

GHOST

I SIR JAMES EDWARD WILLINGFORD

by

Geoffrey L O Davies

How he came to accept the challenge he didn't know. It wasn't easy trying to get to sleep on a thin blanket with a rucksack as a pillow. Fortunately, it was a mild night so he wasn't cold. The ruined castle was full of old passages, nooks and crannies so it hadn't been too difficult eluding the warden at closing time as he, or her, conducted the final check before locking up the site. Still, that was hours ago and he was tired. It wasn't like he'd expected. There were no sighing winds or hooting owls; just a still, warm night with the chirping sound of crickets and the buzzing of other nocturnal insects.

He had dozed on and off for what seemed hours when he suddenly had a strange feeling that something else was in the room with him. The room itself was three floors up one of the best preserved towers. Access to the levels above and below, which had all been fitted with new wooden floors, was via a spiral stone staircase. The room in which he was laying was, like the others, circular with a tall narrow window that included an inset seat. It also contained a fireplace that fed into a common chimney that serviced each floor and a doorway to access the staircase. Apart from that, this room was empty. Other rooms contained replica medieval furniture and board displays tracing the history of the castle.

He was laying on his back and, turning his head slightly, slowly opened his eyes, which were a little sore due to lack of sleep. Something small was resting just inside the room near the top of the staircase. When it realised he was looking at it, the thing started rolling towards him. His initial reaction was that it was some small animal; but animals didn't roll. He slowly lifted himself up on his elbows as the object came to rest about three feet away from him on his right in the light of the moon, which shone in through the gaping window. He gasped and shrank back. It was a head. When it made no further movement he slowly nodded his head in understanding. 'Trust them.' He thought. 'Trust them to try a prank like that in an attempt to scare him. He was about to call out but stopped himself. There were no muffled giggles and anyway they probably couldn't answer – most likely scarpered by now. He wondered how they had managed to get into the grounds.

He looked back at the head and moved closer, pulling out his flashlight. It certainly was a very good model, so lifelike it could have been real. It was a man's head with long straight black hair, a droopy moustache and goatee beard. It had an angular face with long black eyebrows that curled up at the ends. It had the likeness of a sixteenth or seventeenth century gentleman. The neck ended abruptly as though it had been cut off with a very sharp knife. Wondering how they had made it he moved round and lowered his head to look inside and leapt back again, his heart thumping. It looked so realistic. Actually too realistic, what with the spinal cord and ends of blood vessels visible. The head could now no longer contain itself as a grin spread across its face, the eyes opening slightly and the whole shaking as laughter burst from its lips, tears forming around the eyes.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha, thou should see thy face” the head said.

For some reason he didn’t feel any fear.

“Very funny. I suppose you enjoy scaring people to death” he replied.

“Scaring people to death?” the head repeated. “Ha, ‘tis a good joke. I shall have to relate that to my colleagues. They willst find it a good laugh.”

“Who are you and what are you, or what is your head, doing here? Trying to scare me no doubt. Who put you up to it?”

“Questions, questions, questions. I beg thee to slow down and let me have my say.” The head paused for a moment. “I am Sir James Edward Willingford” it continued. “A member of His Royal Highness King Charles’ travel entourage and I am here of my own free will and”

“King Charles’ entourage? What’s that? Some kind of travel bureau? Anyway, there’s only your head here; what happened to the rest of you? No, don’t tell me; chopped off by Oliver Cromwell I suppose.”

Sir James Edward Willingford looked hurt. “Actually, yes. Well, not by that rogue’s hand in person, I might add, but by one of his henchmen. In fact ... er ... that is why I am here in thy presence. By the way, what name art thou known by?”

“Bill.”

“Bill? ‘tis all? Just bill?”

“It’s enough” Bill confirmed.

The head continued. “I am here ... Bill ... to beg for thy help.”

It seemed to find difficulty in saying just ‘Bill’.

“How can I help a ... ghost? I ...”. Bill stopped as the head set itself upright on the floor, the face taking on an expression of superiority.

