

Our Host - the Ghost

By Norman A. Daniels



Detective Bill Duffy took that suspect to the murdered man's house for identification. Duffy knew the strange legends that haunted the eerie place. But the detective never expected that the third degree would be given by the victim's ghost.

DETEKTIVE SERGEANT BILL DUFFY rarely missed a meal at Ricci's. He was as much a part of the restaurant as the big kettle of boiling spaghetti in the windows, or Ricci himself who greeted every patron.

Tonight Duffy just nodded at Ricci and looked keenly toward the small bar. A young man was standing there, slowly

sipping a glass of beer. He was about twenty-seven, well dressed, slim, and curly-haired. His face wore a haunted look and his eyes seemed to be almost dead.

Duffy said to Ricci, "That guy at the bar—how long has he been here? Did you ever see him before?"

Ricci shrugged. "He is a stranger, Sergeant. He came in half an hour ago. I think he has spent about forty cents so far. If you want to pinch him, go ahead."

Duffy laughed. "I'm not sure he's the man I'm after. He looks like Joe Ross, wanted for murdering an eccentric uncle. I'll drift over and have a little talk with him."

Ricci became excited and Duffy had to

warn him to behave. Ricci said, "Si, I remember the case. Two brothers—old men. Crazy, they said. They lived in a big house all alone. Nobody ever saw them, only this nephew."

"Those two brothers may have been crazy," Duffy replied, "but they knew how to make money and hold onto it. If the guy makes a break, see if you can stop him."

Duffy walked over to the bar, put both elbows on it, looked intently at the man.

"Hello, Joe," he said affably.

The man turned to face him, that strange look still in his eyes.

"Is my name Joe?" he asked. "I've forgotten. I can't remember anything. If you know me, for heaven's sake, tell me who I am."

Duffy gave a derisive grunt. "Building up an alibi already, I suppose. You'll say you were crazy at the time you killed your uncle. Come on, Joe Ross, don't give me that line. I've been a cop too long."

"Joe Ross," the man said slowly and then repeated the name several times. "It sounds familiar, as if I knew someone by that name long ago, but I can't remember. You're an officer? And you say I killed my uncle? I didn't know I had an uncle."

Duffy took the man's arm. "We'll iron this out at headquarters. You do look funny to me. Is it a fact you can't remember anything?"

"I swear it. Maybe I am Joe Ross. Maybe I even killed someone. My uncle, as you say. I don't think so because I'm not a killer. I'm sure of that. I'll go with you—willingly too. I've got to find out who I am. For days I've just wandered around trying to find out, but nobody seems to know me."

Duffy led his prisoner over to a table and sat down opposite him.

"Listen to me, Joe. You are Joe Ross. You're an electrical engineer and two days ago you had a fight with an eccentric uncle.

You threw him down a flight of steps and he broke his neck. That constitutes murder. Whether you remember it or not makes no difference. You're under arrest."

Joe Ross gave a wan smile. "I'll be good, officer. If I had killer tendencies before, I haven't got them now. Have your dinner. I'll join you—if you pay the check. I can't even pay for the beer I drank. You see, I intended to eat and have the manager call the police. I need medical attention and that was the surest way to get it."

Duffy warned, "I pack a gun and I know how to use it. If you so much as make a move to get up, I'll stop you with a chunk of lead. All right, we'll eat. If it's any comfort to you, I don't think you look or act like a killer although I've seen murderers who seemed actually saintly. What'll you have?"

IT WAS a rather weird dinner, sitting across the table from a murderer without a memory. Duffy found himself feeling sorry for this man. Before the coffee was served, he wanted to help him because Duffy was certain Joe Ross really had lost his memory.

"Here is the story," he told Ross. "These two uncles of yours, Andrew and Walter Lang, have lived in a big house for about thirty years now and no one ever saw them come out. They own a lot of property and are reputed to have a great deal of cash in the house."

"Did I steal this money?" Ross asked.

"You did not. Andrew is the brother who was killed. Walter told us the complete story. You were in the habit of bringing food and other essentials to the house. You were the only person ever allowed inside. You paid their bills with cash they gave you. Two days ago you asked for money for yourself. Andrew Lang denied the request. You got into a fight with him and, as I said before, he was

killed. Walter Lang saw it all, but he was too old to help his brother.”

