A Ghost Story

By Mark Twain

I took a large room, far up Broadway, in a huge old building whose upper stories had been

wholly unoccupied for years; until I came. The place had long been given up to dust and

cobwebs, to solitude and Silence. I seemed groping among the tombs and invading the privacy of

the dead, that first night I climbed up to my quarters. For the first time in my life a superstitious

dread came over me; and as I turned a dark angle of the stairway and an invisible cobweb swung

its lazy woof in my face and clung there, I shuddered as one who had encountered a phantom.

I was glad enough when I reached my room and locked out the mould and darkness. A cheery

fire was burning in the grate, and I sat down before it with a comforting sense of relief. For two

hours I sat there, thinking of bygone times; recalling old scenes, and summoning half-forgotten

faces out of the mists of the past; listening, in fancy, to voices that long ago grew silent for all

time, and to once familiar songs that nobody sings now. And as my reverie softened down to a

sadder and sadder pathos, the shrieking of the winds outside softened to a wail, the angry beating

of the rain against the panes diminished to a tranquil patter, and one by one the noises in the

street subsided, until the hurrying footsteps of the last belated straggler died away in the distance

and left no sound behind.

The fire had burned low. A sense of loneliness crept over me. I arose and undressed, moving

on tiptoe about the room, doing stealthily what I had to do, as if I were environed by sleeping

enemies whose slumbers it would be fatal to break. I covered up in bed, and lay listening to the

rain and wind and the faint creaking of distant shutters, till they lulled me to sleep.

I slept profoundly, but how long I do not know. All at once I found myself awake, and filled

with a shuddering expectancy. All was still. All but my own heart — I could hear it beat.

Presently the bedclothes began to slip away slowly toward the foot of the bed, as if some one

were pulling them! I could not stir; I could not speak. Still the blankets slipped deliberately

away, till my breast was uncovered. Then with a great effort I seized them and drew them over

my head. I waited, listened, waited. Once more that steady pull began, and once more I lay torpid

a century of dragging seconds till my breast was naked again. At last I roused my energies and

snatched the covers back to their place and held them with a strong grip. I waited. By and by I

felt a faint tug, and took a fresh grip. The rug strengthened to a steady strain — it grew stronger

and stronger. My hold parted, and for the third time the blankets slid away. I groaned. An

answering groan came from the foot of the bed! Beaded drops of sweat stood upon my forehead.

I was more dead than alive. Presently I heard a heavy footstep in my room — the step of an

elephant it seemed to me — it was not like anything human. But it was moving from me — there

was relief in that. I heard it approach the door — pass out without moving bolt or lock — and

wander away among the dismal corridors, straining the floors and joists till they creaked again as

it passed — and then silence reigned once more.

When my excitement had calmed, I said to myself, "This is a dream — simply a hideous

dream." And so I lay thinking it over until I convinced myself that it was a dream, and then a

comforting laugh relaxed my lips and I was happy again. I got up and struck a light; and when I

found the locks and bolts were just as I had left them, another soothing laugh welled in my heart

and rippled from my lips. I took my pipe and lit it, and was just sitting down before the fire,

when — down went the pipe out of my nerveless fingers, the blood forsook my cheeks, and my

placid breathing was cut short with a gasp ! In the ashes on the hearth, side by side with my own

bare footprint, was another, so vast that in comparison, mine was but an infant's! Then I had had

a visitor, and the elephant tread was explained.

I put out the light and returned to bed, palsied with fear. I lay a long time, peering into the

darkness, and listening. Then I heard a grating noise overhead, like the dragging of a heavy body

across the floor; then the throwing down of the body, and the shaking of my windows in

response to the concussion. In distant parts of the building I heard the muffled slamming of

doors. I heard, at intervals, stealthy footsteps creeping in and out among the corridors, and up

and down the stairs. Sometimes these noises approached my door, hesitated, and went away

again. I heard the clanking of chains faintly, in remote passages, and listened while the clanking

grew nearer — while it wearily climbed the stairways, marking each move by the loose surplus of

chain that fell with an accented rattle upon each succeeding step as the goblin that bore it

advanced. I heard muttered sentences, half-uttered screams that seemed smothered violently; and

the swish of invisible garments and the rush of invisible wings. Then I became conscious that my

chamber was invaded — that I was not alone. I heard sighs and breathings about my bed, and

mysterious whisperings. Three little spheres of phosphorescent light appeared on the ceiling

directly over my head, clung and glowed there a moment, and then dropped — two of them upon

my face and one upon the pillow. They spattered, liquidly, and felt warm. Intuition told me they

had turned to gouts of blood as they fell — I needed no light to satisfy myself of that. Then I saw

pallid faces, dimly luminous, and white uplifted hands, floating bodiless in the air — floating a

moment and then disappearing. The whispering ceased, and the voices and the sounds, and a

solemn stillness followed. I waited and listened. I felt that I must have light or die. I was weak

with fear. I slowly raised myself toward a sitting posture, and my face came in contact with a

clammy hand! All strength went from me apparently, and I fell back like a stricken invalid. Then

I heard the rustle of a garment — it seemed to pass to the door and go out.

When everything was still once more, I crept out of bed, sick and feeble, and lit the gas with a

hand that trembled as if it were aged with a hundred years. The light brought some little cheer to

my spirits. I sat down and fell into a dreamy contemplation of that great footprint in the ashes.