“I prefer it if thou wouldst kindly refer to me as ‘Sir James’ or, alternatively, ‘Spirit of the Golden Era’.”

"I think I prefer 'Sir James' Bill replied. "How can I help you, Sir James?"

The head took on a serious look. "I wish thee to help me seekest out my body."

Bill shook his head. "Oh great! Here's me, tired out, waiting for this boring night to end, and the Spirit of the Golden Age ..."

"Era" Sir James corrected.

"... Era, wants me to help it find its body. What for?" Bill threw up his hands in frustration.

"Wouldst thou like to spend an afterlife without a body?" Sir James shouted. "Anyway, be not sarcastic with me, sir."

Bill lowered his head. "I'm sorry and ... I guess you're right." He paused momentarily. "What happened? Anyway, your body could be miles from here."

"Fortunately not. When I was decapitated, my head was impaled on a spike and my body thrown into a cart amongst others of my unfortunate kinsmen and compatriots. As luck would have it, my servants – I was a very magnanimous employer – loyally retrieved my body and had it buried secretly in the grounds of my home."

"And where is that?"

Sir James became excited. "Why here of course."

Bill's sore eyes opened wide. "You owned this castle?"

"Certainly."

"Look, why are you asking me now? Why haven't you asked someone else to help you? After all, you have had a couple of hundred years."

"Many of those were years of superstition and, as my home became more derelict, less were folk inclined to visit here. The few that did linger until dark and were receptive to my spiritual presence quickly departed screaming when I started

speaking or made an appearance.” Sir James pondered a moment. “Yet thou didst not. Why is that?”

“Because I am here for a dare and I thought that my friends were playing a trick on me. When I realised they weren’t I guess it was too late to be scared.”

“Oh, and I thought it was my dramatic entry that didn’t have the right impact.”

“I’m afraid not. Anyway, I thought it was stupid rolling across the floor. You could at least have knocked ...” Bill put his hand to his mouth “Oops, sorry, no hands.”

“See what I mean? ‘tis so restricting having no body.” Sir James was clearly frustrated.

Bill got up to his feet. “Well where is this body?”

“Well, therein exists the other problem.”

Bill sat down again. “Now what?”

“In order to avoid discovery of my body, my servants marked the spot with a riddle, otherwise Cromwell’s cronies would have dug it up and burnt it.”

Bill looked around him. “And where is this riddle?”

“On a parchment hidden behind a brick at the bottom left of the fireplace in this room.”

“Fortunate!” exclaimed Bill. “How do I know which brick?”

“By a small indentation in the centre.”

Bill wandered over towards the fireplace carrying his flashlight. “How do you know all this?”

“I observed.”

“But you were dead. Oh, don’t tell me; your spirit observed.”

“Exactly.”

“Then why didn’t you see where they buried your body?”

“You remember that my body had to be buried with much haste and a chapel service held later in secret. I wasn’t able to manifest myself as a spirit until after this service.”

"Oh." Bill thought he understood then crouched down. He had to lie on the floor before he found the brick in question.

"How am I supposed to get it out?"

"The mortar should not be deep. A sharp implement will allow you to scrape it out and remove the brick."

Bill returned to his rucksack and rummaged about until he found his campers knife. Sir James' head was now hovering at waist height and bill thought he heard something drip. He shone his flashlight onto the floor below the head and noticed dark drops of a viscous liquid. "What's that? It's not blood is it?"

The head backed off a short distance and swivelled vertically downwards through about sixty degrees. "Curses, I leak."

The face turned back up to look at Bill. "Blood pressure, I believe you refer to it as in this day and age. 'tis all this stress trying to find my body."

"You're certainly up to date with twentieth century medical terminology. Still, you had better watch you don't bleed to death." Bill grinned, but Sir James just gave him a distaining look. He also wondered how a ghost could possibly bleed, but quickly focused his attention back to the task in hand.

