

## CHRISTMAS GHOSTS.

By JEROME K. JEROME.

T was Christmas Eve.

I begin this way, because it is the proper, orthodox, respectable way to begin, and I have been brought up in a proper, orthodox, respectable way, and taught to always do the proper, orthodox, respectable thing, and the habit clings to me.

Of course, as a mere matter of information, it is quite unnecessary to mention the date at all. The experienced reader knows it was Christmas Eve, with my telling him. It always is Christmas Eve in a ghost story.

Christmas Eve is the ghosts' great gala night. On Christmas Eve they hold their annual fête. On Christmas Eve everybody in ghostland who is anybody—or, rather, speaking of ghosts, one should say, I suppose, every nobody who is any nobody—comes out to show himself or herself, to see and to be seen, to promenade about and display their winding sheets and grave-clothes to each other, to criticise one another's style and sneer at one another's complexion.

'Christmas Eve parade,' as I expect they themselves term it, is a function, doubtless, eagerly prepared for and looked forward to throughout ghostland, especially by the swagger set, such as the murdered barons, the crime stained countesses and the earls who came over with the Conqueror and assassinated their relatives and died raving mad.

Hollow moans and fiendish grins are, one may be sure, energetically practised up. Blood-curdling shrieks and marrow-freezing gestures are probably rehearsed for weeks beforehand. Rusty chains and gory daggers are overhauled and put into good working order, and sheets and shrouds, laid carefully by from the previous year's show, are taken down and shaken out and mended and aired.

Oh, it is a stirring night in ghostland, the night of December the twenty-fourth!

Ghosts never come out on Christmas night itself, you may have noticed. Christmas Eve, we suspect, has been too much for them. They have not been used to excitement. For about a week after Christmas Eve the gentlemen ghosts no doubt feel as if they were all head, and go about making solemn resolutions to themselves that they will stop in next Christmas Eve, while the lady spectres are contradictory and snappish, and liable to burst into tears and leave the room hurriedly on being spoken to, for no perceptible cause whatever.

Ghosts with no position to maintain—mere middle class ghosts—occasionally, I believe, do a little haunting on off nights, on All Hallow Eve and at midsummer, and some will even run up for a mere local event—to celebrate, for instance, the anniversary of the hanging of somebody's grandfather or to prophesy a misfortune.

He does love prophesying a misfortune, does the British ghost. Send him out to prognosticate trouble to somebody and he is happy. Let him force his way into a peaceful home and turn the whole house upside down by foretelling a funeral, or predicting a bankruptcy, or hinting at a coming disgrace or some other terrible disaster, about which nobody in his senses would want to know sooner than he could possibly help, and the prior knowledge of which can serve no useful purpose whatsoever, and he feels he is combining duty with pleasure. He would never forgive himself if anybody in his family had a trouble and he had not been there for a couple of months beforehand doing silly tricks on the lawn or balancing himself on somebody's bed-rail.

Then there are, besides, the very young or very conscientious ghosts, with a lost will or an undiscovered number weighing heavy on their minds, who will haunt steadily all the year round; and also the fussy ghost, who is indignant at having been buried in a dustbin or in the village pond, and who never gives the parish a single night's quiet until somebody has paid for a first class funeral for him.

But these are the exceptions. As I have said, the average orthodox ghost does his one turn a year on Christmas Eve, and is satisfied.

Why on Christmas Eve, of all nights in the year, I never could myself understand. It is invariably one of the most dismal of nights to be out in, cold, muddy, and wet. And besides, at Christmas time everybody has quite enough to put up with in the way of a houseful of living relations, without wanting the ghosts of any dead ones mooning about the place, I am sure.

There must be something ghostly in the air of Christmas Eve—something about the close, muggy atmosphere that draws up the ghost, like the dampness of the summer rains brings out the frogs and snails.

And not only do the ghosts themselves always walk on Christmas Eve, but live people always sit and talk about them on Christmas Eve. Whenever five or six English-speaking people meet round a fire on Christmas Eve, they start telling each other ghost stories. Nothing satisfies us on Christmas Eve but to hear each other tell authentic anecdotes about spectres. It is a genial festive season, and we love to muse upon graves and dead bodies and murders and blood.

There is a good deal of similarity about our ghostly experiences; but this, of course, is not our fault, but the fault of the ghosts, who never will try any new performances, but always will keep steadily to the old, safe business. The consequence is that when you have been at one Christmas Eve party and heard six people relate their adventures with spirits you do not require to hear any more ghost stories. To listen to any further ghost stories after that would be like sitting out two farcical comedies or taking in two comic journals; the repetition would become wearisome.

There is always the young man who was one year spending the Christmas at a country house and on Christmas Eve they put him to sleep in the west wing. Then in the middle of the night the room door quietly opens and somebody—generally a lady in her night dress—walks slowly in and comes and sits on the bed. The young man thinks it must be one of the visitors, or some relative of the family, though he does not remember having previously seen her, who unable to go to sleep and feeling lonesome all by herself, has come into his room for a chat. He has no idea it is a

ghost—he is so unsuspecting. She does not speak, however, and when he looks again she is gone!

