WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

Best Ghost Stories

CHARLES DICKENS

SELECTED STORIES

BEST GHOST STORIES

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INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens always loved a good ghost story. A fascination with the eerie and macabre pervades his work, and his preoccupation with mesmerism, clairvoyance, second sight, spiritualism and all things supernatural is much documented. He writes about his childhood nurse, Mary Weller, who imbued him with a taste for the ghoulish by telling him horror stories. This taste was fed by his teenage passion for 'penny dreadfuls', the illustrated horror magazines of the day, whose influence can be traced in the most sensational aspects of his work. A morbid preoccupation with death never left him, and it is hardly surprising that this should entail a curiosity about ghosts. When, during his later life, interest in all forms of psychic phenomena reached unprecedented heights in England, Dickens, whose attitude combined open-mindedness with scepticism on certain issues, was at the forefront of public debate, writing numerous topical articles as well as stories.

The twelve ghost stories presented in this volume come from a variety of sources. Some were written specifically as pieces for publication in their own right and others have been extracted from the main narratives of Dickens's early novels where incidental characters often appear simply to tell a tale. Opinions as to why Dickens should so frequently have introduced independent short stories into his larger works veer from the view that he kept a store of them ready-written in case he needed to pad out an episode or meet a deadline, to the notion that he simply used such tales as a form of entertainment when he thought his readers might welcome a diversion. Whatever his reasons, these stories enrich the texts and often concern ghosts.

There are no less than five ghost stories in *The Pickwick Papers*, four of which are included here. 'The Queer Chair' is told by a one-

eyed bagman, a jolly customer at the Peacock Inn and seasoned raconteur, who crops up twice by chance during the course of the book. As with many of Dickens's apparitions, the ghost in the bagman's story is benevolent, even bringing about a total change in the material circumstances of Tom Smart, the bagman to whom he appears. In grim contrast, 'A Madman's Manuscript' is a much darker account. This document, given to Mr Pickwick by a clergyman, shows Dickens probing the mind of a homicidal lunatic with chilling psychological conviction. Dickens visited both prisons and mental asylums, and was haunted by what he saw there. The ghost here may well be a figment of demented or guilty imagination, but the reader is left to judge for himself, and the effect is harrowing.

The next story in the collection, also from *The Pickwick Papers*, is in lighter vein and particularly fine. Told by Mr Pickwick's friend, Mr Wardle of Dingley Dell, 'The Goblins who Stole a Sexton' appeared in the Christmas instalment of *Pickwick* in 1836. Thus Dickens instigated his tradition of producing a ghost story at Christmas. This was to reach its high point with the first of the Christmas books, Dickens's most successful publication ever, and possibly the best known ghost story in the world, *A Christmas Carol*. Indeed, though the earlier story is far shorter and more lighthearted, there are many parallels between these two tales, not only in the personalities of the central characters, and the Christmas Eve timing of the action, but in the educative purpose of the spirits involved.

Dickens delighted himself with *A Christmas Carol*, writing to his publisher of 'this ghostly little tale' with great excitement. Here all his talents are concentrated to create a remarkable atmosphere for the appearance of Marley's ghost and the three celebrated Christmas ghosts in a dream sequence that derives from a rich diversity of myths. He draws on the memories and fears of childhood, and he incorporates his social preoccupations with traditional spirit-lore to blend fantasy with a strong moral message. The virtues of generosity and goodwill to all mankind which are traditionally associated with Christmas are presented as an antidote to the harsh puritan attitude that prevailed in the world of Victorian trade.

