which it uttered those commonplace letters made me, for the first time, afraid. “I must have it. I knew no rest when I was in the world of men, because I was seeking it; I know no rest now, as I linger on the threshold of another life, because I lack it. I shall never be at peace without it.”

I have often heard it said that the Ph.D. is a vastly overvalued degree, but I had not previously thought that it might stand between a man and his eternal rest. I was becoming as agitated as the Ghost.

“My good creature,” said I, rather emotionally, “if I can be of any assistance—”

“You can,” cried the Ghost, clawing that the knees of my trousers with its transparent hands; “examine me, I beg of you. Examine me now and set me free. I’m quite ready.”

“But, just a moment,” said I; “the papers—the copies of your thesis—”

“All ready,” said the Ghost, in triumph. And, though I swear that they were not there before, I now saw that all the circle of tables in the Round Room was piled high with those dismal, unappetizing volumes—great wads of typewritten octavo paper—which are Ph.D. theses.

“Be reasonable,” said I. “I don’t suppose for a minute I can examine you. What is your field?”

“What’s yours?” said the Ghost, and if a Ghost can speak cunningly, that is exactly what this one did now.

“English literature,” I said; “more precisely, the drama of the nineteenth century, with special emphasis on the popular drama of the transpontine London theatres between 1800 and 1850.”

Most people find that discouraging, and change the subject. But the Ghost positively frisked to one of the heaps, drew out an especially thick thesis, and handed it to me.

“Shall I sit here?” he asked, pointing to the red chair, which, as you know, has a place of special prominence in that room.

“By no means,” said I, shocked by such an idea.

“Oh, I had so hoped I might,” said the Ghost.

“My dear fellow, you have been listening to University gossip,” said I. “There are people who pretend that we put the examinee in that chair and sit around the room in a ring, baiting him till he bursts into tears. It is the sort of legend in which scientists and other mythomaniacs take delight. No, no; if you will go away for a few hours—say until tomorrow at ten o’clock—I shall have the room set up for an examination. You shall have a soft chair, cheek by jowl with your examiners, with lots of cigarettes, unlimited water to drink, a fan, and a trained nurse in attendance to take you to the Examinees’ W.C. and bring you back again, should the need occur. We are very well aware here that Ph.D. candidates are delicate creatures, subject to unaccountable metaphysical ills—”

The Ghost broke in, impatiently. “Rubbish,” he said; “I’m quite ready. Let’s get to work. You sit in the red chair. I’m perfectly happy to stand. I think I’m pretty well prepared”—and as he said this I swear that something like a leer passed over the shadow that should have been a face—“and I’m ready as soon as you are.”

There was nothing for it. The Ghost had taken command. I sat down in the red chair—my chair—and opened the thesis. *Prologomena to the Study of the Christ Symbol in the Plays of Thomas Egerton Wilks*, I read, and my heart, which had been sinking for the last few moments now plunged so suddenly that I almost lost consciousness. I have heard of Wilks—it is my job to have heard of him—but of his fifty-odd melodramas, farces and burlesque extravaganzas I have not read a line. However, I have my modest store of professor-craft. I opened the thesis, riffled through the pages, hummed and hawed a little, made a small mark in the margin of one page and said—“Well, suppose for a beginning, you give me a general outline of your argument.”

He did.

Forty-five minutes later, when I could get a word in, I asked him just where he thought the Christ symbol made its first appearance in *My Wife’s Dentist*, or *the Balcony Beau* which is one of Wilks’ dreary farces.

He told me.

Before he had finished he had also given me more knowledge than I really wanted about the Christ symbol in *Woman’s Love or Kate Wynsley the Cottage Girl*, *Raffaelle the Reprobate*, or *the Secret Mission and the Signet Ring*, *The Ruby*

*Ring, or the Murder at Sadlers Wells*, and another farce named, more simply, *Bamboozling*.

By this time I felt that I had been sufficiently bamboozled myself, so I asked him to retire, while the examination board—me, me, and only me, as the old song puts it—considered his case. When I was alone I sought to calm myself with a drink of water, and after a decent interval I called him back.

“There are a few minor errors in this thesis which you will undoubtedly notice during a calm re-reading, and a certain opaqueness of style which might profitably be amended. I am surprised that you have made so little use of the great Variorum Edition of Wilks published by Professors Fawcett and Pale, of the University of Bitter End, Idaho. Nevertheless I find it to be a piece of research of real, if limited, value, which, if published, might be—yes, I shall go so far as to say, will be—seminal in the field of nineteenth-century drama studies,” said I. “I congratulate you, and it will be a pleasure to recommend that you receive your degree.”

I don’t know what I expected then. Perhaps I hoped that he would disappear, with a seraphic smile. True enough, there was an atmosphere as of a smile, but it was the smile of a giant refreshed. “Good,” he said; “now we can get on to my other subjects.”

