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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Old Ghost Story Told At Request Of Friend

By NEIL A. MATHESON
Provincial-Farm Editor

THE ATMOSPHERE of the ghost story telling days of the superstitious years of three-quarters of a century ago are painted graphically in a story told by J. H. Fletcher in the Prince Edward Island Magazine of January 1900.

Fletcher's father owned the Orwell Mills which sawed lumber – it was mostly ship's planks – which were used for many a vessel built by the Hon. B. Davies and Charles Welsh. The Davies shipyard was located at Orwell Point and the Welsh yard was at Vernon River Bridge.

Fletcher recalled how he used to hear the millhands spin fearful ghost stories at night. There were "monstrous tales". They'd tell how the devil put his hand through the floor one night, to show his power, how he used to cut the threads in the loom of a weaver he wanted to get, how his cloven hoof appeared under a table on which men were playing cards and how the Devil used to appear in the form of a big dog.

When Fletcher grew up, though, he "learned there were no such things floating around as ghosts and goblins, demons and devils, sprites and spirits". He spent much of his time talking down the superstitious beliefs of others.

Ghostly Apparition Is Seen

AND THAT, I believe, is sufficient introduction for the ghostly apparition Fletcher saw one night nearly 100 years ago.

It was a dark and drizzly night in the fall of the year. Fletcher lived near the Uigg schoolhouse on the Murray Harbor road, at the Head of Orwell.

He had to go about one mile to perform an errand at a forge. Enroute he had to pass a small stream, by a bridge that was always badly out of repair. Close to the stream there was an old graveyard where many of the pioneers of the area "slept their last sleep".

The natural fear of the graveyard that was prevalent at that time was spiced up a bit by tales of headless men and strange looking women dressed in white, that were seen in the old cemetery at times.

It was dark when Fletcher started for home. "The blackness of Egypt was not any blacker than that rainy autumn night", he told his friends later. Dimly through the gloomy fog, he could see the odd faint light shining from the window of a house.

As he neared the cemetery he began to grow nervous. "I'd stop and listen, then move on slowly again", he said. He tried to forget the grimly defiant things he had said previously, about talk of ghosts being mere nonsense, for he definitely didn't feel brave at the time.

Tall Figure Draped In White

“I HAD made up my mind not to look, but unconsciously, as it were, my head turned, and lo, in the centre of the dreary ground there stood a tall white figure. In spite of my philosophy I felt my hat rise from my head”, he said.

“My God”, he thought. “Can I have been wrong after all about ghosts?” But it was no illusion, as he looked again the tall white-robed figure was plainly and terrifyingly visible.

Then the white figure moved. “It began to advance toward me. It gradually appeared to grow taller, and whiter. My God, I said to myself, it is a spirit in the form of a woman.”

The thought of flight was strong in his mind, but Fletcher didn’t dare run. It could have been one of his friends trying to throw a scare into him “and I would never hear the last of it”, he thought.

“Slowly the figure came nearer and nearer. It must be the troubled spirit of one of the dead. A cold chill crept over my body. I trembled from head to foot. All doubts were now dispelled, it really was a ghost”, Fletcher writes.

Desperate Try For Courage

TRYING DESPERATELY to summon some shred of courage, Fletcher thought it may be the spirit of some dead friend who wishes to tell me something. Then the figure was so close, he explained, “I felt I should do something. I saw it raise its hands high in the air, as though in the act of prayer. There was no longer any room for a shred of doubt.

“So gathering up all of my strength, and summoning forth all of my resolution, I decided to speak to it, and to speak in a defiant and fearless tone and said “How do you do?”

“To my surprise”, Fletcher wrote, “the response came at once – Well thank the Lord.”

“I knew the voice, it was human after all. It lifted a load of anxiety and fear from my heart. It was the most welcome sound I ever heard, and yet I became so weak I could scarcely walk”, he added.

I THINK I should cut short the rest of the story. The “ghost” was “a respectable old religious enthusiast who made his home somewhere in the New Perth area.” He was in the graveyard “performing his oblations among the graves of the departed.”

After that, J.H. Fletcher wrote, “I am a stronger disbeliever in ghost stories than ever before . . . Had I run away when I saw this hideous spectre, I suppose I would have been a believer in all of the stories of the supernatural told in my youth”, he added. But he really was scared. Here’s how he explains it in the old P.E.I. Magazine – it was loaned to me by Alf Egan, City:

Nothing Else So Fearsome

“I HAVE stood in the open prairie, heard the wildest bursts of thunder, have seen the lightening dance a zig-zag waltz on my eyelids. I have stood in the midst of a howling blizzard with the thermometer at 40 below zero. I have travelled the dark streets of a rough mining camp when revolvers snapped when I passed along, and people sprang behind doors and dodged behind boxes to save their lives. I have been aboard a train

when the cars were derailed and went thumping over the ties, and saw women faint and men die from their wounds. I have seen the stately ship struggling with the angry waves in a howling tempest while the passengers stood around strapped in life preservers, ready for the fatal plunge”, Fletcher wrote.

But, he added, “I never saw anything that frightened me so badly as the poor old man who was performing his oblations in the dilapidated cemetery at Orwell Head.

I HAVE written many ghost stories in this column over the years, but today’s story is told for a friend who has been having a rough time with his health. He sent a message this week, through my wife, that a good ghost story would perhaps do more to make him forget his troubles than anything else. I hope this story does just that for you, Willard.

I had a most enjoyable experience on Sunday as I greeted old friends and saw three Jesuit Priests, sons of an old friend of mine, share in a mass of Concelebration while one brother, Father John Trainor, was saying his first mass.

Yes, I’m an old Presbyterian from the Strathalbyn congregation of my boyhood days. But I appreciated sharing for 90 minutes or more, in the worship at St. Malachy’s church in the village I knew so well when I was young. Next week I hope to tell you something about it.