

A SUPERNATURAL SWINDLE

BY TUDOR JENKS

An experience in transcendistiry—Being the tale of a sentimental ghost, endowed with a keen sense of humor and presumably with a tendency to jump his board bills.

SO long as life glides by with unruffled surface men of my disposition are content, whether they be emperors or scullions. Fusses, rows, adventures or happenings are to me bores insufferable, one and all. If fate had made me a reformer or a conqueror, I would have resigned any claim to a quiet life. But on the front of my house my name precedes the letters D. D. S., and in my back parlor is a chair that is meant to receive the victims of cold and hot drinks, candy, and other substances inimical to enamel and dentine.

Being a dentist, I felt aggrieved when selected to figure in a ghost story. Not that my electric drill ever went upon a career of crime, perforating a patron's brain, or that the gas bag slew its victim. It was not the ghost of a friend or even of an acquaintance. A complete stranger's ghost thrust himself upon me without excuse, and long after office hours.

I was working late, on a difficult plate, when I heard a sepulchral groan from the operating room. I know it was sepulchral, for an ordinary groan is, to men of my profession, a mere incident of the day's work.

I looked toward the room, which was unlighted, and said, "Dear me!" The groan was repeated, and I advanced to the door, peering in. I saw a waving light green figure rocking itself to and fro, just

within the fancy glass folding doors. It must have seen me, for, with the preface of another groan, it said:

"Oh—h! are you a dentist?"

"Yes," I replied; "what is it?"

"Oh—oo—oh!" it replied, advancing toward me; "I am a ghost, and I have a horrible toothache! Oh—h!"

"If this is a joke," I said severely, "it is one I do not relish. Why do you haunt me with your supernatural toothaches? Go haunt the candy maker, or the cook. You're not one of my patients, are you?"

"No—o—oh!" wailed my visitor. "But you were the nearest dentist, and—ouch! This is worse than dying!"

"But you have no power over me," I insisted boldly. "If you come as a ghost, go haunt some one who deserves it. I haven't slain any one. Go find a vivisectionist. If you come as a patient, you're too late. It's long after office hours. Didn't you see my sign?"

"Yes!" declared the green visitant, in a voice of triumph; "I saw your sign, and therefore do I claim dominion—ow!—over you!"

"In what way?" I demanded.

"Come," said the ghost, in a tone so commanding that I followed involuntarily.

Drifting to the front door, which noiselessly opened at its approach, the

ghost stationed itself upon the front stoop and pointed meaningly to my sign. Obeying the gesture I read the fatal words: TEETH EXTRACTED WITHOUT PAIN.

“Well? “I said uneasily.

“Well,” said the ghost, “by that bold and shameless falsehood I claim the right to haunt you.”

“Ah, I see,” was the reply; “you make the usual error. That sign is quite correct. It doesn’t mean all teeth extracted without pain; it means some teeth.”

“Is it so?” asked the poor ghost, as it clapped a nebulous hand to its transparent cheek and rocked again; “and what teeth come out painlessly?”

“Milk teeth,” I replied.

“Alas!” cried the shadowy thing, “then what shall I do?” and it groaned in pain and despair.

“Come,” I said, my professional pride asserting itself, “you see it is useless to bully me; but though a dentist I am not insensible to human—I mean, inhuman suffering. Float into my operating chair and let us see what is the difficulty.”

I followed the green haze as it blew into the room and settled itself upon my cheerful red cushions. I touched the button, and the room was flooded with the electric light. Then, turning to my patient. I saw an empty chair!

“Confound the creature!” I broke out impatiently. “it’s gone.” But I was relieved to hear another expression of pain, and I added, “So you’re here yet, are you?”

“Yes,” said the thing, “but I am not visible in the light.”

I turned off the current and I saw the filmy presence still in the chair.

“Now, let me see,” I said; “open your mouth.”

The mouth was opened, much as a

smoke ring expands. Then by careful examination I saw that the troublesome tooth was a mere shell.

“Yes, yes,” I said; “I see, I see. We’ll make it all right in a minute, my dear—”

“Sir—ow!” the ghost interjected.

“My dear sir,” I went on, automatically. It was my usual formula for calming my patients while I selected the peculiar forceps indicated—in this case the right premolar.

“Now,” I said, arranging the instrument correctly in hand, “let me see which tooth it was—”

As the ghostly jaws parted I gripped for the tooth, but to my surprise the forceps went right through it without meeting any resistance, and at the same moment the ghost closed its smoke-like jaws over the instrument, leaving the forceps inserted in its nebulous head.

For the first time during the interview I was a trifle unnerved.

“This is—extraordinary!” I gasped. “I don’t see just how I am to operate on you. I get no grip at all. I can’t pull the wraith of a tooth, you know.”

“I feared as much,” exclaimed the unfortunate shade, with a cloud of foggy tears. “And what—ow!—am I to do? Am I to go on through countless years with this excruciating pain? Even death would be a relief, and it is denied me!”

