

# The Transferred Ghost

Frank Stockton

The country residence of Mr. John Hinckman was a delightful place to me, for many reasons. It was the abode of a genial, though somewhat impulsive, hospitality. It had broad, smooth-shaven lawns and towering oaks and elms; there were bosky shades at several points, and not far from the house there was a little rill spanned by a rustic bridge with the bark on; there were fruits and flowers, pleasant people, chess, billiards, rides, walks, and fishing. These were great attractions; but none of them, nor all of them together, would have been sufficient to hold me to the place very long. I had been invited for the trout season, but should probably have finished my visit early in the summer had it not been that upon fair days, when the grass was dry, and the sun was not too hot, and there was but little wind, there strolled beneath the lofty elms, or passed lightly through the bosky shades, the form of my Madeline.

This lady was not, in very truth, my Madeline. She had never given herself to me, nor had I, in any way, acquired possession of her. But as I considered her possession the only sufficient reason for the continuance of my existence, I called her, in my reveries, mine. It may have been that I would not have been obliged to confine the use of this possessive pronoun to my reveries had I confessed the state of my feelings to the lady.

But this was an unusually difficult thing to do. Not only did I dread, as almost all lovers dread, taking the step which would in an instant put an end to that delightful season which may be termed the ante-interrogatory period of love, and which might at the same time terminate all intercourse or connection with the object of my passion, but I was also dreadfully afraid of John Hinckman. This gentleman was a good friend of mine, but it would have required a bolder man than I was at that time to ask him for the gift of his niece, who was the head of his household, and, according to his own frequent statement, the main prop of his declining years. Had Madeline acquiesced in my general views on the subject, I might have felt encouraged to open the matter to Mr. Hinckman; but, as I said before, I had never asked her whether or not she would be mine. I thought of these things at all hours of the day and night, particularly the latter.

I was lying awake one night, in the great bed in my spacious chamber, when, by the dim light of the new moon, which partially filled the room, I saw John Hinckman standing by a large chair near the door. I was very much surprised at this, for two reasons. In the first place, my host had never before come into my room; and, in the second place, he had gone from home that morning, and had not expected to return for several days. It was for this reason that I had been able that evening to sit much later than usual with Madeline on the moon-lit porch. The figure was certainly that of John Hinckman in his ordinary dress, but there was a vagueness and indistinctness about it which presently assured me that it was a ghost. Had the good old man

been murdered? and had his spirit come to tell me of the deed, and to confide to me the protection of his dear—? My heart fluttered at what I was about to think, but at this instant the figure spoke.

“Do you know,” he said, with a countenance that indicated anxiety, “if Mr. Hinckman will return to-night?”

I thought it well to maintain a calm exterior, and I answered:

“We do not expect him.”

“I am glad of that,” said he, sinking into the chair by which he stood. “During the two years and a half that I have inhabited this house, that man has never before been away for a single night. You can’t imagine the relief it gives me.”

And as he spoke he stretched out his legs and leaned back in the chair. His form became less vague, and the colors of his garments more distinct and evident, while an expression of gratified relief succeeded to the anxiety of his countenance.

“Two years and a half!” I exclaimed. “I don’t understand you.”

“It is fully that length of time,” said the ghost, “since I first came here. Mine is not an ordinary case. But before I say anything more about it, let me ask you again if you are sure Mr. Hinckman will not return to-night?”

“I am as sure of it as I can be of anything,” I answered. “He left to-day for Bristol, two hundred miles away.”

“Then I will go on,” said the ghost, “for I am glad to have the opportunity of talking to some one who will listen to me; but if John Hinckman should come in and catch me here I should be frightened out of my wits.”

“This is all very strange,” I said, greatly puzzled by what I had heard. “Are you the ghost of Mr. Hinckman?”

This was a bold question, but my mind was so full of other emotions that there seemed to be no room for that of fear.