“Sordid, isn’t it?” Joe Ross shook his head. “If I did that to an old man, I deserve to go to the chair. Just the same, I don’t think I did. I can’t remember anything, but even so, I’d know whether or not I had killer tendencies. Sergeant, will you do me a favor?”

“Anything, except let you go,” Duffy said.

“Take me to the house where the murder was committed. Perhaps the sight of it will bring back my memory. At least it can’t do me any harm.”

“I’ll have to put the cuffs on you and make a report of this before we go,” Duffy warned. “However, I’d have to take you there anyhow. The old man, your uncle Walter, wouldn’t step out of the house and he must identify you.”

Duffy called Ricci and ordered him to watch Ross. Duffy went to a telephone booth, called in a report, and obtained permission to bring Ross to the Lang house for identification.

“If you’re sure it’s safe,” the Inspector said hesitantly. “Remember, that man is as good as convicted for murder. He has nothing to lose by making a break for it.”

“I know,” Duffy replied, “but he acts more like a sick man than a murderer to me. I’m not satisfied with the case, Inspector. I never have been, but taking Ross back there will probably convince me. He won’t get away.”

Duffy returned to the table, led Ross to a corner, affixed a handcuff to his prisoner’s wrist, and closed the other cuff around, his own. They walked out of the place without attracting any attention, for which Ross seemed to be very grateful. They climbed into a cab. Duffy leaned forward and then glanced at Ross.

“What’s the address of that house again? I’ve forgotten it.”

Ross grinned. “So help me, Sergeant, I have no idea.”

Duffy grinned too and gave the right address. He leaned back and offered Ross a cigarette.

Ross said, “You’re supposed to be one of the toughest cops on the force, Sergeant, and yet I’ll swear your heart is as soft as butter in a noonday sun.”

“Yeah,” Duffy grunted, “but even if your memory isn’t so hot, keep this in mind. I’m tough more often than not. If I trusted a man enough to do him a favor and he tried to pull anything fancy, I’d get very sore and very tough.”

“I’m properly warned,” Ross nodded. “Honestly, I’ll be good, Sergeant. I want to clear this up as much as you do—even if it turns out I’m a killer.”

The car stopped in front of a huge house. It must have contained twenty-odd rooms and sprawled over half a city block. Every window and door was heavily boarded up. Not the faintest streak of light emanated. The house gave the impression of having been deserted for many years.

“Looks haunted,” Ross commented wryly. “Do you mean to say someone lives in there?”

“Your Uncle Walter,” Duffy replied curtly. “Odd duck all right. He didn’t even come out to attend his brother’s funeral and it took ten of us to persuade him to let the medical examiner and the undertaker inside. Frankly, I think he’s nuts.”

DUFFY paid off the taxi driver, piloted Ross around the corner, and headed for a small door at the rear of the house. This door was not boarded up, but it looked stout enough to resist a battering ram.

“I don’t blame people for thinking there’s a lot of cash hidden in this house,” Duffy said. “It’s a regular fortress. Anything around here familiar to you, Ross?”

“Not a thing, Sergeant. My brain is still a blank.”

Duffy punched a small bell and held his finger on it for all of five minutes. Finally, they heard metal clink. A burglar chain near the top of the door was released. Then another close to the floor clinked. A bolt slid back and then a second. The door opened about an inch and they could see two more very thick burglar chains still in place.

The man who peered out was silhouetted by a weak light behind him. He was small of build, incredibly old looking, and had a gray beard that reached halfway down his chest and long gray hair. He peered from out of thick glasses, nodded in recognition of Sergeant Duffy, then transferred his gaze to Ross.

Walter Lang gave a short scream of terror and promptly slammed the door before Duffy could get his foot into it. Duffy banged on the panels.

“It’s all right, Mr. Lang,” he said loudly. “Ross is handcuffed. You’ve got to identify him.”

“Take him away,” came Walter Lang’s muffled voice. “I don’t want to see the ungrateful wretch. Never again. Go away, I tell you.”