It was certainly a trying situation, and I set my wits to work to devise a remedy. But the ghost was beforehand with me.

“Eureka!” it exclaimed. “You must ghostify your forceps!”

“Ghostify?” I asked.

“Why, certainly,” said the ghost, almost joyfully. “You have a crucible?”

“Yes, several.”

“Very good. Put the forceps into

the crucible, volatilize it, and then it will belong to my own state of matter.”

“We can try, at least,” I answered.

So we went into the laboratory, and I deposited the forceps in my largest crucible, arranging a bell glass over it to retain the vapor.

I turned the Bunsen burner on full blast, and before long was gratified to see the forceps lose its luster, its hardness, its shape, and melt. In a few minutes more I saw a metallic mist condensing upon the bell glass.

“Aha!” the ghost cried (it was invisible because of the light), “let me take it out for you. Extinguish the light, please.”

I did so, and saw the ghost insert its shadowy hand beneath the glass, and withdraw an equally vague forceps.

“Now,” the ghost went on, joyfully, “we have it;” and it preceded me to the operating chair, and was seated before I entered the room.

“Here,” said the ghost, extending toward me the ghostified forceps.

I reached out my hand and tried to take it. It had no substance, and my hand closed emptily upon some hot—exceedingly hot—space.

“Ouch!” I said, in my turn. “I can’t get any hold on the thing!”

“Blame the luck!” the ghost ejaculated, flinging the instrument aside in anger; whereupon the forceps floated gently away, as the ghost nursed its aching jaw.

“Stay,” I ventured, after a moment’s reflection; “why don’t you pull your own tooth?”

“By the stroke of midnight, so I will!” responded the suffering spirit, heartily.

It wafted itself after the floating tool, grasped it, and returned to the chair.

“How do you work it?” asked the ghost.

“Oh, just anyhow!” I replied, impatiently. “There’s no trick about it. Just catch a firm hold, and yank all you know how.”

“But won’t it hurt?” asked the shade.

“I shouldn’t wonder,” I said airily; “it often does. But you mustn’t mind that. You’re the dentist now, and needn’t think about the patient.”

“That’s all very well,” said the ghost ruefully, “providing I wasn’t the patient, too. I suppose there is no help for it, though.”

Then the ghost, with many a wavering twinge, adjusted the sublimated nippers, and pulled with all his vaporous might.

The operation was over in a minute, and was entirely successful. It was not long before the ghost was quite his jolly self again.

He leaned comfortably back in my chair, and was disposed to chat a little.

“If that last plan hadn’t succeeded,” it said, reflectively. “there were two others I might have tried.”

“Indeed?” I asked, with a yawn, for the night was nearly gone.

“Yes; I might have made a ghost of you, for one thing,” the ghost remarked, with a purplish gleam of humor in its phosphorescent eyes.

“Could you have done that?” was my question, while the second qualm of that night passed along my backbone.

“Easily,” said the ghost. “Oh, it’s nothing much. You wouldn’t have really minded after it was over. Why, if you’d like to try—”

But I interrupted him.

“What was your second plan?”

“I might have found the ghost of a dentist. Still, that’s not so easy. I should

have had little to go on, as we know each other mainly by the inscriptions cut in the epitaphs, and there is nothing said about dentists, so far as I have noticed. I might have gone to all the assemblages for miles around—yes, even to the crematories.”

“No matter now,” I said. “It is nearly morning, and I’d like to get a little sleep. So, if you will kindly pay for the operation—”

“What operation?” asked the green scamp, with an unconscious expression.

“Extracting the tooth.” I replied firmly.

“Indeed!” sneered the ghost. “I certainly shall not pay you for work I did myself. What assurance!”

This argument staggered me.

“But,” I went on, rallying to the attack. “I gave you skilled advice.”

“Yes,” sneered the ghost—“Take hold anyhow and yank!”—skilled advice, you call it?” and it laughed most hollowly.

“At least,” I burst out in anger, “pay me for the forceps you ghostified.”

“There might be some justice in that claim,” the green swindler admitted; “but even if I allow the claim, I don’t see how I am to pay you—there are no

pockets in a shroud,’ you know.” Again that fog horn laugh.

“You are a common swindler!” I broke out, shaking my fist in his face.

“Strike right through me, if you find it relieves your feelings,” said the mocking ghost. “I assure you I shall not mind it in the least. In fact, however, you must admit that I am not a common swindler, for ghosts are most uncommon swindlers. Still, I do not wish to leave you unrewarded. You have shown me some attention, even if your ulterior object was mercenary. I will in return inform you of a secret that will make your fortune. Listen.”

Ascending from the chair the pale mist was borne toward me. I was impressed by the weird intensity of the being’s eyes, and listened breathlessly.

“Just beyond the great Washington Bridge, on the Harlem River, is buried—”

But here there came a faint cock crow from the yard of a chicken fancying neighbor, and, with a final shriek of anguish or derision, the ghost vanished.

Next day I removed the inscription relating to the painless extraction of teeth, and I have since been undisturbed.