“Yes, I am his ghost,” my companion replied, “and yet I have no right to be. And this is what makes me so uneasy, and so much afraid of him. It is a strange story, and, I truly believe, without precedent. Two years and a half ago John Hinckman was dangerously ill in this very room. At one time he was so far gone that he was really believed to be dead. It was

in consequence of too precipitate a report in regard to this matter that I was, at that time, appointed to be his ghost. Imagine my surprise and horror, sir, when, after I had accepted the position and assumed its responsibilities, that old man revived, became convalescent, and eventually regained his usual health. My situation was now one of extreme delicacy and embarrassment. I had no power to return to my original unembodiment, and I had no right to be the ghost of a man who was not dead. I was advised by my friends to quietly maintain my position, and was assured that, as John Hinckman was an elderly man, it could not be long before I could rightfully assume the position for which I had been selected. But I tell you, sir," he continued, with animation, "the old fellow seems as vigorous as ever, and I have no idea how much longer this annoying state of things will continue. I spend my time trying to get out of that old man's way. I must not leave this house, and he seems to follow me everywhere. I tell you, sir, he haunts me."

"That is truly a queer state of things," I remarked. "But why are you afraid of him? He couldn't hurt you."

"Of course he couldn't," said the ghost. "But his very presence is a shock and terror to me. Imagine, sir, how you would feel if my case were yours."

I could not imagine such a thing at all. I simply shuddered.

"And if one must be a wrongful ghost at all," the apparition continued, "it would be much pleasanter to be the ghost of some man other than John Hinckman. There is in him an irascibility of temper, accompanied by a facility of invective, which is seldom met with. And what would happen if he were to see me, and find out, as I am sure he would, how long and why I had inhabited his house, I can scarcely conceive. I have seen him in his bursts of passion; and, although he did not hurt the people he stormed at any more than he would hurt me, they seemed to shrink before him."

All this I knew to be very true. Had it not been for this peculiarity of Mr. Hinckman I might have been more willing to talk to him about his niece.

"I feel sorry for you," I said, for I really began to have a sympathetic feeling toward this unfortunate apparition. "Your case is indeed a hard one. It reminds me of those persons who have had doubles, and I suppose a man would often be very angry indeed when he found that there was another being who was personating himself."

"Oh, the cases are not similar at all," said the ghost. "A double or doppelgänger lives on the earth with a man, and, being exactly like him, he makes all sorts of trouble, of course. It is very different with me. I am not here to live with Mr. Hinckman. I am here to take his place. Now, it would make John Hinckman very angry if he knew that. Don't you know it would?"

I assented promptly.

“Now that he is away I can be easy for a little while,” continued the ghost; “and I am so glad to have an opportunity of talking to you. I have frequently come into your room and watched you while you slept, but did not dare to speak to you for fear that if you talked with me Mr. Hinckman would hear you and come into the room to know why you were talking to yourself.”

“But would he not hear you?” I asked.

“Oh no!” said the other; “there are times when any one may see me, but no one hears me except the person to whom I address myself.”

“But why did you wish to speak to me?” I asked.

“Because,” replied the ghost, “I like occasionally to talk to people, and especially to some one like yourself, whose mind is so troubled and perturbed that you are not likely to be frightened by a visit from one of us. But I particularly wanted to ask you to do me a favor. There is every probability, so far as I can see, that John Hinckman will live a long time, and my situation is becoming insupportable. My great object at present is to get myself transferred, and I think that you may, perhaps, be of use to me.”

“Transferred!” I exclaimed. “What do you mean by that?”

“What I mean,” said the other, “is this: now that I have started on my career I have got to be the ghost of somebody, and I want to be the ghost of a man who is really dead.”

“I should think that would be easy enough,” I said. “Opportunities must continually occur.”

“Not at all! not at all!” said my companion, quickly. “You have no idea what a rush and pressure there is for situations of this kind. Whenever a vacancy occurs, if I may express myself in that way, there are crowds of applications for the ghostship.”