The young man relates the circumstance at the breakfast table next morning, and asks each of the ladies present if it was she who was his visitor. But they all assure him that it was not, and the host, who has grown deadly pale, begs him to say no more about the matter, which strikes the young man as a singularly strange request.

After breakfast the host takes the young man into a corner and explains to him that what he saw was the ghost of a lady who had been murdered in that very bed, or who had murdered somebody else there—it does not really matter which. You can be a ghost by murdering somebody else or by being murdered yourself, whichever you prefer. The murderer's ghost is, perhaps, the more popular, but, on the other hand, you can frighten people better if you are the murdered one, because then you can show your wounds and do groans.

Then there is the sceptical guest. It is always 'the guest' who gets let in for this sort of thing, by the bye. A ghost never thinks much of his own family. It is 'the guest' he likes to haunt, who after listening to the host's ghost story on Christmas Eve laughs at it, and says that he does not believe there are such things as ghosts at all, and that he will sleep in the haunted chamber that very night if they will let him.

Everybody urges him not to be reckless, but he persists in his foolhardiness, and goes up to the yellow chamber (or whatever colour the haunted room may be) with a light heart and a candle, and wishes them all good-night and shuts the door.

Next morning he has got snow white hair. He does not tell anybody what he has seen. It is too awful.

There is also the plucky guest, who sees a ghost, and knows it is a ghost, and watches it as it comes into the room and disappears through the wainscot; after which, as the ghost does not seem to be coming back and there is nothing consequently to be gained by stopping awake, he goes to sleep.

He does not mention having seen the ghost to anybody for fear of frightening them—some people are so nervous about ghosts—but determines to wait for the next night and see if the apparition appears again.

It does appear again, and this time he gets out of bed, dresses himself and does his hair, and follows it, and then discovers a secret passage leading from the bedroom down into the beer cellar—a passage which, no doubt, was not unfrequently made use of in the bad old days of yore.

After him comes the young man who woke up with a strange sensation in the middle of the night and found his rich bachelor uncle standing by his bedside. The rich uncle smiled a weird sort of smile and vanished. The young man immediately got up and looked at his watch. It had stopped at half-past four, he having forgotten to wind it.

He made inquiries the next day, and found that, strange enough, his rich uncle, whose only nephew he was, had married a widow with eleven children at exactly a quarter to twelve only two days ago.

The young man does not attempt to explain the extraordinary circumstance. All he does is to vouch for the truth of his narrative.

And, to mention another case, there is the gentleman who is returning home late at night from a Freemason's dinner, and who, noticing a light issuing from a ruined abbey, creeps up and looks through the keyhole. He sees the ghost of a 'grey sister' kissing the ghost of a brown monk, and is so inexpressibly shocked and frightened that he faints on the spot and is discovered there the next morning, lying in a heap against the door, still speechless and with his faithful latchkey clasped tightly in his hand.

All these things happen on Christmas Eve; they are all told of on Christmas Eve. For ghost stories to be told on any other evening than the evening of the 24th of December would be impossible in English society as at present regulated.

## NEW ZEALAND CHRISTMAS.

**T**ell you about old Christmas Day,  
And about the good folks too,  
In our dear old island far away  
O'er the great Pacific blue.  
Ah! had I the story-teller's gift,  
'Twere a pleasant task, my dear;  
One says too little, or else too much,  
And the picture isn't clear.

It comes to us in the golden time,  
When the days are still and fair;  
When the stately trees long shadows throw,  
And flowers perfume the air;  
When each morn is sweet and evening cool,  
Tho' we shun the fierce noon glow;  
But the early dew and twilight star  
Are gentle and mild, you know.

Oh, 'tis sweet to wander far afield  
With friends who are blythe and gay,  
In the dense, dim bush, where green ferns wave  
On our Austral Christmas Day.  
The shore is wide, and the sands are firm  
Where the long waves ebb and flow;  
Like red acacia over the cliff  
Pohutukawa blossoms grow.

The ships are gay with many a flag  
In a harbour fair to see,  
As the famous bay, which poets sing  
On the shores of Tuscany!  
The sea is calm and the sails gleam white,  
But the city streets are full  
Of a merry throng. The flowing tide  
Of pleasure comes in with Yule.

Proud steeds are prancing, church bells ring,  
There is laughter, love, and fun,  
And all too soon, the glittering sands  
Of our Christmas Day have run.  
Night comes majestic in her pomp,  
To the low chant of the sea;  
But within our homes, are songs and smiles  
And sweet toned gaiety.

Thus clad in sunshine, and crowned with flowers,  
Whose fragrance will haunt us aye,  
Are the merry moments and happy hours  
Of our Austral Christmas Day.

Thames.

M. A. SINCLAIR.

## THE CHRIST SPIRIT.

When pale Misery mutely calls,  
When thy tempted brother falls,  
When thy gentle words may chain  
Hate, and Anger and Despair,  
Or thy loving smile impart  
Courage to some sinking heart;  
When within thy troubled breast  
Good and evil thoughts contest,  
Though unconscious thou may'st be  
The Christ Spirit strives with thee.

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