By and by its outlines began to waver and grow dim. I glanced up and the broad gas flame was

slowly wilting away. In the same moment I heard that elephantine tread again. I noted its

approach, nearer and nearer, along the musty halls, and dimmer and dimmer the light waned. The

tread reached my very door and paused — the light had dwindled to a sickly blue, and all things

about me were in a spectral twilight. The door did not open, and yet I felt a faint gust of air fan

my cheek, and presently was conscious of a huge, cloudy presence before me. I watched it with

fascinated eyes. A pale glow stole over the Thing; gradually its cloudy folds took shape — an arm

appeared, then legs, then a body, and last a great sad face looked out of the vapour. Stripped of

its filmy housings, naked, muscular and comely, the majestic Cardiff Giant loomed above me!

All my misery vanished — for a child might know that no harm could come with that benignant

countenance. My cheerful spirits returned at once, and in sympathy with them the gas turned up

brightly again. Never a lone outcast was so glad to welcome company as I was to greet the

friendly giant. I said:

"Why, is it nobody but you? Do you know, I have been scared to death for the last two or three

hours? I am most honestly glad to see you. I wish I had a chair — Here, here, don't try to sit down

in that thing!"

But it was too late. He was in before I could stop him, and down he went — I never saw a chair

shivered so in my life.

"Stop, stop, you'll ruin ev — "

Too late again. There was another crash, and another chair was resolved into its original

elements.

"Confound it, haven't you got any judgment at all? Do you want to ruin all the furniture on the

place? Here, here, you petrified fool — "

But it was no use. Before I could arrest him he had sat down on the bed, and it was a

melancholy ruin.

"Now what sort of a way is that to do? First you come lumbering about the place bringing a

legion of vagabond goblins along with you to worry me to death, and then, when I overlook an

indelicacy of costume which would not be tolerated anywhere by cultivated people except in a

respectable theater, and not even there if the nudity were of your sex, you repay me by wrecking

all the furniture you can find to sit down on. And why will you? You damage yourself as much

as you do me. You have broken off the end of your spinal column, and littered up the floor with

chips of your hands till the place looks like a marble yard. You ought to be ashamed of

yourself — you are big enough to know better."

"Well, I will not break any more furniture. But what am I to do? I have not had a chance to sit

down for a century." And the tears came into his eyes.

"Poor devil," I said, "I should not have been so harsh with you. And you are an orphan, too, no

doubt. But sit down on the floor here — nothing else can stand your weight — and, besides, we

cannot be sociable with you away up there above me; I want you down where I can perch on this

high counting-house stool and gossip with you face to face."

So he sat down on the floor, and lit a pipe which I gave him, threw one of my red blankets over

his shoulders, inverted my sitz-bath on his head, helmet fashion, and made himself picturesque

and comfortable. Then he crossed his ankles, while I renewed the fire, and exposed the flat,

honey-combed bottoms of his prodigious feet to the grateful warmth.

"What is the matter with the bottom of your feet and the back of your legs, that they are

gouged up so?"

"Infernal chilblains — I caught them clear up to the back of my head, roosting out there under

Newell' s farm. But I love the place; I love it as one loves his old home. There is no peace for me

like the peace I feel when I am there."

We talked along for half an hour, and then I noticed that he looked tired, and I spoke of it.

"Tired?" he said. "Well, I should think so. And now I will tell you all about it, since you have

treated me so well. I am the spirit of the Petrified Man that lies across the street there in the

museum. I am the ghost of the Cardiff Giant. I can have no rest, no peace, till they have given

that poor body burial again. Now what was the most natural thing for me to do, to make men

satisfy this wish? Terrify them into it! — haunt the place where the body lay! So I haunted the

museum night after night. I got the other spirits to help me. But it did no good, for nobody ever

came to the museum at midnight. Then it occurred to me to come over the way and haunt this

place a little. I felt that if I ever got a hearing I must succeed, for I had the most efficient

company that tradition could furnish. Night after night we have shivered around through these

mildewed halls, dragging chains, groaning, whispering, tramping up and down stairs, till, to tell

you the truth, I am almost worn out. But when I saw a light in your room to-night, I roused my

energies again and went at it with a deal of the old freshness. But I am tired out — entirely fagged

out. Give me, I beseech you, give me some hope!"

I lit off my perch in a burst of excitement, and exclaimed:

"This transcends everything! Everything that ever did occur — why, you poor blundering old

fossil, you have had all your trouble for nothing — you have been haunting a plaster cast of

yourself — the real Cardiff Giant is in Albany !

"Confound it, don't you know your own remains?"

I never saw such an eloquent look of shame, of pitiable humiliation, overspread a countenance

before.

The Petrified Man rose slowly to his feet, and said:

"Honestly, is that true?"

"As true as I am sitting here."

He took the pipe from his mouth and laid it on the mantle, then stood irresolute a moment

(unconsciously, from old habit, thrusting his hands where his pantaloon pockets should have

been, and meditatively dropping his chin on his breast), and finally said:

"Well — I never felt so absurd before. The Petrified Man has sold everything else and now the

mean fraud has ended by selling his own ghost! My son, if there is any charity left in your heart

for a poor friendless phantom like me, don't let this get out. Think how you would feel if you had

made such an ass of yourself."

I heard his stately tramp die away, step by step down the stairs and out into the deserted street,

and felt sorry that he had gone, poor fellow — and sorrier still that he had carried off my red

blanket and my bathtub.