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opening extract from

Ghostboy and the Moonbalm Treasure

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published by

Bloomsbury

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Chapter 1



The clocks struck twelve, midnight. As moonlight fell upon the ancient stones of Halibut Hall, two ghostly figures scurried across a courtyard and up a flight of steps. They moved silently, and so lightly that they almost seemed to be floating. One of the figures was tall and stooped, dressed in a long black coat and tails; the other was a boy in baggy shorts and boots with no socks. They were the butler and the kitchen boy of the house. They were both dead. They had been dead for a hundred and fifty years.

The door creaked as the two spirits entered the house. An owl hooted. They tiptoed down a

passage, past the stern faces in the portraits on the wall, through shafts of cold moonlight that cut through the arched windows, and stopped in front of a door.

'This is it,' whispered the tall ghost, the butler. He rubbed his hands together and cracked his fingers.

The boy ghost read the words 'Indian Room' in gold lettering on the door.

The butler tried the handle.

'It's locked,' he whispered. 'You first.'

'No. You first,' The boy folded his arms. 'It was your idea.'

The butler made a little humming noise and tugged his ear nervously.

'Are you frightened?' asked the boy.

'Don't be ridiculous,' snorted the butler pulling himself together. '*I'm* the frightening one!' He rolled his red-rimmed eyes and smiled with a row of half rotten teeth. 'Haaahaaaaaa-huuuuuuuuurhhuuuuuurrrr-uurrrr-hurr,' he laughed softly and evilly.

'Crikey, Grandpa – you'll scare her to death,' grinned the boy.

'That would be nice,' smiled the butler. He drew himself up to his full height and coughed – ahem!

– before stepping straight through the closed door. The boy took a deep breath and followed, shuddering as he went.

'Alexander! You're on my toe!' hissed the butler.

'Sorry, Grandpa,' the boy apologised.

They stood still, blinking in the darkness. Portraits of Indian maharajas loomed over them. Huge ivory elephants stood either side of the fireplace, caught in a pool of moonlight, with rubies for eyes. From a large four-poster bed came the sound of deep contented breathing.

'That's her,' whispered the butler. 'A guest of Lady Halibut, down for the weekend. She is a computer scientist or something. I overheard her tell His Lordship there was no such thing as ghosts!'

'What? No such thing as ghosts?' the boy said in mock horror. 'We shall have to show her the error of her thoughts, eh Grandpa?'

'Alexander,' whispered the butler, winding a loose thread from his coat round and round his finger.

'Yes?'

'I don't know – I don't know if I can do it.'

'Of course you can, Grandpa. I know you can.'

'But . . . she was so very stern. Look at her – she is like a dragon, Alexander.' The butler leaned over

the sleeping woman and eyed her quivering nostrils.

'And you are a dragon-slayer, Grandpa! Go on – put out her fire, give her a spine-chiller! Make her hair stand on end! Please, Grandpa.'

The butler sniffed, wiggled his wing collar and brushed down his black coat and tails.

'Very well,' he replied. 'I shall try.'

He stalked around the bed, looking like a hungry heron. Then suddenly he reared up and loomed over the sleeping woman. Gradually he grew brighter and brighter. A cold green light spread through his body, flickering gently, lighting up the exotic carvings of elephants and tigers and snakes that wound around the four posts of the bed. In a few moments, and with a great effort, the butler was shining. Now he was visible to humans. His eyes were wide. His hair was wild. Very slowly, he began to hover in the air.

The boy stood behind him, much dimmer, too dim for humans to see. He crossed his fingers.

'Whhhooooo,' the butler sang.

'Whhhooooo,' echoed the boy.

'We are the ghosts of Halibut Hall!' sang the butler in a reedy voice. He flapped his arms up and down.

'More light,' urged the boy.

'I can't,' hissed Grandpa, 'I haven't got it in me.'

'Halibut Hall, Halibut Hall,' echoed the boy eerily.

'Whhooooooeeee.'

The boy frowned. His grandpa sounded as if he were a neighbour calling 'Cooeee!' across the fence. This was not good. This was not frightening.

The butler blew in the woman's ear.

He tweaked a toe sticking out from under the duvet.

He dropped a cobweb on her lips.

'Whhooooooeeee.'

'The ghosts of Halibut Hall are here.'

'Halibut Hall, Halibut Hall,' echoed the boy.

The woman began snoring.

Grandpa paused. His hands on his hips.

'The ghosts – WAKE UP!' he shouted, losing patience.

The woman's eyes sprang open and stared at the butler. She had a strong face with a firm square jaw and coils of tousled hair. She looked in

astonishment at the butler. For a moment fear flickered across her face.

Grandpa grinned, showing off his half-rotten teeth. Alex watched. This was the bit he liked.

'Boo!' said Grandpa playfully fluttering his eyelids. Then he rolled his eyes, theatrically.

The woman's lip trembled. She swallowed and blinked. Then suddenly she sat up and screamed: 'GO AWAY, YOU HORRIBLE OLD MAN!'



Grandpa shot up in the air and briefly passed through the top beam of the four-poster bed. 'Ow!' he cried as a curtain flopped down into him and he fell back on to the bed.

The woman narrowed her eyes and grabbed a pillow, which she held in front of her as if for protection. 'I don't know who you are – but if you are as you appear – a rather moth-eaten butler – then . . . Get me a gin and tonic!' she demanded as if she were the Queen of England. 'And don't take all night about it.'

Grandpa's jaw fell. His glow lost its brightness and he flickered weakly like a dying light bulb. 'But–but–but,' he began crawling off the bed, straightening his hair and smoothing down his coat. 'Yes, madam,' he said in confusion.

'Go on Grandpa – turn her blood cold. Turn her hair white!' cried the boy dancing around.

The butler looked at his grandson, desperately. He turned to the woman and began to chant in a small, uncertain voice:

'Beware the horrible Halibut curse,
The curse of Halibut Hall–
On October the third at half past five–'

'Oh, do be quiet,' snapped the woman, 'and don't

give me any more of this haunty nonsense, please,' she told him, abruptly.

'Oh!' The butler stopped. He coughed apologetically. 'No, madam. Certainly not, madam. Certainly not.' He began backing towards the door: 'I suppose you weren't just a little bit frightened? Madam? Just for a second? Eh?' He looked at the woman hopefully, blinking his bloodshot eyes and wringing his hands.

'No. Of course not,' she replied. And snorted like a racehorse.

'Ooooooooooooooohh!'

wept the butler as his light fizzled out and he fled from the room, his wailing dying away down the passage.

The boy Alex stood by the fireplace, too dim for the woman to see. How dare she upset his grandpa! He was almost hot with anger. Before he left he picked up the woman's clothes on the chair and threw them all out of the open window.

'Rotten ghost,' spluttered the woman throwing back the covers and getting out.

Alex stuck out his tongue: 'Blllleeeeeeeeaaaaaaar!'

And he ran.