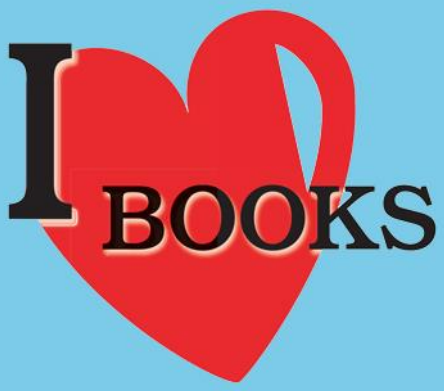


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For Ann and David. *H.P.*



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The Haunted Suitcase

Colin Thompson

Under the roof of the house, below dark beams carved from the ribs of ancient sailing ships, was the attic. Hardly anyone ever went up there. It was a calm quiet place where the air stood still and the sounds from the rooms below were muffled by a heavy layer of dust. A thin wash of sunshine came in through a single skylight, throwing a million shadows around all the junk stored there. Boxes of books and old photographs, and chests full of ancient memories filled the place. In the darkest corners there were crumbling trunks that had stood there for hundreds of years. And in those time-worn containers, in soft paper-lined tunnels lived the most horrendous spiders you could

imagine. They had been there so long that they had evolved into a unique species, a species that, because they had eaten nothing but books for hundreds of generations, had developed into a race of super-intelligent beings.

Because of the spiders, there were no ghosts in the attic. Even the most ferocious ghost was too frightened to live there. And even the most stupid ghost was not so stupid that he didn't shake with fear at the thought of them. All except one ghost, and it had no choice. Unable to move by any means, flight, telepathy or plain walking, it sat in the middle of the floor, terrified out of its tiny mind. It shone in the moonlight, a dull brown glow of antique leather. Nothing went near it, not even the dust. It was the haunted suitcase.

It was forty years since the last person had been up into the attic. The suitcase had been there then. It gave off an uneasy feeling that made people keep away from it. Sixty years before someone had put a box of old magazines up there. The suitcase had been

there then too. And in 1890, when the housekeeper had been up looking for a lost maid, the suitcase had definitely been there.

"Can we go up in the attic and play?'' asked Alice one morning at breakfast.

"I suppose so," said her mother.

"Who's *we*?" asked Peter.

"You and me," said Alice.

"No way," said Peter. "I'm not going up there. It's much too dangerous."

"Who says?" said Alice. "I've never heard a single sound from up there."

"Exactly," said Peter.

"There's dark forces up there," said Peter's granny ominously.

"See," said Alice. "Dark forces. I told you there was nothing to worry about."

Two sprites started chasing each other through everyone's breakfast, splashing milk everywhere, so the attic was forgotten while they tried to get them back into the cereal box.

"If you don't let us out," they shouted through the cardboard, "you'll be sorry."

"Oh yes," said Alice. "What will you do?"

"We'll destroy all the cornflakes," said the first sprite.

"And the plastic toy," said the second.

"Yeah," said the first. "We're cereal killers."

By the time they'd wiped the table with the ghost of a witch's cat and finished their breakfast everyone was talking about something else. But at lunchtime Peter's father said, "You know it's funny you should mention the attic. I've been thinking we should clear it out."

"Best let sleeping dogs lie," said Peter's granny.

"Are there dogs up there as well?" asked Alice. "Let's go up please, please."

"It'll end in tears," said Peter's granny.

But after lunch they got a ladder, and Peter's father opened the trapdoor, climbed into the loft and disappeared.

For a long time there was complete silence. Peter and Alice stood at the bottom of the ladder looking up into the dark square in the ceiling.

"Dad," said Alice, "can we come up?"



"I think we should stay here and hold the ladder," said Peter.

"You're just a big baby," said Alice and climbed up after her father. Once again there was complete silence.

"Dad, Alice," said Peter, "is everything all right?"

