**A Ghost of a Chance**

O. Henry

“Actually, a *hod* !” repeated Mrs. Kinsolving, pathetically.

Mrs. Bellamy Bellmore arched a sympathetic eyebrow. Thus she expressed condolence and a generous amount of apparent surprise.

“Fancy her telling everywhere,” recapitulated Mrs. Kinsolving, “that she saw a ghost in the apartment she occupied here—our choicest guest-room—a ghost, carrying a hod on its shoulder—the ghost of an old man in overalls, smoking a pipe and carrying a hod! The very absurdity of the thing shows her malicious intent. There never was a Kinsolving that carried a hod. Every one knows that Mr. Kinsolving’s father accumulated his money by large building contracts, but he never worked a day with his own hands. He had this house built from his own plans; but—oh, a hod! Why need she have been so cruel and malicious?”

“It is really too bad,” murmured Mrs. Bellmore, with an approving glance of her fine eyes about the vast chamber done in lilac and old gold. “And it was in this room she saw it! Oh, no, I’m not afraid of ghosts. Don’t have the least fear on my account. I’m glad you put me in here. I think family ghosts so interesting! But, really, the story does sound a little inconsistent. I should have expected something better from Mrs. Fischer-Suympkins. Don’t they carry bricks in hods? Why should a ghost bring bricks into a villa built of marble and stone? I’m so sorry, but it makes me think that age is beginning to tell upon Mrs. Fischer-Suympkins.”

“This house,” continued Mrs. Kinsolving, “was built upon the site of an old one used by the family during the Revolution. There wouldn’t be anything strange in its having a ghost. And there was a Captain Kinsolving who fought in General Greene’s army, though we’ve never been able to secure any papers to vouch for it. If there is to be a family ghost, why couldn’t it have been his, instead of a bricklayer’s?”

“The ghost of a Revolutionary ancestor wouldn’t be a bad idea,” agreed Mrs. Bellmore; “but you know how arbitrary and inconsiderate ghosts can be. Maybe, like love, they are ‘engendered in the eye.’ One advantage of those who see ghosts is that their stories can’t be disproved. By a spiteful eye, a Revolutionary knapsack might easily be construed to be a hod. Dear Mrs. Kinsolving, think no more of it. I am sure it was a knapsack.”

“But she told everybody!” mourned Mrs. Kinsolving, inconsolable. “She insisted upon the details. There is the pipe. And how are you going to get out of the overalls?”

“Shan’t get into them,” said Mrs. Bellmore, with a prettily suppressed yawn; “too stiff and wrinkly. Is that you, Felice? Prepare my bath, please. Do you dine at seven at Clifftop, Mrs. Kinsolving? So kind of you to run in for a chat before dinner! I love those little touches of informality with a guest. They give such a home flavour to a visit. So sorry; I must be dressing. I am so indolent I always postpone it until the last moment.”

Mrs. Fischer-Suympkins had been the first large plum that the Kinsolvings had drawn from the social pie. For a long time, the pie itself had been out of reach on a top shelf. But the purse and the pursuit had at last lowered it. Mrs. Fischer-Suympkins was the heliograph of the smart society parading corps. The glitter of her wit and actions passed along the line, transmitting whatever was latest and most daring in the game of peep-show. Formerly, her fame and leadership had been secure enough not to need the support of such artifices as handing around live frogs for favours at a cotillon. But, now, these things were necessary to the holding of her throne. Beside, middle age had come to preside, incongruous, at her capers. The sensational papers had cut her space from a page to two columns. Her wit developed a sting; her manners became more rough and inconsiderate, as if she felt the royal necessity of establishing her autocracy by scorning the conventionalities that bound lesser potentates.

To some pressure at the command of the Kinsolvings, she had yielded so far as to honour their house by her presence, for an evening and night. She had her revenge upon her hostess by relating, with grim enjoyment and sarcastic humour, her story of the vision carrying the hod. To that lady, in raptures at having penetrated thus far toward the coveted inner circle, the result came as a crushing disappointment. Everybody either sympathized or laughed, and there was little to choose between the two modes of expression.

But, later on, Mrs. Kinsolving’s hopes and spirits were revived by the capture of a second and greater prize.

Mrs. Bellamy Bellmore had accepted an invitation to visit at Clifftop, and would remain for three days. Mrs. Bellmore was one of the younger matrons, whose beauty, descent, and wealth gave her a reserved seat in the holy of holies that required no strenuous bolstering. She was generous enough thus to give Mrs. Kinsolving the accolade that was so poignantly desired; and, at the same time, she thought how much it would please Terence. Perhaps it would end by solving him.