Dickens seemed fully prepared to accept the existence of ghosts, declaring 'my own mind is perfectly unprejudiced and impressible on the subject of ghosts. I do not in the least pretend that such things cannot be . . . ', yet it is notable that most of his ghost stories suggest dream-visions as an alternative explanation for supernatural experience. Ghosts invariably appear at night, and the sighting of

them is often preceded by drinking alcohol, as in 'The Goblins who Stole a Sexton', 'The Ghosts of the Mail', 'The Baron of Grogzwig' and others. In 'The Baron of Grogzwig', a comic parable about moral courage from *Nicholas Nickleby*, alcohol is an especially strong factor. The protagonists' names are puns on their excessive drinking habits, and the spirit appears just as the hero is 'in the process of draining his glass to the bottom'. Yet this in no way diminishes the importance of the apparition or undermines the reality of its purpose, for Dickens was an ardent believer in the power and prophetic nature of dreams.

Following the huge success of *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens decided to produce a Christmas book each year, and with the exception of 1847, he did so until 1848. The idea was perpetuated in *Household Words*, the twopenny weekly that he launched in 1856, which always carried a short story in the Christmas issue, several of which were ghostly. 'The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain' (Dickens' final Christmas book) involves a rather more menacing spectre than usual. The tale is another moral one, but here human goodness transcends supernatural force to teach the hero the value of suffering and grief. Dickens draws on personal experience in much of his work, and this story has strong biographical echoes concerning the death of Dickens's own sister, Fanny, in 1848.

Dickens was profoundly superstitious, fascinated by dreams and nightmares, with a morbid imagination and an obsession with death. In 1852 he was asked to contribute to *The Keepsake*, a fashionable annual. For this he wrote, 'To be Read at Dusk', a pair of anecdotes related by two couriers at the Great St Bernard Hospice in the Swiss Alps, in which these fixations are manifested. Both tales are about dreams that entail precognition, and the first is said to have been inspired by the condition of a Mme de la Rue, a woman whose dreams were haunted by demons, and on whom Dickens had practised mesmerism in Genoa in 1845. These unnerving stories leave a powerful and convincing impression of supernatural intervention.

In 1857, Dickens took a rambling holiday in the Midlands with his friend Wilkie Collins, the writer. Jointly they wrote a thinly disguised account of their travels which was published in five parts in *Household Words* in October of that year. The two literary 'apprentices' took their names from Hogarth's series of engravings, *Industry and Idleness*, of 1747. Collins called himself 'Thomas Idle' and Dickens was 'Francis Goodchild', author of the one ghost story that emerged from their experiences and is reprinted in this

anthology. 'The Ghost of the Bride's Chamber', though framed in a comical way, harks back to the horror stories told to Dickens by his nurse, and has the disturbing effect of the most gruesome fairy tales.

It is well recorded that Dickens investigated spiritualism by attending seances and experimenting with table-turning. His scepticism and his condemnation of the popular practices of spiritualism furnished many articles in *Household Words* and then in *All the Year Round* (successor to the first magazine). Yet his attitude to this sort of contact with the dead was strangely contradictory for a man who was fully prepared to accept the existence of ghosts, and in whose fiction a theme of the dead returning and signalling their presence recurs. The Christmas 1859 number of *All the Year Round*, called *The Haunted House*, was intended to deflate contemporary credulity and denigrate the prevailing hysteria about all supernatural phenomena. The issue contained chapters contributed by various other authors, and included here are two items by Dickens – his introduction, 'The Mortals in the House', and his story 'The Ghost in Master B's Bedroom'. The first sets the scene as the narrator and his friends spend several nights in an allegedly haunted house; ultimately, common-sense is shown to triumph over fancy. The second illustrates the strange tricks of memory.

The last two tales in this volume are possibly the best of Dickens's shorter ghost stories. Both were written as Christmas stories for *All the Year Round*. In 1865, the Christmas number was entitled *Dr Marigold's Prescriptions*, and included 'The Trial for Murder', a ghost story purportedly told to the hawker, Dr Marigold, by one met on his travels. It is an account of the narrator's experience as jury foreman at a murder trial where the victim returns to seek justice. Brilliantly told, and despite the ambivalence implicit in its subtitle, 'To be Taken with a Grain of Salt', this story too carries a disconcerting ring of conviction. The 1866 Christmas issue was called *Mugby Junction*, and the first four of the eight items it comprised were by Dickens. 'The Signalman' is a beautifully constructed tale related with consummate mastery. A signalman, isolated in his box, tells the narrator of the apparition he has experienced three times near the mouth of a tunnel. His state of apprehension is acutely conveyed and the ghastly final twist provides a stunning climax that reflects many of Dickens's personal obsessions.