“Mr. Lang,” Duffy said patiently, “if you don’t let us in, you’ll have to come down to headquarters to make the identification. If you refuse to do that, we’ll have to place you under arrest as a material witness and lock you up. Open the door.”

That threat seemed to have made Walter Lang change his mind. He opened the door, but fled down a narrow, brick-lined corridor, as Ross stepped in ahead of Duffy. When the two handcuffed men reached the first floor after passing through the basement, Walter Lang was waiting for them in one of the largest living rooms Duffy had ever seen.

It was fitted with furniture outdated by

about forty years. There were three expensive grand pianos there, two beautiful chandeliers, and long, ornately carved tables besides the usual uncomfortable furniture of several decades past.

Two small lamps served to illuminate the huge room. The Lang brothers were noted as misers and stinting on electricity was one of their ways of piling up money.

WALTER LANG, halfway across the room, looked like a gnome from out of some child’s fairy book. He was dressed entirely in black and not out of mourning for his brother. Black was just the usual color both men always had worn.

Duffy said, “Mr. Lang, is this man Joe Ross, your nephew?”

“Yes—yes, of course he is. Don’t tell me he denies it,” Lang croaked.

“He claims to be suffering from amnesia,” Duffy explained. “Maybe he is too. The shock of killing your brother may have thrown him off balance. Ross wanted to come here and see if he could associate anything in his past with this house. Was he here often?”

“He came every week. He brought Andrew and me our food and whatever else we needed. We paid him well for it, too, but like everybody else in the world, he was after our money. Two nights ago he forced his way in here and Andrew remonstrated with him. There was a fight on the second floor landing. I saw Andrew tumble down the steps. He was – dead. Joe Ross started toward me and I locked myself in the study. He pounded on the door, but he couldn’t break it in. Then he went away.”

“Was anything missing?” Duffy asked. “Did he get money?”

“I don’t intend to even give the impression there is any money in the house,” Walter Lang said. “Take him out of here. I’m not used to having company. I

don't like people. No kind of people. I'll live here alone until I die. . ."

"With Andrew's ghost to keep you company?" Ross asked very abruptly.

"Ghost? Who said anything about ghosts?" Walter charged. "I don't believe there are such things. Get out of here—I want to be alone. I like being alone."

"Come on." Duffy jerked at the handcuff. "He identified you as the murderer and that's all that is necessary. Mr. Lang, you might as well face things. You'll be compelled to go into court when Ross is brought to trial. Nothing you can do will prevent that."

"I'll be there," Lang snapped. "I'd even go to the execution chamber if they allowed me to. I'd like to see Joe hang."

"Hmm," Duffy grunted. "They electrocute 'em now. Let's go, Ross."

"Wait a minute," Ross said. "Let me look around just a few seconds longer. This room does seem familiar—I want to get my bearings. Sergeant, give me this one last chance. If my memory comes back, so help me, I'll confess to' the crime. Look at that grandfather's clock. It seems familiar—as if I used to set it when I was a kid."

Ross opened the clock door.

Duffy shrugged. "Look all you want, but if your uncle's appearance doesn't bring back your memory, I don't think this furniture will. I—what's wrong, Ross? You're shivering."

"I know it." Ross cast a quick, nervous glance over his shoulder. "I—I feel as if someone was watching us. Someone we can't see. Sergeant—perhaps a man with an upset brain senses things. You know—things that come out of thin air. Right now I'd swear Walter Lang's double was over there in that corner."

They all turned quickly. The corner was occupied by a big table.

Duffy made a wry face. "Are you trying to build up an insanity plea? That's a table

in the corner. Nobody could be there. The whole space is occupied by the table."

"No it isn't," Ross declared. "I'm not lying. Someone is there. He's—he seems to be mixed up with the table, as if the table went right through him. Now he's moving. He's coming this way. Sarge, don't let him get me. He's coming."

Walter Lang was slowly backing toward Duffy too, rigid with fear.

"I don't see anything," he croaked. "He's mad. He must have been crazy when he killed my brother. There is nothing in that corner."

"Not now there isn't," Ross gasped. "He's a quarter of the way across the room. He's walking toward that big chair near the fireplace. Look—you can see his footprints in the rug."