Terence was Mrs. Kinsolving’s son, aged twenty-nine, quite good-looking enough, and with two or three attractive and mysterious traits. For one, he was very devoted to his mother, and that was sufficiently odd to deserve notice. For others, he talked so little that it was irritating, and he seemed either very shy or very deep. Terence interested Mrs. Bellmore, because she was not sure which it was. She intended to study him a little longer, unless she forgot the matter. If he was only shy, she would abandon him, for shyness is a bore. If he was deep, she would also abandon him, for depth is precarious.

On the afternoon of the third day of her visit, Terence hunted up Mrs. Bellmore, and found her in a nook actually looking at an album.

“It’s so good of you,” said he, “to come down here and retrieve the day for us. I suppose you have heard that Mrs. Fischer-Suympkins scuttled the ship before she left. She knocked a whole plank out of the bottom with a hod. My mother is grieving herself ill about it. Can’t you manage to see a ghost for us while you are here, Mrs. Bellmore—a bang-up, swell ghost, with a coronet on his head and a cheque book under his arm?”

“That was a naughty old lady, Terence,” said Mrs. Bellmore, “to tell such stories. Perhaps you gave her too much supper. Your mother doesn’t really take it seriously, does she?”

“I think she does,” answered Terence. “One would think every brick in the hod had dropped on her. It’s a good mammy, and I don’t like to see her worried. It’s to be hoped that the ghost belongs to the hod-carriers’ union, and will go out on a strike. If he doesn’t, there will be no peace in this family.”

“I’m sleeping in the ghost-chamber,” said Mrs. Bellmore, pensively. “But it’s so nice I wouldn’t change it, even if I were afraid, which I’m not. It wouldn’t do for me to submit a counter story of a desirable, aristocratic shade, would it? I would do so, with pleasure, but it seems to me it would be too obviously an antidote for the other narrative to be effective.”

“True,” said Terence, running two fingers thoughtfully into his crisp, brown hair; “that would never do. How would it work to see the same ghost again, minus the overalls, and have gold bricks in the hod? That would elevate the spectre from degrading toil to a financial plane. Don’t you think that would be respectable enough?”

“There was an ancestor who fought against the Britishers, wasn’t there? Your mother said something to that effect.”

“I believe so; one of those old chaps in raglan vests and golf trousers. I don’t care a continental for a Continental, myself. But the mother has set her heart on pomp and heraldry and pyrotechnics, and I want her to be happy.”

“You are a good boy, Terence,” said Mrs. Bellmore, sweeping her silks close to one side of her, “not to beat your mother. Sit here by me, and let’s look at the album, just as people used to do twenty years ago. Now, tell me about every one of them. Who is this tall, dignified gentleman leaning against the horizon, with one arm on the Corinthian column?”

“That old chap with the big feet?” inquired Terence, craning his neck. “That’s great—uncle O’Brannigan. He used to keep a rathskeller on the Bowery.”

“I asked you to sit down, Terence. If you are not going to amuse, or obey, me, I shall report in the morning that I saw a ghost wearing an apron and carrying schooners of beer. Now, that is better. To be shy, at your age, Terence, is a thing that you should blush to acknowledge.”

At breakfast on the last morning of her visit, Mrs. Bellmore startled and entranced every one present by announcing positively that she had seen the ghost.

“Did it have a-a-a-?” Mrs. Kinsolving, in her suspense and agitation, could not bring out the word.

“No, indeed—far from it.”

There was a chorus of questions from others at the table. “Weren’t you frightened?” “What did it do?” “How did it look?” “How was it dressed?” “Did it say anything?” “Didn’t you scream?”

“I’ll try to answer everything at once,” said Mrs. Bellmore, heroically, “although I’m frightfully hungry. Something awakened me—I’m not sure whether it was a noise or a touch—and there stood the phantom. I never burn a light at night, so the room was quite dark, but I saw it plainly. I wasn’t dreaming. It was a tall man, all misty white from head to foot. It wore the full dress of the old Colonial days—powdered hair, baggy coat skirts, lace ruffles, and a sword. It looked intangible and luminous in the dark, and moved without a sound. Yes, I was a little frightened at first—or startled, I should say. It was the first ghost I had ever seen. No, it didn’t say anything. I didn’t scream. I raised up on my elbow, and then it glided silently away, and disappeared when it reached the door.”

Mrs. Kinsolving was in the seventh heaven. “The description is that of Captain Kinsolving, of General Greene’s army, one of our ancestors,” she said, in a voice that trembled with pride and relief. “I really think I must apologize for our ghostly relative, Mrs. Bellmore. I am afraid he must have badly disturbed your rest.”

Terence sent a smile of pleased congratulation toward his mother. Attainment was Mrs. Kinsolving’s, at last, and he loved to see her happy.