"Excuse me a moment" the head responded, and proceeded to make a gurgling, sucking sound. Bill wasn't sure whether it came from the head's mouth, nose or the severed blood vessels. Anyway, the dripping stopped and didn't recur after that.

It wasn't long before the brick was loose enough to remove and Bill was able to insert his hand into the wall to retrieve a yellowed, rolled up parchment encased in dusty cobwebs accompanied by an assortment of spiders. He undid the cord around the parchment and spread the document out on the floor. Shining the light onto it he began to read.

*The road to paradise beginneth here
Tis close to the Lord but at his rear.*

"Weird," he said, looking at the head.
"Readst thou on" commanded Sir James.
Bill returned to the riddle.

*Take not the straight path to salvation
Turn thy head in correct rotation.*

Bill paused again to digest the lines.
"Go on, keep reading" the head said.
Bill continued.

*There is no chariot per the old adage
Thou must don thy boots and walk an age.
Whenst thou reachest the promised land
Raise thy left and clench his hand.
Turnst thy head and face the Lord
Sum up the year and feel suitably awed.
Let him lead thee to his place
And see thy future face-to-face.*

"That is it?" queried Sir James.
"That is it" confirmed Bill. "What do you make of it?"
The face frowned. "Strange riddle it is." It looked back at the parchment. "Let us return to the beginning."
Bill shone the light back onto the first line. *The road to paradise beginneth here.* He paused, thinking for a moment.
"Church? Chapel?"
"Yes, of course" Sir James responded excitedly. "And the next line must mean at the back of the chapel behind the

altar." The head rose to shoulder height and went zooming off towards the staircase. "Come, follow me Bill."

Bill grabbed his bag, stuffed the flashlight inside and half fell down the spiral staircase bumping into the hard stone walls as he scrambled after the head that was shouting back ahead of him. Soon, he was standing in the damp grass at what was a rear door of the ruined chapel with the head next to his own. "Now what? Recognise anything?"

"I told you" Sir James replied somewhat impatiently, "I didst not see them bury me; readst thou the next line."

Bill turned back to the parchment.

*Take not the straight path to salvation
Turn thy head in correct rotation.*

"Well it isn't straight on, so it must be left or right." He thought for a moment. "It's right."

"How knowest thee?"

"'Right', is an alternative to 'correct'."

"Thou art clever Bill." Sir James relaxed somewhat and looked impressed.

Bill continued reading.

*There is no chariot per the old adage
Thou must don thy boots and walk an age.*

"We obviously have to walk a number of paces, but how many? And 'walk an age'; what does that mean?"

The head bobbed up and down excitedly. "My age; when I was put to death of course."

"And what was that?"

"Thirty years and five."

Bill looked down at his feet. "Right, let's assume a standard pace and ..." He strode out. "Off we go." He started pacing out the thirty five steps with Sir James' head floating along beside him.

"Thou hast a very noble walk Bill. Thou shouldst be a cavalier."

"...fourteen, fifteen, sixteen ... cavaliers don't exist any more ... nineteen, twenty ..."

"No? What has thou in our place?"

Bill stopped. "Look, Sir James, if you keep on talking I'll lose my count. Now please stop until we reach the promised land."

"Sorry Bill."

When Bill had finished pacing he pulled up the parchment into the light again.

*Whenst thou reachest the promised land
Raise thy left and clench his hand.*

Bill raised his left arm and looked back at the document.

Turnst thy head and face the Lord
Sum up the year and feel suitably awed.
Let him lead thee to thy place
And see thy future face to face.

"This obviously means we turn left here but what now?"

Sir James' face had a puzzled expression. "What does it say next?"

"I read it just now. It says 'Sum up the year and feel suitably awed'. What does that mean?"

The head bobbed again. "Obviously the year I was beheaded."

"When was that?"

"Sixteen forty eight; but 'sum up the year'?"

Now Bill's face lit up. "Add up the digits of course. One plus six plus four plus eight equals ... "

"Eighteen?"

"Nineteen. You aren't very good at maths are you?"

"I employed an accountant."

