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THE CASTLE GHOSTS

Joseph Delaney

THE CASTLE GHOSTS

I looked up at the castle and tried to be brave. After all, I wasn't going to be imprisoned there. I was going to guard the prisoners: murderers, common criminals and convicted witches. That was my job. Or at least it would be once I'd finished my training.

There was a new moon, slender and horned, about to be overwhelmed by the dark clouds blustering in from the west. I shivered but not just with cold. I'd heard stories about the castle after dark, about things long dead that walked its damp corridors.

The building was large and forbidding, set on a high hill about three miles from the nearest town and surrounded by a dense wood of sycamore and ash trees. It was constructed from dark, dank stone with turrets,

battlements and a foul-smelling moat that was rumoured to contain the skeletons of those who had attempted to escape.

I'd never wanted to be on the night shift. But my feelings counted for nothing. Orders were orders and, after just two weeks preliminary training, I'd been told to report one hour after sunset. But, being unused to going to bed in the afternoon, I'd overslept. I was already over half an hour late and castle guards were supposed to be punctual.

There was a clanking grinding sound and then the portcullis began to rise. They knew I was there. Nobody approached the castle without being noticed. Behind the portcullis there was a huge wooden door studded with iron. It was another five minutes before that opened and I waited patiently as a light drizzle began to drift into my face.

At last the door started to grind back on its hinges to reveal a burly guard. He scowled at me. 'Name?' he demanded.

'Billy Calder,' I answered.

He knew my name and knew exactly who I was; he'd been letting me in every day for my training. But he was following the rules. Anyone entering had to identify himself.

'You'll be working under Adam Colne. There he is,' he said, pointing to a man in the distance who held a huge bunch of keys. 'He's waited over half an hour for

you and he's not best pleased to say the least. I wouldn't like to be in your shoes, boy.'

I approached Adam Colne warily. He was big and scary with a reputation for being tough and ruthless. He'd once thrown a trainee guard from the battlements into the moat. The boy had been lucky to survive. Colne stared at me hard, without blinking, making me feel very nervous. It was the first time we'd met and I knew I hadn't made a good impression.

'You're late!' Colne growled. 'There are only six guards on the night shift and it's important that we are all present. So it won't happen again, will it, boy? Those who work for me never make the same mistake twice. Not if they want to carry on breathing. You have to know your place in the scheme of things. Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes, sir,' I answered.

'Good, as long as we've got that straight I'll forget your lateness and we'll make a fresh start from now. You'll be happy here, boy. We're just like a close-knit family on the night shift.'

I didn't know much about families because my parents had died when I was very young. I'd been brought up in an orphanage. This was my first job since I'd turned fifteen and had been thrown out to make my own way in the world. I was a stranger to the district and hadn't made any friends yet.

'So first things first,' Colne continued. 'Do you know why you've been transferred to the night shift?'

'No, sir.'

'Somebody asked for you. Somebody politely requested your presence. Someone we have to keep sweet. "Let the young Calder boy guard at night," she begged. Wouldn't you like to know who she is?'

I nodded. I hadn't got a clue.

'Then why don't you take a guess?'

Who could it be? There were some female as well as male prisoners but certainly no female jailers. The castle was run by men. But as far as I was aware, I knew no one imprisoned in this castle – or any castle for that matter.

'Is it one of the prisoners, sir?'

'Her name is Netty and she *was* one of the prisoners, boy. But she's a prisoner no longer.'

That didn't make any sense. If she'd been released why had she requested my presence on the night shift?

'Where is she now?' I asked.

'Mostly she's to be found in Execution Square. One of her favourite places it is, because that's where they hanged her.' My face must have shown my shock. 'Netty is a ghost, and we need to keep her sweet or it's bad news for everybody. Some call her "Long-Neck Netty" on account of how stretched her neck was by the rope. But don't let her overhear you using that name. She doesn't like it. Even when she's in a good mood she raps and bangs and wakes up the prisoners. Sometimes she turns the milk sour or gives us nightmares. No, it don't do to

cross Netty. So follow me, boy! If it's you she wants on the night shift, it's you she'll get.'

He walked off swinging his big bunch of keys, and I followed him through a tunnel and into the castle yard.

'But how does she know who I am, sir?' I asked.

'Must have seen you during your training and taken a shine to you.'

'Are we going to see her now?' I asked, my knees beginning to tremble. The thought of facing a ghost had suddenly turned me right off the job. *Why on earth had I wanted to be a prison guard?*

'Nobody *goes to see* Netty, boy. She comes to see you. No doubt she'll turn up when she's ready. Of course there's more than one ghost haunts this prison.' He pointed at two cell windows high on the wall. It wasn't time for lights out yet and they were the only two cells in darkness.

'We never put prisoners in those two cells, boy. Not now, anyway. Know why?'

'Are they haunted, sir?'

'They're haunted all right, but by exactly what we're not sure. About ten years ago the castle was filled to bursting with prisoners so we had to use those two cells. We knew they were supposed to be haunted by something unpleasant but there were no precise records, so we took a chance and locked up two drunken farm hands for the night. Got into a fight they had, and then

battered the parish constable who'd tried to separate them.

'The morning after, they were trembling like leaves in an autumn storm. And both told the same tale. In the middle of the night something invisible but very strong had grabbed them by their throats and tried to drag them into the wall. But that weren't all . . . '

Colne stood there for a while staring into the darkness, shaking his head and muttering to himself as if he were reliving the experience. He seemed to have forgotten all about me.

'What happened? I asked.

'Well, as I said, the castle cells were all occupied so we had to put them back in the same quarters again the following night. Come dawn we regretted it. We should have sent them off elsewhere to be locked up, but we hadn't the man power to transport 'em. In the morning one of them was dead. He'd been strangled and there were fingermarks embedded in his throat. His eyes were bulging too – it wasn't a pretty sight. But the other had disappeared; or at least most of him had. There was a large pool of blood on the cell floor, and in it were his teeth.'

'His teeth? Was that all that was left of him?'

'His dentures, boy, to be precise, which were made out of wood. And whatever had taken him couldn't get them through the stone wall as well. Flesh and bone, yes, but not Rowan wood. It's a wood that has certain

properties. Witches aren't supposed to be able to touch it and some say it wards off dark apparitions. Anyway let's get inside, out of this drizzle. I need something to warm my belly.'

We passed along two corridors and at the end of each was a sturdy door to be unlocked. Moving even a short distance across the prison took some time because of all those locks; no wonder each jailer carried a big heavy bunch of keys.

At last we emerged into a large room with a small fire in the grate, three big wooden tables and lots of chairs.

'This is the quarters for the night shift,' Colne said.

I'd never visited the room because it was always locked during the day. But there was little evidence now to suggest that it was ever occupied. There were no cups, cutlery or plates on the table tops. The room was tidy – too tidy. Something about that made me feel very uneasy.

'Of course,' Colne said, 'we don't use it much. Not a nice place this.'

'Is it haunted as well?' I asked.

'By night the whole castle is haunted, boy, but a lot depends on what's doing the haunting. There are some really nasty things that rap and bang in here so most guards prefer to take their rest in other places.'

I didn't speak. I just waited in silence. I knew he had more to say.