

Ghost of Castle Wink

by dracontia

Since about 1412, the village of Castle Wink has had a visitor every thirty years or so.

A precursor to 'A Credit to Their Houses.'

Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: The village of Castle Wink is loosely based on an actual location in Wiltshire that makes a nice sort of place to build a manor, and the HP-verse characters about whom I write are based on someone else's work. I profit from the use of neither.

Mattie pushed through the old wooden door into her grandmother's kitchen, her fingers still sticky from the piece of lardy cake she'd taken. "Gran, tell me about the Ghost," she said.

Her grandmother continued to pass the iron over her best tablecloth. "Have I not told you before?" she asked. She seemed not to notice Mattie's pink-faced breathlessness.

"I forgot it. Please, Gran, tell me again," Mattie begged.

Gran never looked up from the ironing board, but Mattie could see her smile. "If your mum still lived in the village, ye'd have known it from time you could talk. I'll tell'ee, but fold us some towels, little luv," she said. Mattie reluctantly went to the basket, folding and listening impatiently.

"In the old days, the Romans had a fort on the hill above the Wink Brook. A castle was built there in King Stephen's day, which is why they call the village Castle Wink. But time passed, and I guess the quality didn't want to live in a drafty castle as was fallin' down. Some years after the lord's family moved down to the grand stone house in the valley, folk first saw a ghost by the brook.

"There's folks say it was a young son of the one of the lords. Little fellow went to play in the brook, wearing just his shift, and drowned. Others think it was a choir boy who died of sickness, since those were the days of the Black Death. There's a few think it was a ghost left from Roman times, tired of haunting the lonely hill where no stone sat atop another anymore, that put on his best toga to visit the village.

"They say he pops by every thirty years or so. Folk may see 'im just a few times, or all through the year...but once he's gone, he won't be seen again for another thirty. Sometimes he's seen right in the village, in the church tower or hiding under the old Market Cross. Most times he's just a white flicker in the woods or in someone's garden. When I was a girl, Jimmy Parrie swore the ghost threw pebbles at the windows of the school. When the children looked out, he made horrid faces, then disappeared when the Master looked to see what it was about."

"And he steals pies from windowsills," Mattie prompted. "And any sweets he can get his hands on. Mummy told me he was a terrible thief of cakes. Everyone lost candy to the Winky Ghost when she was a girl."

"That story's gone 'round a few times through the years, but I hear mostly he keeps 'is distance." Gran seemed to think the story ended, for she folded the tablecloth and laid it in the linen press before sprinkling the sheets. "I've never seen 'im."

"What about when he threw the pebbles?" Mattie persisted. "Or chased the chickens?"

"Oh, the chickens were before my time. And I never saw any pebbles. The boys and girls were in different rooms in the old school," Gran said. She chuckled. "Jimmy tells a good tale to this day."

"And what does the ghost look like, Gran?" Mattie clutched a dishtowel to her chest, wrinkling it all over again.

"Everyone agrees that it's a little boy of about your age, in long, white clothes...every inch of 'im white...even 'is hair," Gran said.

"Then I saw him. I really saw the Winky Ghost!" Mattie was so excited, she almost upset the carefully folded pile of towels. "He was in the wood! We peeped at each other around the beech tree, but when I tried to offer him my lardy cake, he disappeared! So I left it on my handkerchief and told him to come eat it, if he wanted it."

"Ye don't say," Gran said. She finished up the bedsheet. Mattie couldn't see why Gran wasn't more excited.

"Come with me and see if he ate it?" Mattie asked.

Gran laughed. "Faith, little luv, more like the squirrels ate it." Mattie looked at her grandmother with great disappointment. Gran put up the iron and unplugged it. "Well, show me your little ghost, then."

Mattie led Gran down the path to where it entered the wood. She looked about trying to spot the rock where she had left the cake. At last, she squealed and ran to a patch of white. "See, Gran! He ate the cake...and he left me a new handkerchief! Mine had a hole," Mattie said. She showed Gran the Ghost Handkerchief in triumph. "Thank you, ghost!"