The quality of these twelve stories is inevitably uneven, for they span virtually the whole of Dickens's creative lifetime, cover a variety of supernatural elements, and were written with varying

intentions. Yet Dickens's natural inclinations towards drama, the macabre and the lurid made him a superlative teller of ghost tales, and in this volume, which includes some of his most acclaimed work, the full range of his gothic talents can be seen. Chilling as some of these stories are, others are happy. Dickens makes them peculiarly humorous for the genre, injecting characteristically grotesque comedy, and populating them with most memorable figures, both human and ghostly!

CHRISTINE BAKER

Charles Dickens was born at Landport (Portsea), near Portsmouth, Hampshire, on 7 February 1812. He was the second of eight children. His father, John, was a clerk in the Naval Pay Office at Portsmouth. The Dickens family, although not poor by the standards of the time, lived through a series of financial crises and the accompanying social insecurity. Dickens's childhood was spent in Portsmouth, London and Chatham in Kent, where there was a large naval dockyard. In 1822, facing financial ruin, the family moved to London and, on 5 February 1824, Charles began work in a blacking warehouse at Hungerford Stairs where he was employed to label bottles for six shillings a week. A short time previously Charles's father had been arrested for debt and the family, except for Charles, had joined their father in Marshalsea Debtors' Prison. The combination of this family trauma and his own menial job profoundly affected Charles's life and view of the world and was to haunt him for the rest of his days. John Dickens was released after three months in prison by having himself declared an Insolvent Debtor. Charles was sent to school at the age of twelve, where he did well, and at the age of fifteen he began work in the office of a legal firm in Gray's Inn. Here he taught himself shorthand, and eighteen months later started as a freelance reporter in the court of Doctors' Commons. In 1829 Dickens fell deeply in love with Maria Beadnell and the affair dragged on inconclusively until the summer of 1833. Meanwhile, Dickens's career was prospering, with his rapid and accurate reporting of debates in the House of Commons for the *Morning Chronicle*, and good reviews for his literary work, which led to his being commissioned by the publishers, Chapman & Hall, to provide text in monthly instalments to accompany sporting plates by the artist Seymour. It was in this way that the hugely successful *Pickwick Papers* was published in 1836/7. In 1858 Dickens separated from his wife, by whom he had had ten children, and developed his

friendship with a young actress called Ellen Ternan. Dickens's health, adversely affected by the strain of his very popular readings, which he instituted in 1858, and a demanding tour of America in 1867/8, began to fail in the late 1860s. He suffered a stroke at his home at Gad's Hill, near Rochester, Kent, on 8 June 1870, and died the next day.

FURTHER READING

Works of Charles Dickens published individually by Wordsworth Editions

Charles Dickens, *My Early Times*, ed. Peter Rowland, London 1988

Christopher Hibbert, *The Making of Charles Dickens*, London 1967

Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens*, London 1970

Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, London 1990

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The Queer Chair

THE BAGMAN'S STORY

ONE WINTER'S EVENING, about five o'clock, just as it began to grow dusk, a man in a gig might have been seen urging his tired horse along the road which leads across Marlborough Downs, in the direction of Bristol. I say he might have been seen, and I have no doubt he would have been, if anybody but a blind man had happened to pass that way; but the weather was so bad, and the night so cold and wet, that nothing was out but the water, and so the traveller jogged along in the middle of the road, lonesome and dreary enough. If any bagman of that day could have caught sight of the little neck-or-nothing sort of gig, with a clay-coloured body and red wheels, and the vixenish ill-tempered fast-going bay mare that looked like a cross between a butcher's horse and a twopenny post-office pony, he would have known at once that this traveller could have been no other than Tom Smart, of the great house of Bilson and Slum, Cateaton Street, City. However, as there was no bagman to look on, nobody knew anything at all about the matter; and so Tom Smart and his clay-coloured gig with the red wheels, and the vixenish mare with the fast pace, went on together keeping the secret among them: and nobody was a bit the wiser.