“Do you mean to say that nineteenth-century drama isn’t your real subject?” I cried, and when I say “I cried,” I really mean it; my voice came out in a loud, horrified croak.

“Sir,” said he; “it is so long ago since my unfortunate experience at my first examination that I have utterly forgotten what my subject was. But I have had time since then to prepare myself for any eventuality. I have written theses on everything. Shall we go on now to History?”

I was too astonished, and horrified, and by this time afraid, to say anything. We went on to History.

My knowledge of History is that of a layman. Academically, there is nothing worse, of course, that can be said. But professor-craft did not wholly desert me. The first principle, when you don’t know anything about the subject of a thesis, is to let the candidate talk, nodding now and then with an ambiguous smile. He thinks you know, and are counting his mistakes, and it unnerves him. The Ghost was an excellent examinee; that is to say, he fell for it, and I think I shook his confidence once with a little laugh, when he was talking about Canada’s encouragement of the arts under the premiership of W. L. Mackenzie King. But finally the two hours was up, and I graciously gave him his Ph.D. in History.

Next came Classics. His thesis was on *The Concept of Pure Existence in Plotinus*. You don't want to hear about it, but I must pause long enough to say that I scored rather heavily by my application of the second principle of conducting an oral, which is to pretend ignorance, and ask for explanations of very simple points. Of course your ignorance is real, but the examinee thinks you are being subtle, and that he is making an ass of himself, and this rattles him.

And so, laboriously, we toiled through the Liberal Arts, and some of the Arts which are not so liberal. I examined him in Computer Science, and Astronomy, and Mediaeval Studies, and I rather enjoyed examining him in Fine Art. One of my best examinations was in Mathematics, though personally my knowledge stops short at the twelve-times table.

Every examination took two hours, but my watch did not record them. The night seemed endless. As it wore on I remembered that at cockcrow all ghosts must disappear, and I cudged my brain trying to remember whether the kosher butchers on Spadina keep live cocks, and if so what chance we had of hearing one in the Round Room. I was wilting under my ordeal, but the Ghost was fresh as a daisy.

"Science, now!" he positively shouted, as a whole new mountain of theses appeared from—I suppose from Hell. Now I know nothing whatever of Science, in any of its forms. If Sir Charles Snow wants a prime example of the ignorant Arts man, who has not even heard of that wretched law of thermodynamics, which is supposed to be as fine as Shakespeare, he is at liberty to make free with my name. I don't know and I don't care. When the Ghost moved into Science I thought my reason would desert me.

I needn't have worried. The Ghost was as full of himself as a Ghost can possibly be, and he hectored and bullied and badgered me about things I had never heard of, while my head swam. But little by little—it was when the Ghost was chattering animatedly about his work on the rate of decay of cosmic rays when they are brought in contact with mesons—I realized the truth. The Ghost did not care whether I knew what he was talking about or not. The Ghost was a typical examinee, and he wanted two things and two things only—an ear into which he could pour what he believed to be unique and valuable knowledge, and a license to go elsewhere and pour it into the ears of students. Once I grasped this principle, my spirits rose. I began to nod, to smile, to murmur appreciatively. When the Ghost said something especially spirited about the meiosis function in the formation of germ cells, I even allowed myself to say "Bravo"—as if he had come upon something splendid that I had always suspected myself but had never had the time to prove in my laboratory. It was a

great success; I knew that dawn could not be far away, for as each examination was passed, the Ghost seemed to become a little less substantial. I could see through him now, and I was happily confident that he could not, and never would, see through me. As he completed his last defense of a doctoral dissertation, I was moved to be generous.

“A distinguished showing,” I said. “With a candidate of such unusual versatility I am tempted to go a little beyond the usual congratulations. Is there anything else you fancy—a Diploma in Public Health, for instance, or perhaps something advanced in Household Science?”

But the Ghost shook his head. “I want a Ph.D. and that only,” said he. “I want a Ph.D. in everything.”

“Consider it yours,” said I.

“You mean that I may present myself at the next Convocation?”

“Yes; when the Registrar kneels to take upon him the degrees granted to those who are forced by circumstances to be absent, I suggest that you momentarily invest him with your ectoplasm—or whatever it is that people in your situation do,” said I.

“I shall; oh, I shall,” he cried, ecstatically, and as he faded before my eyes I heard his voice from above the skylight in the Round Room, saying, “I go to a better place than this, confident that as a Ph.D. I shall have it in my power to make it better still.”

So at last, as dawn stole over the College, I was alone in the Round Room. The night of the Holy Innocents had passed. Musing, my hand stole to my pocket and, pulling out the sugarbaby, I crunched off its head. Was it those blessed children, I wondered, who had hovered over me, protecting me from being found out? Or had it perhaps been the spirit of King Herod, notoriously the patron of examiners?

All things considered, I think it was both great spiritual forces, watching over me during the long night. Happy in the thought that I was so variously protected, I stepped out into the first light, the last crumbs of the sugarbaby still sweet upon my lips.