"Eh, that's a nice 'andkerchief," Gran said. "Pr'aps the ghost has learned better manners since my day." Mattie skipped back to her grandmother's house, waving her trophy. Gran followed more slowly, chuckling quietly now and then.

Quiet as the bark of the tree in which he sat, Scorpius watched the little Muggle girl pick up his everyday handkerchief. Father had said the Bedazzled Robe would hide him from Muggle view so long as he kept still. Unfortunately, he'd rather forgotten that and had let himself be seen. Fortunately, as soon as the Muggle girl began to approach him, he froze with indecision and thus effectively vanished before her eyes.

According to Father, it was a family tradition of sorts, donning the robe to go peeking at the quaint Muggle village. Scorpius had the idea that Grandfather had used words other than 'peeking' and 'quaint' when presenting the robe to Father. The portrait of Great-Grandfather Abraxas, hidden away in the back of the library, had hinted that Muggle poultry were quite amusing when terrified. Scorpius had not made any reply, but privately thought it sounded like something that was not quite in keeping with Secrecy Statutes. It certainly was not the sort of thing that Mum would approve.

Keeping still was difficult. Scorpius would very much have liked to at least nibble a few more raisins from the little cake in his pocket. He had been very cautious with his first bite...not because he feared it was unsafe to eat (after all, the little Muggle girl had nearly finished it before she left some for him) but because he didn't want to drop any crumbs and leave a trail to his hiding place.

It was a very nice cake, if a little heavy. He wondered if the woman called Gran had made it. It was too bad she was a Muggle; Scorpius would have liked to ask her to teach Tuny how to make such sweets. Reluctantly, he left the last bit wrapped in the handkerchief in which it had been offered. Perhaps Tuny could figure something out by looking at it.

Scorpius thought this would be his last visit to the village. If everyone was as nice as the little girl who gave him cake, he would quickly run out of things to give them in return. Though he wasn't technically out a handkerchief...Father or Mum could fix the little hole in this one with the quickest of spells. He also supposed the cake wasn't technically for him, since he wasn't a ghost. But it had seemed impolite to explain that to someone who offered him cake, even if he had been allowed to talk to Muggles. Father had been quite clear that the Secrecy Statutes frowned on that sort of thing, hence the Bedazzled robe. Hopefully, being mistaken for a ghost was not a violation.

It made him feel lonely to look at other children and not be able to speak or play with them. He imagined it would have been worse in the old days, when there were more people in the village. There was a building on the edge of town with a plaque that read it had been a school with upwards of a hundred students before village population dwindled and forced it to close. He could scarcely imagine it...a hundred children! He wondered if Father or Grandfather had ever seen them. Scorpius wondered what it was like to be around so many children. He would find out soon enough, he supposed. Grandmother told him it would only be two years before he could expect his Hogwarts letter.

Once the Muggles walked away, Scorpius climbed down from the tree carefully. It wasn't a very long walk up the hill, along a path which Muggle eyes saw as washed away and impassable. He paused in the disused Summer House, where Muggles might glimpse a grassy earthwork and a few stray bits of masonry if they strained their eyes to peer through the thick trees at the top of the hill. He rubbed the fabric of his robe, feeling how thin with age it was.

As Scorpius took one final look back, he wondered how many generations of Malfoys had visited the village disguised in its white folds.

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Note: This tale is a precursor to 'A Credit to Their Houses.'

If you would like to envision the village Scorpius visits, you could do worse than to search for a place called 'Castle Combe.' A stroll down its main street, courtesy of Google Earth, is particularly picturesque. Lardy Cakes are a sweet peculiar to the region, though having much in common with various rich, dried-fruit-filled-breads throughout the world.

The grandmother's occasional dialect words are based on the country talk of that region. Even in her day, organized schooling would have been erasing or blunting dialect pronunciation and regionalisms in favor of Received Pronunciation. Her account of the history of the area is also deliberately vague; as is common when people relate legends, time lines may be compressed and events extended or abbreviated to make a better story.