DUFFY blinked, shook his head violently, and blinked again. Then a slow, crawling fear started up his spinal column. As he watched, the nap of that thick rug depressed exactly in the form of a footprint. As one of the prints appeared, the one behind it vanished. The steps were in the direction of the fireplace.

"You must be able to see him," Ross said hoarsely. "He's facing us now—and smiling. He wants us to come over and join him. To sit down in front of the fireplace with him. We'd better do as he wishes."

Duffy started moving toward Walter Lang. He was stopped when the handcuff tugged at his wrist. He'd forgotten about that. His eyes were riveted on the carpet. He saw those footmarks again. Marks in the nap made by the weight of an invisible man.

"Lang," Duffy croaked, "do you see those footprints too?"

"Y-yes. Yes, I see them. They've stopped now. Right beside that chair."

"Andrew's favorite chair," Ross cried out.

“How did you know that?” Duffy was all detective again. “If you can’t remember anything, how do you know that was Andrew’s favorite chair?”

Ross passed his free hand across his face. “I—don’t know. It just came to me—from somewhere far back in my brain. Look—he’s getting impatient. We’d better go over.”

Duffy hesitated a moment and then took keys from his pocket. If there was going to be any trouble, he wanted both hands free. He removed the handcuffs. Lang didn’t notice this. His eyes were glued to the floor in front of that big chair—at the marks of two shoes against the nap.

Duffy walked slowly toward the chair, skirted it carefully, and dropped into a chair placed at the other end of the big fireplace. Ross sat down too, and gnomelike Walter Lang tottered over on feet that threatened to buckle under him at any moment. He also sat down. All eyes were fastened to the big chair.

Duffy would have liked nothing better than to be about one million miles from this house. What he saw was incredible and yet—he saw it. His eyes saw the seat of that big chair slowly sink as if under a heavy weight. Then the soft back of the chair gave way under the same invisible weight, just as if a ghost had leaned back comfortably.

“Get me out of here!” Walter Lang suddenly yelled. “Get me out!”

Duffy disdained a reply. He glanced at Ross whose face was perfectly white and strained.

“What’s he doing now?” he asked.

Ross twisted his head and looked in the direction of a big table. There was a thick, black-covered book on it.

“He’s pointing—right at that book,” Ross gulped. “He—he wants us to look at it. He wants us to . . .”

Ross’ voice rose to a shrill peak and then stopped abruptly. The black book was slowly opening. Its heavy covers struck the table with a slight cracking sound. Duffy arose slowly, glancing at the empty chair where a ghost sat. Duffy walked over to the table, bent down to examine the exposed pages of the book.

“It’s an album of some kind,” he said in a strained voice. “It opened to a page where an old photograph is pasted. There’s something written below the picture. Lang, come over here and tell me what this is.”

Ross came too, brushing Lang aside. He peered at the book.

“I’ve seen that before,” he said hoarsely. “Things are coming back a little. It’s like a fog in front of my memory. Yes, I remember now. This book is the family Bible. Andrew used to keep pictures here. This one shows him and Walter as they were years ago. Their names are written below. Their signatures—I’m sure of it. Walter, don’t you remember this?”

“I can’t think,” Walter Lang clapped a hand to his forehead. “I can’t think at all. You’re lying, Joe. You lie when you say Andrew sits in that chair. Andrew is dead and buried. You killed him. You’re a murderer. You—”

“Hold it,” Duffy said harshly. “Maybe Ross is right. Perhaps his brain is afflicted in some way so he does see things we can’t distinguish. Maybe Andrew is back. We both saw those footmarks, we saw the chair sink under the weight of an invisible something. Ross isn’t lying. He does see Andrew.”

Lang’s teeth chattered. He cast one swift glance at the chair. The cushions were still deflated. Ross glanced at the chair too.

“He—wants us to come back. He’s beckoning again. We—we’d better do as he says. Duffy, I’m scared stiff. I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

“Then we’re twins,” Duffy gasped.

“Are you sure you see—something in that chair?”