There were shuffling noises coming from the loft and a thick cloud of dust crawling out of the trapdoor. Peter put his hand over his nose, took a deep breath and climbed up the ladder.

There were so many old boxes and dust everywhere it was a bit like being a giant in a foggy city. Peter's dad and Alice were over in the far corner opening boxes and pulling things out left, right and centre.

"Can you go and get a torch?" asked Peter's dad. "This place is a treasure trove."

And so it was. Over the next few weeks, they unearthed old books and vases worth a small fortune. It was like a hundred Christmases all at once. The vile spiders moved back deeper and deeper into the darkest corners until there was almost

nowhere left for them to go. The haunted suitcase sat by the water tank and waited. For some strange reason neither Peter nor Alice nor their dad seemed to have noticed it.

"It'll end in tears," said Peter's granny. "You mark my words."

After six weeks, the attic was almost empty. Six crumbling boxes, too old to move, lay along the farthest wall, and inside them the spiders sat and waited. For the first time in three hundred years, they were frightened. It was a strange, exciting feeling but none of them knew how to handle it. Ghosts and ghouls they could deal with, but humans, especially small girls who looked like they might eat spiders, they were something different.

"Maybe we should rush out and terrorize them," said the oldest spider, Eddie.

"Yeah," said his sister Edna, "if all the ghosts are scared of us, a few humans'd be easy."

"I don't know," said Eddie's brother, Eric. "There are three of them."

"Yeah," said Eddie, "but there are three thousand nine hundred and seventy-two of us."

"Three thousand nine hundred and seventy-one," said Edna. "I've just eaten young Eamon."

"I'm not sure about that girl," said Eddie. "She looks like she could eat all of us in one go."

"Come on," said Edna. "We're the most ferocious spiders in the world."

"Of course we are," said Eddie. "Let's go."

So on the count of seven they all ran out. As they raced across the floor they suddenly heard a dreadful ear-shattering roar.

"I wonder why all spiders have names beginning with 'e'," thought Edna as the roar came closer and closer. For centuries the spiders had lived in the attic. They had heard ten thousand thunderstorms and the bombs of several wars but that had all been outside. This noise was inside, right there all around them and it was the loudest thing they had ever heard.

"Oh, look," said Alice, as she vacuumed the

ancient Chinese carpet that covered the attic floor, "hundreds of tiny weeny spiders."

They may have frightened ghosts and they may have thought they were the most ferocious spiders in the world, but because they had lived alone for so long they had forgotten that they were also some of the smallest spiders in the world, so small that Alice could hardly see them.

"Hello, tiny spiders," she said. "Come and play inside the vacuum cleaner."

The last of the dust and old boxes was cleared away and it was only then that someone noticed the haunted suitcase. Peter had spent all morning cleaning and polishing and he was exhausted. He sat on the old suitcase and closed his eyes.

"Where did that come from?" said Alice.

"What?" said Peter.

"That suitcase."

"That's odd," said their dad. "I wonder why we never noticed it."

"It was probably hidden under the water tank," said Peter. But it hadn't been. It had

actually been moving slowly around the attic, hoping someone would notice it.

"I wonder what's inside," said Alice.

They tried to open it, but the suitcase didn't want to be opened in the attic. It wanted to be downstairs in the warm sunshine. It had been cold for far too long.

"It's locked," said Peter.

"We'll take it down to the kitchen and open it there," said Peter's dad.