“I had no idea that such a state of things existed,” I said, becoming quite interested in the matter. “There ought to be some regular system, or order of precedence, by which you could all take your turns like customers in a barber’s shop.”

“Oh dear, that would never do at all!” said the other. “Some of us would have to wait forever. There is always a great rush whenever a good ghostship offers itself—while, as you know, there are some positions that no one would care for. And it was in consequence of my

being in too great a hurry on an occasion of the kind that I got myself into my present disagreeable predicament, and I have thought that it might be possible that you would help me out of it. You might know of a case where an opportunity for a ghostship was not generally expected, but which might present itself at any moment. If you would give me a short notice I know I could arrange for a transfer.”

“What do you mean?” I exclaimed. “Do you want me to commit suicide? or to undertake a murder for your benefit?”

“Oh no, no, no!” said the other, with a vapory smile. “I mean nothing of that kind. To be sure, there are lovers who are watched with considerable interest, such persons having been known, in moments of depression, to offer very desirable ghostships; but I did not think of anything of that kind in connection with you. You were the only person I cared to speak to, and I hoped that you might give me some information that would be of use; and, in return, I shall be very glad to help you in your love-affair.”

“You seem to know that I have such an affair,” I said.

“Oh yes!” replied the other, with a little yawn. “I could not be here so much as I have been without knowing all about that.”

There was something horrible in the idea of Madeline and myself having been watched by a ghost, even, perhaps, when we wandered together in the most delightful and bosky places. But then this was quite an exceptional ghost, and I could not have the objections to him which would ordinarily arise in regard to beings of his class.

“I must go now,” said the ghost, rising, “but I will see you somewhere to-morrow night. And remember—you help me and I’ll help you.”

I had doubts the next morning as to the propriety of telling Madeline anything about this interview, and soon convinced myself that I must keep silent on the subject. If she knew there was a ghost about the house she would probably leave the place instantly. I did not mention the matter, and so regulated my demeanor that I am quite sure Madeline never suspected what had taken place. For some time I had wished that Mr. Hinckman would absent himself, for a day at least, from the premises. In such case I thought I might more easily nerve myself up to the point of speaking to Madeline on the subject of our future collateral existence; and, now that the opportunity for such speech had really occurred, I did not feel ready to avail myself of it. What would become of me if she refused me?

I had an idea, however, that the lady thought that, if I were going to speak at all, this was the time. She must have known that certain sentiments were afloat within me, and she was not unreasonable in her wish to see the matter settled one way or the other. But I did not

feel like taking a bold step in the dark. If she wished me to ask her to give herself to me she ought to offer me some reason to suppose that she would make the gift. If I saw no probability of such generosity I would prefer that things should remain as they were.

That evening I was sitting with Madeline in the moon-lit porch. It was nearly ten o'clock, and ever since supper-time I had been working myself up to the point of making an avowal of my sentiments. I had not positively determined to do this, but wished gradually to reach the proper point, when, if the prospect looked bright, I might speak. My companion appeared to understand the situation—at least I imagined that the nearer I came to a proposal the more she seemed to expect it. It was certainly a very critical and important epoch in my life. If I spoke I should make myself happy or miserable forever; and if I did not speak I had every reason to believe that the lady would not give me another chance to do so.

Sitting thus with Madeline, talking a little, and thinking very hard over these momentous matters, I looked up and saw the ghost not a dozen feet away from us. He was sitting on the railing of the porch, one leg thrown up before him, the other dangling down as he leaned against a post. He was behind Madeline, but almost in front of me, as I sat facing the lady. It was fortunate that Madeline was looking out over the landscape, for I must have appeared very much startled. The ghost had told me that he would see me sometime this night, but I did not think he would make his appearance when I was in the company of Madeline. If she should see the spirit of her uncle I could not answer for the consequences. I made no exclamation, but the ghost evidently saw that I was troubled.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “I shall not let her see me; and she cannot hear me speak unless I address myself to her, which I do not intend to do.”