“It’s Andrew, I tell you. I know that beard and that long gray hair. That expression in his eyes, too. He seems to be sorry for one of us. Duffy, let me try to make him speak. My brain is functioning again. Not completely, but I know I’m Joe Ross. I know Andrew and Walter Lang are my uncles. Perhaps Andrew will tell me that I killed him. I want to know. I’ve got to know.”

“Ask—him.” Duffy held his breath after those two words.

LANG sidestepped to be nearer the burly detective. His eyes were round and bulging. Duffy could hear him breathing in agonized spurts. Ross walked a little closer, but maintained a respectful distance between himself and the invisible occupant of the chair.

“Uncle Andrew,” he said in a very small voice. “I can see you. These others can’t. Not even Walter, your own brother. They tell me I mur-murdered you. Tell me—did I? Something happened to my brain. I can’t remember. Andrew, if you can speak, for heaven’s sake. . .”

Ross bent forward as if listening. He straightened up and looked directly at the fireplace. He kept looking at it for fully five minutes while Walter Lang and Duffy stood frozen to the floor. Then Ross moved with jerky steps toward the fireplace.

“Ross, Ross, what are you doing?” Duffy found his voice, but it was just a thin squeak.

“He—won’t speak. He—just points at the fireplace. There must be something there he wants. I don’t know what it is. I—look. Look! He’s getting up.”

Duffy found himself murmuring a prayer. The cushions of the big chair inflated themselves. The weight had been removed.

Ross hurried back toward the chair and seemed to be helping the ghost arise. Then Ross walked toward the fireplace. His expression was like that of a medium in a trance. He reached out and placed a hand on the fireplace mantel.

“Here?” he asked.

Ross moved his hand farther along the mantel and repeated the same question. Almost before it was out of his mouth, there was a sharp click. The big fireplace swung open about a foot. Ross nodded slowly, still in that trancelike state. He grasped the partially opened fireplace and pulled. It swung all the way back.

Behind it was a room. A rather small room and expertly concealed. Duffy didn’t notice its size so much. His eyes were riveted on a grisly spectacle occupying the exact center of the room.

Seated in a high-backed chair, reclining against it as if in deep thought, sat a human skeleton. One arm rested on the desk in front of the chair and there was an old fashioned quill pen thrust between the bony fingers. A few bits of cloth hung from the skeletal frame.

Walter Lang issued a piercing scream, turned, and ran madly away. Duffy walked slowly toward the skeleton. It seemed that the dead man was writing something on a piece of yellow, faded paper on the desk. Stifling a sense of repugnancy, Duffy leaned over the skeleton’s shoulder.

There were legible words, written in a crabbed hand on that paper. It was a last will and testament, bequeathing all possessions of Andrew Lang to his brother Walter. At the bottom was the cramped signature, exactly like that one written below the photograph.

Without looking up, Duffy said, “This skeleton is what’s left of Andrew Lang. How come you murdered a skeleton, Ross? Ask that ghostly friend of yours. . .”

“Sarge,” Ross said in a firmer voice,

“Sarge—there’s a gun pointed at us.”

Duffy straightened up. Walter Lang seemed to have grown several inches and his eyes were wild and yet cunning beneath those shaggy gray brows. He had an automatic in one hand. At his feet were two bulky suitcases.

“Don’t move,” he yelled stridently. “I think this is all some kind of a trick. There is no ghost. There never was a ghost. Step back, Ross. Back against the wall. You, too, Duffy. I know you. The toughest cop on the force. I’m going to soften you up with a bullet.”

“What is this?” Duffy asked. “That guy isn’t as old as he looks. Wait—he isn’t Walter Lang. I get it now. Andrew Lang has been dead for years. Walter lived in the house alone. This imposter found it out, came here and killed Walter. He told us Walter was Andrew Lang and in that way accounted for the two brothers.”

“He pinned the blame on you, Ross, and also swore the dead man was Andrew, whose skeleton occupies that chair. The two brothers had been so close that when Andrew died, Walter probably couldn’t bear the thought of their being separated, even in death. Andrew has been dead for years, so the murdered man was Walter.”

THE pseudo Walter Lang gave a croaking laugh. “It makes no difference what either of you think. I’ve got what I came for. Yes—the cash that’s been rotting in this house, just like that skeleton rotted.