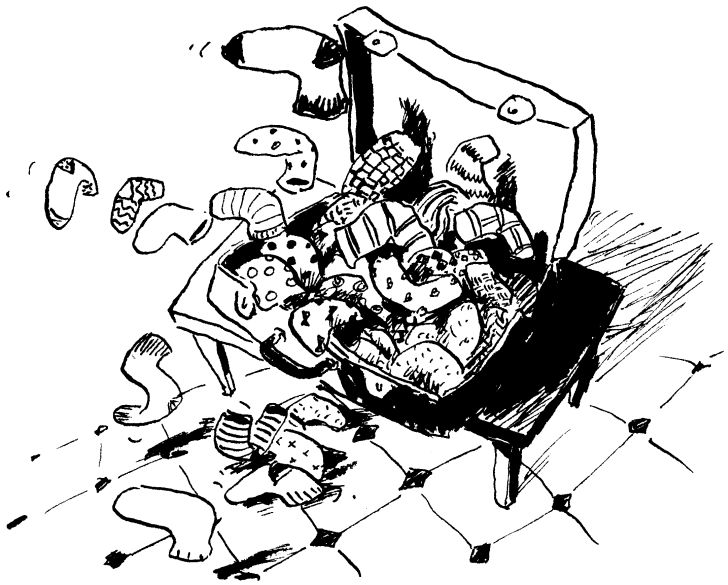
"Yeah!" thought the suitcase.

They cleared the kitchen table and put the suitcase in the middle. It wasn't very big or heavy, no bigger than a small box, really.

"Come on, come on," said Alice, "bash the locks off."

As soon as the suitcase heard that, it sprung its locks and began shivering. The few ghosts that were awake ran out into the garden and Peter's granny went to the lavatory. "I think this is where it ends in tears," she said.

Peter lifted the lid and as he did so a few socks fell out.



"It's just full of old clothes," he said and it was, full of socks, millions and millions and millions of them.

They poured out of the suitcase like oil from an oil well. They covered the table and piled up on the floor until everyone was ankle deep in them.

"Shut it," shouted Peter's mum, but no one could. They dragged the case into the garage and locked the doors and still the socks kept pouring out.

By next morning they had reached the roof

and were packing themselves in tighter and tighter until the doors were straining at their hinges.

"I wish I'd taken the car out first," said Peter's dad.

They collected up all the socks from the kitchen, three thousand and twenty-seven of them. And every single one was different. Inside the haunted suitcase were all the odd socks that everyone in the world had ever lost.

"Maybe there's another suitcase somewhere with all the other ones in," suggested Peter, but there wasn't, because the sock that got left behind was always used as a duster or a rag to clean up after a new puppy.

On Tuesday, the garage doors collapsed and the socks began to pour out into the garden. On Wednesday, Peter's Aunt Sophie, who was staying for the weekend, said she would take the suitcase. She had an idea.

She tunnelled into the garage and carried the suitcase out to a large truck. Their poor car had sock dents all over it and for months they kept finding socks in the most unlikely

places. They turned up in parts of the house where the suitcase hadn't even been. The strangest one was on Christmas day when they found a very old worn-out sock in the middle of the Christmas pudding.

Aunt Sophie drove the truck into the middle of a massive factory and twenty-four hours a day forever after, two hundred people sorted the socks into pairs. Because, although they were all odd socks, there are only so many different possible types of sock. So if you lost a green one with orange spots in a cottage in Scotland, someone, somewhere else in the world would, one day, be bound to lose a sock exactly the same as yours.

"It'll end in tears," said Peter's granny, who had been put in charge of everyone in the sock factory.

"No, no," said Aunt Sophie. "It'll end in pairs."

Aunt Sophie opened a shop that just sold socks. Then she opened another one and another one until she had shops all over the world. And every day thousands of people bought new socks to replace the odd ones

they had lost. Sometimes they probably bought back one of the very socks they had lost. There was even a man in Tasmania who bought his own lost socks back three times and never realized. He just thought how wonderful it was that they kept making the same pattern over and over again. And of course every day people kept on losing socks so the haunted suitcase was never empty.

The haunted suitcase sat in the middle of its huge factory, happier than it had ever been. Every day someone dusted it and stroked its brown leather skin with soft gentle polish that hadn't been tested on any animals at all and was full of wonderful things like marigolds and honey. Everyone loved the haunted suitcase because it had made them all very, very rich. Even Peter's granny finally admitted that it probably wouldn't end in tears after all.