I suppose I looked grateful.

“So you need not trouble yourself about that,” the ghost continued; “but it seems to me that you are not getting along very well with your affair. If I were you I should speak out without waiting any longer. You will never have a better chance. You are not likely to be interrupted; and, so far as I can judge, the lady seems disposed to listen to you favorably; that is, if she ever intends to do so. There is no knowing when John Hinckman will go away again; certainly not this summer. If I were in your place I should never dare to make love to Hinckman’s niece if he were anywhere about the place. If he should catch any one offering himself to Miss Madeline he would then be a terrible man to encounter.”

I agreed perfectly to all this.

“I cannot bear to think of him!” I ejaculated aloud.

“Think of whom?” asked Madeline, turning quickly toward me.

Here was an awkward situation. The long speech of the ghost, to which Madeline paid no attention, but which I heard with perfect distinctness, had made me forget myself.

It was necessary to explain quickly. Of course it would not do to admit that it was of her dear uncle that I was speaking; and so I mentioned hastily the first name I thought of.

“Mr. Vilars,” I said.

This statement was entirely correct; for I never could bear to think of Mr. Vilars, who was a gentleman who had at various times paid much attention to Madeline.

“It is wrong for you to speak in that way of Mr. Vilars,” she said. “He is a remarkably well-educated and sensible young man, and has very pleasant manners. He expects to be elected to the legislature this fall, and I should not be surprised if he made his mark. He will do well in a legislative body, for whenever Mr. Vilars has anything to say he knows just how and when to say it.”

This was spoken very quietly and without any show of resentment, which was all very natural; for if Madeline thought at all favorably of me she could not feel displeased that I should have disagreeable emotions in regard to a possible rival. The concluding words contained a hint which I was not slow to understand. I felt very sure that if Mr. Vilars were in my present position he would speak quickly enough.

“I know it is wrong to have such ideas about a person,” I said, “but I cannot help it.”

The lady did not chide me, and after this she seemed even in a softer mood. As for me, I felt considerably annoyed, for I had not wished to admit that any thought of Mr. Vilars had ever occupied my mind.

“You should not speak aloud that way,” said the ghost, “or you may get yourself into trouble. I want to see everything go well with you, because then you may be disposed to help me, especially if I should chance to be of any assistance to you, which I hope I shall be.”

I longed to tell him that there was no way in which he could help me so much as by taking his instant departure. To make love to a young lady with a ghost sitting on the railing near by, and that ghost the apparition of a much-dreaded uncle, the very idea of whom in such a position and at such a time made me tremble, was a difficult, if not an impossible, thing to do; but I forbore to speak, although I may have looked, my mind.

“I suppose,” continued the ghost, “that you have not heard anything that might be of

advantage to me. Of course I am very anxious to hear; but if you have anything to tell me I can wait until you are alone. I will come to you to-night in your room, or I will stay here until the lady goes away.”

“You need not wait here,” I said; “I have nothing at all to say to you.”

Madeline sprang to her feet, her face flushed and her eyes ablaze.

“Wait here!” she cried. “What do you suppose I am waiting for? Nothing to say to me indeed!—I should think so! What should you have to say to me?”

“Madeline,” I exclaimed, stepping toward her, “let me explain.”

But she had gone.

Here was the end of the world for me! I turned fiercely to the ghost.

“Wretched existence!” I cried. “You have ruined everything. You have blackened my whole life. Had it not been for you—”

But here my voice faltered. I could say no more.

“You wrong me,” said the ghost. “I have not injured you. I have tried only to encourage and assist you, and it is your own folly that has done this mischief. But do not despair. Such mistakes as these can be explained. Keep up a brave heart. Good-by.”

And he vanished from the railing like a bursting soap-bubble.

