

The Ghost in the Red Shirt

by B. M. Bower

The proper way to begin this story would be to assure the reader, first of all, that I have never believed in ghosts; that is the way ghost-stories usually begin, I think. Also, I should say that what I am about to relate is perfectly true—but I won't begin it like that. As a matter of fact, I don't care much whether you believe me or not, and I always did believe in ghosts—at least, I always hoped they were truer than Santa Claus, and that some day I should see one.

Aunt Jane—but I don't want to begin with Aunt Jane either: she always did begin everything in my life, ever since I can remember, and she sha'n't begin this story. I don't mean her even to know I wrote it—she'd only say I'm crazy, and I'm not.

This is the way it all happened, and, mind, I don't care whether you believe it or not. It *happened*, and your belief or disbelief won't alter that one important fact. And he was the dearest old ghost—but wait till I start at the beginning, as I should have done before.

We had gone across the lake that evening in the little sail-boat, the New Woman. Jack named it, you might know; he said she was full of whims and it took a man to hold her nose in the wind—Jack’s awfully sarcastic.

There were just six of us—Aunt Jane and Mabel, Cousin Jack, Professor Goldburn, and Clifford Wilton. Clifford and I weren’t on very friendly terms. We had been engaged, though Aunt Jane didn’t suspect it. But it was all over, and my sweet little ruby ring was lying somewhere off Weir Point, where Clifford threw it one day—but this is a ghost-story.

Nothing happened during the sail except that my hat blew away and Mabel hinted that it wasn’t an accident—that I liked to show off my hair. I said I didn’t show off any hair but what I might justly call my own, and, of course, that made Mabel mad—angry, I mean. Aunt Jane scolded me, as usual: it’s easy to tell which niece has the money.

We landed to visit a cave in the cliff, and Mabel and Clifford flirted outrageously. It wasn’t a bit interesting—I mean the cave. The flirting didn’t worry me: I was particularly nice to Professor Goldburn—so nice that Aunt Jane called me her dear child twice, and the Professor came near offering me his heart and hand. Jack saved me: he called us all to the boat just as the Professor got fairly warmed to his subject. Of course, I ran as

soon as Jack called, leaving the Professor to come nipping along behind—I hate fat men, anyway.

A storm was muttering up from the horizon, and the oily, ugly clouds were almost over our heads before we pushed off, on account of Mabel and Clifford loitering along the cliff path and acting that silly!

The lake was smooth as glass and ink black, and the look of it made me shiver, with four miles of it between us and home.

Jack raised the sail, but it hung limp, so there was nothing for it but to row. Jack and Clifford went to work, while I steered the boat. Clifford spoke once to me: we ignored each other, as a rule.

“Better keep her close in. We’ll try to round this point and run into the cove before she strikes.”

“If we don’t,” remarked Jack cheerfully, “she’ll flop us; and, oh mister, she won’t do a thing to us!”

I rather thought “she” would do several things to us, but I didn’t stop to argue the point—there wasn’t time. I don’t know just how it came about, but Jack was right—she “flopped” us.

We weren’t far from shore, so the upset wasn’t very serious. The water was so shallow we could easily wade ashore, though

Mabel called for help, and, of course, it was Clifford who rescued her—from water no deeper than our bathtub! It is incredible, the foolishness of that girl!

I was first to climb the bank, and when I had watched the others land I just sat down in the wind and the rain and laughed. (Mabel says I will probably laugh at my own funeral; I'm positive I could have laughed at hers just then.) The idea of a great, overgrown girl like her (she weighs a hundred and fifty pounds if she weighs an ounce) sobbing on a young man's shoulder! and the curl all out of her hair, and the complexion washed off her face in streaks. It's a wonder she didn't turn Clifford sick; but, then, men show dreadfully poor taste at times. I don't suppose I was very entrancing myself just then, but, thank goodness, my complexion will bear washing!

The New Woman reached the shore, upside down, almost as soon as we did, and my old golf-cape, that Aunt Jane insists I shall carry with me always in the boat, dangled on a wave-washed willow. Jack waded in and rescued it and Aunt Jane's little gray shawl (her green umbrella's gone forever, for which I am very thankful). Mabel's sailor-hat washed ashore while we stood there, and Clifford got that.