There are many pleasanter places even in this dreary world than Marlborough Downs when it blows hard; and if you throw in beside, a gloomy winter's evening, a miry and sloppy road, and a pelting fall of heavy rain, and try the effect, by way of experiment, in your own proper person, you will experience the full force of this observation.

The wind blew – not up the road or down it, though that's bad enough, but sheer across it, sending the rain slanting down like the lines they used to rule in the copy-books at school, to make the boys slope well. For a moment it would die away, and the traveller would begin to delude himself into the belief that, exhausted with its previous fury, it had quietly lain itself down to rest, when, whoo! he would hear it growling and whistling in the distance, and on it would come rushing over the hilltops, and sweeping along the plain, gathering sound and strength as it drew nearer, until it dashed with

a heavy gust against horse and man, driving the sharp rain into their ears and its cold damp breath into their very bones; and past them it would scour, far, far away, with a stunning roar, as if in ridicule of their weakness and triumphant in the consciousness of its own strength and power.

The bay mare splashed away, through the mud and water, with drooping ears; now and then tossing her head as if to express her disgust at this very ungentlemanly behaviour of the elements, but keeping a good pace notwithstanding, until a gust of wind, more furious than any that had yet assailed them, caused her to stop suddenly and plant her four feet firmly against the ground, to prevent her being blown over. It's a special mercy that she did this, for if she had been blown over, the vixenish mare was so light, and the gig was so light, and Tom Smart such a light weight into the bargain, that they must infallibly have all gone rolling over and over together, until they reached the confines of earth, or until the wind fell; and in either case the probability is that neither the vixenish mare, nor the clay-coloured gig with the red wheels, nor Tom Smart, would ever have been fit for service again.

'Well, damn my straps and whiskers,' says Tom Smart (Tom sometimes had an unpleasant knack of swearing), 'Damn my straps and whiskers,' says Tom, 'if this ain't pleasant, blow me!'

You'll very likely ask me why, as Tom Smart had been pretty well blown already, he expressed this wish to be submitted to the same process again. I can't say – all I know is that Tom Smart said so – or at least he always told my uncle he said so, and it's just the same thing.

'Blow me,' says Tom Smart; and the mare neighed as if she were precisely of the same opinion.

'Cheer up, old girl,' said Tom, patting the bay mare on the neck with the end of his whip. 'It won't do pushing on, such a night as this; the first house we come to we'll put up at, so the faster you go the sooner it's over. Soho, old girl – gently – gently.'

Whether the vixenish mare was sufficiently well acquainted with the tones of Tom's voice to comprehend his meaning, or whether she found it colder standing still than moving on, of course I can't say. But I can say that Tom had no sooner finished speaking, than she pricked up her ears, and started forward at a speed which made the clay-coloured gig rattle till you would have supposed every one of the red spokes were going to fly out on the turf of Marlborough Downs; and even Tom, whip as he was, couldn't stop or check her pace, until she drew up, of her own accord, before a roadside inn on

the right-hand side of the way, about half a quarter of a mile from the end of the Downs.