I went gloomily to bed, but I saw no apparitions that night except those of despair and misery which my wretched thoughts called up. The words I had uttered had sounded to Madeline like the basest insult. Of course there was only one interpretation she could put upon them.

As to explaining my ejaculations, that was impossible. I thought the matter over and over again as I lay awake that night, and I determined that I would never tell Madeline the facts of the case. It would be better for me to suffer all my life than for her to know that the ghost of her uncle haunted the house. Mr. Hinckman was away, and if she knew of his ghost she could not be made to believe that he was not dead. She might not survive the shock! No, my heart could bleed, but I would never tell her.

The next day was fine, neither too cool nor too warm; the breezes were gentle, and Nature smiled. But there were no walks or rides with Madeline. She seemed to be much engaged

during the day, and I saw but little of her. When we met at meals she was polite, but very quiet and reserved. She had evidently determined on a course of conduct, and had resolved to assume that, although I had been very rude to her, she did not understand the import of my words. It would be quite proper, of course, for her not to know what I meant by my expressions of the night before.

I was downcast and wretched and said but little, and the only bright streak across the black horizon of my woe was the fact that she did not appear to be happy, although she affected an air of unconcern. The moon-lit porch was deserted that evening, but wandering about the house, I found Madeline in the library alone. She was reading, but I went in and sat down near her. I felt that, although I could not do so fully, I must in a measure explain my conduct of the night before. She listened quietly to a somewhat labored apology I made for the words I had used.

“I have not the slightest idea what you meant,” she said, “but you were very rude.”

I earnestly disclaimed any intention of rudeness, and assured her, with a warmth of speech that must have made some impression upon her, that rudeness to her would be an action impossible to me. I said a great deal upon the subject, and implored her to believe that if it were not for a certain obstacle I could speak to her so plainly that she would understand everything.

She was silent for a time, and then she said, rather more kindly, I thought, than she had spoken before:

“Is that obstacle in any way connected with my uncle?”

“Yes,” I answered, after a little hesitation, “it is, in a measure, connected with him.”

She made no answer to this, and sat looking at her book, but not reading. From the expression of her face I thought she was somewhat softened toward me. She knew her uncle as well as I did, and she may have been thinking that, if he were the obstacle that prevented my speaking (and there were many ways in which he might be that obstacle), my position would be such a hard one that it would excuse some wildness of speech and eccentricity of manner. I saw, too, that the warmth of my partial explanations had had some effect on her, and I began to believe that it might be a good thing for me to speak my mind without delay. No matter how she should receive my proposition, my relations with her could not be worse than they had been the previous night and day, and there was something in her face which encouraged me to hope that she might forget my foolish exclamations of the evening before if I began to tell her my tale of love.

I drew my chair a little nearer to her, and as I did so the ghost burst into the room from the

doorway behind her. I say burst, although no door flew open and he made no noise. He was wildly excited, and waved his arms above his head. The moment I saw him my heart fell within me. With the entrance of that impertinent apparition every hope fled from me. I could not speak while he was in the room.

I must have turned pale; and I gazed steadfastly at the ghost, almost without seeing Madeline, who sat between us.

“Do you know,” he cried, “that John Hinckman is coming up the hill? He will be here in fifteen minutes; and if you are doing anything in the way of love-making you had better hurry it up. But this is not what I came to tell you. I have glorious news! At last I am transferred! Not forty minutes ago a Russian nobleman was murdered by the Nihilists. Nobody ever thought of him in connection with an immediate ghostship. My friends instantly applied for the situation for me, and obtained my transfer. I am off before that horrid Hinckman comes up the hill. The moment I reach my new position I shall put off this hated semblance. Good-by. You can’t imagine how glad I am to be, at last, the real ghost of somebody.”

“Oh!” I cried, rising to my feet, and stretching out my arms in utter wretchedness, “I would to Heaven you were mine!”

“I *am* yours,” said Madeline, raising to me her tearful eyes.

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