Then Jack remembered that there was an old cabin near there, and we found what had once been a well-trodden path leading

back from the shore into the woods. We followed it dismally, with the lightning to guide us.

Jack led the way, reciting: “It was night! The vivid lightnings flashed athwart the vaulted sky and shook their fiery darts upon the shuddering earth. The elements were in wild commotion!”—or something like that. I think he got it out of a “Penny Dreadful.”

Just as Jack said “commotion,” with a fine roll upon the word, the Professor caught his toe upon a root, and down he went—and I laughed. Aunt Jane didn’t call me her dear child that time; she said, “Zel-l-l-ah!” But I don’t care. Jack laughed too, though he did pretend he was just coughing.

We found the cabin, half hidden by the tall burdocks and wild rosebushes. The door-step was sunken and covered deep with the leaves of many summers.

Jack threw open the door and cried “Spooks!” in a sepulchral tone which gave me a chill, but when Mabel gave a squawk and caught Clifford’s arm I just pushed Mr. Jack headlong over the threshold and went on in.

The lightning glared in at the open door and showed us a great, old fireplace, with a huge pile of dry wood stacked in one

corner, and there were some chairs and a table, and that was all.

Jack swooped down upon the fireplace with a shout, and we had a roaring fire in no time, for Jack's matches were dry, for a wonder. Goodness knows he paid enough for his matchbox; Aunt Jane said it was a scandalous price, but it was worth every cent of it to have dry matches that night. We huddled around the fire, half frozen from our ducking. I spread out my old golf-cape to dry, so that I might have some good of the old thing—I had lugged it around all summer and hadn't used it once. Aunt Jane and I took down our hair and wrung out the water. Mabel wouldn't; she said hers wasn't very wet—and that settled the switch question in my mind, and from the way Jack grinned I know what he thought about it—and Aunt Jane trying to make a match between those two!

Professor Goldburn backed up to the fire, rubbed his pudgy hands together behind him, and ogled till I felt downright sick, but I wouldn't show it. He had lost his eyeglass and the curl was out of his mustache and his collar all crumpled, and that oily smile didn't seem to match the rest of him a bit. I don't care if he is worth a million or more, I just think he's horrid! I smiled back at him just to see Clifford scowl. But Clifford wasn't looking my way. He was whispering something to Mabel and

had his back turned to me—both of which I consider rude in anybody, no matter who does it.

Then Jack got to wondering what was in the next room, for there appeared to be two, and he and I went to explore.

The room had been a bedroom, I think. It was bare of everything but dust and cobwebs, and was so small it didn't take us long—Jack only burned one match and two fingers.

After that we sat around the fire and listened to the storm, and tried to think we weren't famished, which was hard to do, seeing we had had nothing since luncheon.

Aunt Jane worried over Uncle John and how anxious he'd be, but I was rather glad for him. He'd lectured me awfully that morning because I wasn't nice and dignified, like Mabel. I hoped he'd remember it with remorse.

Jack sang coon-songs and even did a cake-walk. I got up and helped him in that, just to shock Mabel. She thinks cake-walking is very unladylike, and always looks scandalized when I begin anything of the kind.

Aunt Jane—to punish us, I think—started the Professor going on his pet microbes, and once he was started, no one else had any show whatever. He droned on about bacilli and other horrors, and gravely assured us that old cabin was

undoubtedly swarming with awful-sounding germs. Fancy being married to such a man—ugh!

Aunt Jane presently fell asleep, and as Clifford took to staring moodily into the fire and not seeming to remember anything but his thoughts, Mabel soon followed Aunt Jane's example. I was hungry and cross, and even the Professor couldn't talk me to sleep.

I wrapped my golf-cape around me and cuddled in an old armchair in front of the fireplace, with Jack and the Professor upon either side of me and Clifford on a little bench against the wall. Aunt Jane and Mabel were on the side opposite Clifford, though they, being asleep, do not count.

I was beginning to hold my eyes open with some effort, when something roused me, and I sat up straight and listened. The storm was still beating furiously against the cabin walls, but another sound was distinctly audible. There could be no mistake—someone was walking back and forth in the other room.

We looked at one another, and I admit a creepy feeling went up my spine just at first.

Clifford caught up a brand from the fire and started for the closed door, and we all followed him. When we crowded into

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