Tom cast a hasty glance at the upper part of the house as he threw the reins to the hostler, and stuck the whip in the box. It was a strange old place, built of a kind of shingle, inlaid, as it were, with crossbeams, with gabled-topped windows projecting completely over the pathway and a low door with a dark porch, and a couple of steep steps leading down into the house, instead of the modern fashion of half a dozen shallow ones leading up to it. It was a comfortable-looking place though, for there was a strong cheerful light in the bar-window, which shed a bright ray across the road, and even lighted up the hedge on the other side; and there was a red flickering light in the opposite window, one moment but faintly discernible, and the next gleaming strongly through the drawn curtains, which intimated that a rousing fire was blazing within. Marking these little evidences with the eye of an experienced traveller, Tom dismounted with as much agility as his half-frozen limbs would permit, and entered the house.

In less than five minutes' time, Tom was ensconced in the room opposite the bar – the very room where he had imagined the fire blazing – before a substantial matter-of-fact roaring fire, composed of something short of a bushel of coals, and wood enough to make half a dozen decent gooseberry bushes, piled halfway up the chimney, and roaring and crackling with a sound that of itself would have warmed the heart of any reasonable man. This was comfortable, but this was not all, for a smartly-dressed girl, with a bright eye and a neat ankle, was laying a very clean white cloth on the table; and as Tom sat with his slippered feet on the fender, and his back to the open door, he saw a charming prospect of the bar reflected in the glass over the chimneypiece, with delightful rows of green bottles and gold labels, together with jars of pickles and preserves, and cheeses and boiled hams, and rounds of beef arranged on shelves in the most tempting and delicious array. Well, this was comfortable too; but even this was not all – for in the bar, seated at tea at the nicest possible little table, drawn close up before the brightest possible little fire, was a buxom widow of somewhere about eight-and-forty or thereabouts, with a face as comfortable as the bar, who was evidently the landlady of the house, and the supreme ruler over all these agreeable possessions. There was only one drawback to the beauty of the whole picture, and that was a tall man – a very tall man – in a brown coat and bright basket buttons, and black whiskers and wavy black hair, who was seated at tea with

the widow, and who it required no great penetration to discover was in a fair way of persuading her to be a widow no longer, but to confer upon him the privilege of sitting down in that bar for and during the whole remainder of the term of his natural life.

Tom Smart was by no means of an irritable or envious disposition but somehow or other the tall man with the brown coat and the bright basket buttons did rouse what little gall he had in his composition, and did make him feel extremely indignant: the more especially as he could now and then observe, from his seat before the glass, certain little affectionate familiarities passing between the tall man and the widow, which sufficiently denoted that the tall man was as high in favour as he was in size. Tom was fond of hot punch – I may venture to say he was *very* fond of hot punch – and after he had seen the vixenish mare well fed and well littered down, and had eaten every bit of the nice little hot dinner which the widow tossed up for him with her own hands, he just ordered a tumbler of it, by way of experiment. Now, if there was one thing in the whole range of domestic art which the widow could manufacture better than another, it was this identical article; and the first tumbler was adapted to Tom Smart's taste with such peculiar nicety that he ordered a second with the least possible delay. Hot punch is a pleasant thing, gentlemen – an extremely pleasant thing under any circumstances – but in that snug old parlour, before the roaring fire, with the wind blowing outside till every timber in the old house creaked again, Tom Smart found it perfectly delightful. He ordered another tumbler, and then another – I am not quite certain whether he didn't order another after that – but the more he drank of the hot punch, the more he thought of the tall man.

'Confound his impudence!' said Tom to himself, 'what business has he in that snug bar? Such an ugly villain too!' said Tom. 'If the widow had any taste, she might surely pick up some better fellow than that.' Here Tom's eye wandered from the glass on the chimneypiece, to the glass on the table; and as he felt himself become gradually sentimental, he emptied the fourth tumbler of punch and ordered a fifth.

Tom Smart, gentlemen, had always been very much attached to the public line. It had long been his ambition to stand in a bar of his own, in a green coat, knee-cords, and tops. He had a great notion of taking the chair at convivial dinners, and he had often thought how well he could preside in a room of his own in the talking way, and what a capital example he could set to his customers in the drinking compartment. All these things passed rapidly through Tom's mind