“I suppose I ought to be ashamed to confess,” said Mrs. Bellmore, who was now enjoying her breakfast, “that I wasn’t very much disturbed. I presume it would have been the customary thing to scream and faint, and have all of you running about in picturesque costumes. But, after the first alarm was over, I really couldn’t work myself up to a panic. The ghost retired from the stage quietly and peacefully, after doing its little turn, and I went to sleep again.”

Nearly all listened, politely accepted Mrs. Bellmore s story as a made-up affair, charitably offered as an offset to the unkind vision seen by Mrs. Fischer-Suympkins. But one or two present perceived that her assertions bore the genuine stamp of her own convictions. Truth and candour seemed to attend upon every word. Even a scoffer at ghosts—if he were very observant—would have been forced to admit that she had, at least in a very vivid dream, been honestly aware of the weird visitor.’

Soon Mrs. Bellmore’s maid was packing. In two hours the auto would come to convey her to the station. As Terence was strolling upon the east piazza, Mrs. Bellmore came up to him, with a confidential sparkle in her eye.

“I didn’t wish to tell the others all of it,” she said, “but I will tell you. In a way, I think you should be held responsible. Can you guess in what manner that ghost awakened me last night?”

“Rattled chains,” suggested Terence, after some thought, “or groaned? They usually do one or the other.”

“Do you happen to know,” continued Mrs. Bellmore, with sudden irrelevancy, “if I resemble any one of the female relatives of your restless ancestor, Captain Kinsolving?”

“Don’t think so,” said Terence, with an extremely puzzled air. “Never heard of any of them being noted beauties.”

“Then, why,” said Mrs. Bellmore, looking the young man gravely in the eye, “should that ghost have kissed me, as I’m sure it did?”

“Heavens!” exclaimed Terence, in wide-eyed amazement; “you don’t mean that, Mrs. Bellmore! Did he actually kiss you?”

“I said *it* ,” corrected Mrs. Bellmore. “I hope the impersonal pronoun is correctly used.”

“But why did you say I was responsible?”

“Because you are the only living male relative of the ghost.”

“I see. ‘Unto the third and fourth generation.’ But, seriously, did he—did it—how do you—?”

“Know? How does any one know? I was asleep, and that is what awakened me, I’m almost certain.”

“Almost?”

“Well, I awoke just as—oh, can’t you understand what I mean? When anything arouses you suddenly, you are not positive whether you dreamed, or—and yet you know that—Dear me, Terence, must I dissect the most elementary sensations in order to accommodate your extremely practical intelligence?”

“But, about kissing ghosts, you know,” said Terence, humbly, “I require the most primary instruction. I never kissed a ghost. Is it—is it—?”

“The sensation,” said Mrs. Bellmore, with deliberate, but slightly smiling, emphasis, “since you are seeking instruction, is a mingling of the material and the spiritual.”

“Of course,” said Terence, suddenly growing serious, “it was a dream or some kind of an hallucination. Nobody believes in spirits, these days. If you told the tale out of kindness of heart, Mrs. Bellmore, I can’t express how grateful I am to you. It has made my mother supremely happy. That Revolutionary ancestor was a stunning idea.”

Mrs. Bellmore sighed. “The usual fate of ghost-seers is mine,” she said, resignedly. “My privileged encounter with a spirit is attributed to lobster salad or mendacity. Well, I have, at least, one memory left from the wreck—a kiss from the unseen world. Was Captain Kinsolving a very brave man, do you know, Terence?”

“He was licked at Yorktown, I believe,” said Terence, reflecting. “They say he skedaddled with his company, after the first battle there.”

“I thought he must have been timid,” said Mrs. Bellmore, absently. “He might have had another.”

“Another battle?” asked Terence, dully.

“What else could I mean? I must go and get ready now; the auto will be here in an hour. I’ve enjoyed Clifftop immensely. Such a lovely morning, isn’t it, Terence?”

On her way to the station, Mrs. Bellmore took from her bag a silk handkerchief, and looked at it with a little peculiar smile. Then she tied it in several very hard knots, and threw it, at a convenient moment, over the edge of the cliff along which the road ran.

In his room, Terence was giving some directions to his man, Brooks. “Have this stuff done up in a parcel,” he said, “and ship it to the address on that card.”

The card was that of a New York costumer. The “stuff” was a gentleman’s costume of the days of ‘76, made of white satin, with silver buckles, white silk stockings, and white kid shoes. A powdered wig and a sword completed the dress.

“And look about, Brooks,” added Terence, a little anxiously, “for a silk handkerchief with my initials in one corner. I must have dropped it somewhere.”

It was a month later when Mrs. Bellmore and one or two others of the smart crowd were making up a list of names for a coaching trip through the Catskills. Mrs. Bellmore looked over the list for a final censoring. The name of Terence Kinsolving was there. Mrs. Bellmore ran her prohibitive pencil lightly through the name.

“Too shy!” she murmured, sweetly, in explanation.