“I’ll shoot both of you, close this door and leave you here. They’ll think Ross murdered you, Duffy. They’ll say he hid your body and then ran away. You’ll never be found. Stand up and take it—trying to trick me into believing there were ghosts...”

“You won’t have to close the door on us,” Ross said slowly. “It’s closing already.

Right behind you. There is a ghost. It is Andrew’s ghost. He’s going to lock you in here too. We’ll all die. We’ll . . .”

The crook let out a wild shriek and swiveled around. At that moment Duffy went careening across the room. He hit the crook with one shoulder, threw him off balance, wrested the gun from his hand. He threw this across the floor, got to his feet and yanked the crook upright. Then he uncorked one straight to the jaw. The crook dropped with a thump. Duffy took the handcuffs from his pocket and affixed them.

“Okay, Ross,” he said. “He fell for that one. Lucky you used your head. I—what’s the matter, Ross?”

Ross gulped. “Nothing. Nothing at all, Sergeant. I just thought I saw—oh, what difference does it make? I exposed this crook for you. I furnished the ghost that made this mug practically blow his top. He was sitting pretty here.”

Duffy glanced at the skeleton and shuddered. “Let’s go into the other room,” he suggested. “The atmosphere is a lot better. Take this mug’s feet and we’ll lug him out.”

Five minutes later, Duffy sat down beside Ross while the latter explained what he’d done.

“I came here the night of the murder, just as a matter of course. I came every week, but I seldom saw my uncle. I suspected that one of them was dead—had been for several years. I got the impression from the sudden cutting down of food which I was requested, by note, to bring. I did not know which of my uncles was dead, not even after seeing the survivor because they had the same beards, the same long hair and wore identical clothes. Also they were the same size.”

“What happened the night of the murder?” Duffy asked.

Ross sighed. “I admitted myself. Nights

when I was expected the burglar chains were removed and I had a key. This night nobody met me, as usual. I went upstairs. In the darkness, someone attacked me. I woke up in an alley several blocks away, returned; and found the police here. I also learned they wanted me for the murder of my uncle.”

Duffy nodded. “When you found out one uncle accused you of murdering the other, you knew doggone well it was a trumped-up affair, because there weren’t two uncles any more. So your accuser must be an imposter. All right. Now about rigging that ghost business?”

“I’m an electrical engineer,” Ross shuddered. “I got into the house and set up an elaborate apparatus. Magnetic plates beneath the rug to form those footprints in the nap. More plates in the chair. In the cellar I rigged the rest of the apparatus and connected it with that grandfather’s clock.

“Remember how I examined it? I had the door open when I called your attention to the corner where I said the ghost was materializing. I managed to set the hands of the clock so the apparatus in the cellar would start working.”

“It certainly fooled me,” Duffy grunted.

“That’s what I gambled on. I purposely sought you out at Ricci’s restaurant so you’d arrest me. I knew if the set-up scared a tough guy like you, it would also terrify this imposter who posed as my uncle. The amnesia was, of course, faked.”

Duffy laughed. “You certainly looked like a man who was sick.”

“That’s because I hadn’t slept in forty-eight hours. It took a long time to rig this apparatus. Then, too, I had to try and find out what happened to the body of my uncle who died those years ago. Perhaps I should have reported that when I first suspected it, but although those uncles of mine may have been very queer, they were good men. They gave away thousands of dollars to charities. Anonymously too, so I thought they deserved the right to live any way they chose.”

Duffy walked over and looked at the grandfather’s clock. Ross joined him.

Ross said, “You see, when I set the clock for exactly one in the morning, the apparatus in the cellar began to function. It was all a matter of timing. The book trick was done the same way and I wanted that Bible to open to those pictures because both my uncles had written their names below the picture.

“The imposter may have looked like one of my uncles, but if it came to a comparison of handwriting, he’d have been sunk. That threw him off balance, especially when I pretended my uncle’s ghost showed me the secret room and the skeleton.”

Duffy was bending over the murderer. “His whiskers and hair are real, but I think they are dyed grey. This guy must have also known one uncle was dead and saw his way clear to killing the other, living in the house, and finding this money. A judge and jury will teach him the error of his ways.”