"Not much good to you now is he." Bill started pacing out again until they reached an ordinary looking patch of grass.

"It must be here" said Sir James.

"We could be way off if my paces were too long or too short." Bill began to feel a bit frustrated after all the excitement. "It'll take ages to find the right spot." He looked about him, shining his flashlight.

Fortunately, the moon was still very bright so they were able to espy an old and worn paving slab a couple of feet to their left with a small marker stuck in the ground. "What's that Jim?"

"Jim?"

"Sorry, a familiar term for 'James'. I didn't mean to offend you."

"I prefer 'Sir James'."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"What is that ... slab?"

The head tilted to look at the slab. "Um, I knowest not. It ... ah yes, I remember; a sundial stood on it."

Bill's mind worked quickly. "A symbol of time – the hours past – the hours ahead. The future! Sir James, we have it!"

The head bobbed about and rotated in excitement. "Gazooks. Thou art marvellous Bill. I canst actually feel that I willst soon be whole again."

Bill lifted the slab to reveal just earth, earthworms and various wriggling insects. "That's good news Sir James; so what now?"

"Dig of course."

"What with? My bare hands?"

The head looked up and swivelled about. "What is that hut that lies over yonder?"

Bill looked towards the hut. "Could be a storage hut with a spade in it I suppose." He then turned back to Sir James' head that was nodding and had a knowing look on its face. "You expect me to break in there and get a spade to dig up your grave, don't you?"

The face suddenly adopted a very condescending attitude. "Thou promised to help me Bill. Art thou going back on thy word? If so, thou hast no honour."

Bill stomped off towards the shed. "Okay, okay." Even though the hut was padlocked, the fittings weren't well attached and Bill didn't find it too difficult to break in and find a suitable shovel. It wasn't long before he had returned and dug deep enough to reveal a shallow grave containing some old bones and what appeared to be fragments of clothing material. He called up to the head that was floating around the top of the pit. "I'm afraid there is not much of you left Sir James. I don't think there is much hope." The head didn't reply and when Bill looked up and shone the beam at it, he noticed a very sombre but peaceful expression on the face.

"Uncover all the bones please Bill."

Bill scrambled amongst the soil and finally had most of the skeletal bones arranged in their correct positions, minus the skull of course.

"I thank thee Bill. Thou canst come out now."

Bill clambered out of the pit and wiped his hands on his jeans, to get most of the dirt off, and watched. The head slowly floated down to come to rest at the top of the skeleton whilst Bill watched dumbfounded as an eerie mist slowly enveloped the grave until neither head nor skeleton were visible. After about half a minute had elapsed he made out something moving within the mist. Slowly, Sir James rose up from the grave, whole once again. He was dressed in the full splendour of a King's Cavalier with a short gold edged doublet over a white shirt with frilly cuffs and neck frill. He wore red pantaloons tied just below the knee, white stockings and elegant black shoes with large brass buckles. A decorative belt supported a handsome looking sword scabbard, which was somewhat corroded.

"Wow, you look really grand Sir James."

"I thank thee, Bill." Sir James suddenly glanced up into the sky. "I feel my time is nearly up as dawn approaches. I must go now."

"What are you going to do now that you have a body?" Bill enquired.

"Seek out my beloved wife so that we canst be together once again.

"Oh, how romantic" Bill said, smiling.

"This, I wouldst have been unable to do without thy help Bill, for which I willst be eternally grateful. I do hope we willst meet again someday in more enjoyable circumstances."

Bill felt quite emotional and actually a little sorry that the adventure was coming to an end. "Me too, Sir James." He said, with a lump in his throat.

Light peeped over the horizon and Sir James began to fade.

"Goodbye Bill; and thanks." And he was gone.

"Goodbye Sir James." Bill wiped his moist eyes and thought about the dirt smears he had probably left on his face. He

glanced down at the pit and pile of earth and shrugged his shoulders. He picked up his rucksack and looked around for a suitable hiding place. Now all he had to do was to 'spirit' himself past the wardens when they opened up the site for the morning tourists.

©2019