

The Free Press Short Story

THE PRIZE PHENOMENA

BY ROY J. SNELL

It was night. Deep, mysterious darkness, the somber blackness that one experiences only in out-of-the-way corners of a mountain county when there is no moon. "It won't come," whispered Cora Lewis with a shudder.

"It is time," replied Ballard Kirkmore. There was a tense note of expectancy, not as yet spread, in his voice as he went on. "It'll come pretty soon, if it's coming to-night."

As for his cousin, Elizabeth Binter, she crowded more closely against Ballard's broad shoulder and spoke not at all. It was a narrow business, this sitting-out on a narrow ledge of rock, at the top of Stone Mountain, waiting for the appearance of the phantom light.

Three pairs of eyes strove in vain to fathom the darkness, to catch the least outline of the perpendicular mass of rock that was the topmost peak of Stone Mountain. Strain their eyes as they might, they caught not the faintest outline; yet, on many a night dark as this, a strange light had appeared against the very centre of that perpendicular wall. "If only we could climb it!" whispered Cora.

"But you couldn't. A gray squirrel couldn't. There's not a crack nor a crevice where one could stick."

"Couldn't be moonshiners?" "Shiners?" In spite of the darkness and mystery that hung over all, Ballard laughed. "They couldn't find room to hide a chestnut up there, say nothing of a still."

Again the silent darkness brooded over the mountain. "This phantom light," as most people had come to call it, though some called it the "ghost light" or "that haint of Stone Mountain," had made its first appearance three years before. It was a strange filmy light, sometimes motionless, sometimes apparently drifting, appeared on the side of Stone Mountain around nine o'clock at night. It was very irregular in its appearance. In summer it did not appear at all. Even in late autumn, winter, and early spring, its appearance was very uncertain.

What was the cause of this mysterious light? The people of the mountains had asked one another this question. At first they had asked it out of curiosity only; but as the months passed and no solution of the mystery had been forthcoming, many a gray head was shaken in sad foreboding.

A stranger, riding through the mountains at night, had seen the light. He had asked about it, and having been told all these wild tales, had become curious as to the origin of the light. He had spoken about the light to the head of a great geological society. The geologist had come down to investigate. After a week of prowling about among the rocks, he had evolved a very learned explanation of the phenomena. The light, or apparent light, was caused, he said, by phosphorescent gases rising from the surface of cold springs that, coming from some hidden cavern in the rocks, doubtless carried the gases outward to release them. Once released, the gases floated upward to cause an appearance of light.

Having arrived at this scholarly conclusion of the matter, he had packed his bag and departed.

Common sense had at once attacked and demolished his theory. Fox fire was far more common in summer than in winter; yet this light did not appear in summer. On the contrary, it had appeared in the dead of winter when springs at that high altitude must be solidly frozen over. "That's not it," said the wise ones, shaking gray heads once more. "It is a haint, a ghost light, a warning; you shall see. There will be trouble, feud fighting, war, disease, famine."

A second learned man had appeared. After days of investigating he declared the gas theory to be unfounded, but had advanced no theory of his own. In this he had, perhaps, shown himself to be a truly wise man. "If a railway, or a much-frequented automobile road faced that way, I should say the light was the distant reflection of a headlight," he had said, "but since there are no automobiles and the only train going up the valley travels directly away from the rock, it does not seem possible that this should be its origin. I will say, that I had continued, 'that I consider the phenomena to be of perfectly natural origin. I cannot remain to solve the mystery, but as an added incentive to mountain people who, having lived here since childhood, are most likely to solve the mystery, I will offer a prize of one hundred dollars to the person who brings forward a proved solution.'"

That prize, that one hundred dollars, was a stimulating factor that had driven our three young people over the five miles of rocky trail through the frost-kissed air of January, to the highest and most formidable ledge of Stone Mountain, and that held them there, shivering in the dark and cold.

"It will come. It must—" "There! There! Look!" Elizabeth gripped Ballard's arm until it hurt.

"No light that I can see," he grumbled. "It's your imagination."

"Say," he whispered after a moment, "do you suppose it is moonshiners after all? There might be a cave that has an opening on the other side. Cracks in the rocks might let the light of their fire shine through on this side."

"Right," Elizabeth whispered back. It was quite evident that she was more than

half convinced that the light was of supernatural or ghostly origin, after all. "Come on," she shuddered, "let's go home. It won't come while we're here." She was the youngest of the trio—barely eighteen. She was small and naturally timid; yet, she it had been who proposed the trip in the beginning. "We need that hundred dollars," she had said. "Think what it will mean; a whole term at Middleborough for us all."

Ballard, her cousin, was past twenty. Tall, broad-shouldered, red-headed, a bit stubborn, he was not likely to leave that rock until all hope of seeing the phantom light that night had passed. He said as much to the others.

As for Cora Lewis, who was nineteen, she joined with Ballard in his vote to "stay right there." Handling together in the frosty darkness of the mountain side, now catching the note of some mountain bird chirping in his sleep, and now, faint and from far away, the gloom-inspired bay of a hound, they waited and watched in silence until with a sudden shrill whisper Elizabeth gasped, "There! There it is. The—the ghost light!"

"The phantom light!" Cora whispered back. At that instant, had sudden death befallen, not one of the three could have moved. With eyes staring at the mountain side, the watchers seemed glued to the spot; while faint, indistinct, seeming to move, yet ever remaining, a filmy illumination played upon the rocky face of Stone Mountain.

For five full minutes, not speaking nor moving, seeming not to breathe, they sat like stone statues until with a quiver and start, Elizabeth took one long full breath to utter faintly, "It's gone."

Rising stiffly, Ballard assisted the girls to their feet; then, as if walking in a trance, led the way down the rocky mountain side. "Well," he broke the silence as the little group reached a much-travelled path close to the cabin, "what do you think of it?"

"It's not moonshiners," declared Cora. "No fox fire, either. Two cold for fox fire to-night," Ballard shivered. "It will snow to-morrow."

If Elizabeth had any theories regarding the mysterious light, she did not voice them. They marched on in silence and as they stalked along, the moon coming out from behind Big Black Mountain flooded the hills with a glorious light. The moonlight fell upon a broad square surface which sent it flitting back. The very flash sent a cold chill shooting up the youngest girl's spine, for the bright surface was the face of a tombstone.

Old James McGregor, who had carved all simple sandstone shafts that marked the graves of his fellow mountaineers for half a century, had discovered a great boulder lying at the base of a limestone cliff, close beside the river. This rock, which was ten feet across and twice as high, was harder than any granite. A curious deposit, perhaps of meteoric origin, it had captured the old tombstone maker's fancy. "This," he had said, "shall be my tombstone."

"You can't move it," objected his friends. "Don't need to. Here beneath the cliff, beside the river shall be my grave. If he had purchased the bit of land upon which the boulder rested, had purchased new cutting instruments of finest tempered steel, and had begun the task of squaring and smoothing that dark adamantine surface. All his spare time for four years went to this task. At his death it was found that he had squared and finished off a surface ten feet across, which slanted slightly toward the crest of the mountain, was so perfectly polished that it caught and reflected the first rays of the morning.

To Elizabeth the stone stood only for a lonely grave. To Ballard it suddenly suggested a possibility. "It might be true," he told himself, "and if it was, if it only could be, then there will be a chance to return to school once more!" "Girls," he said, suddenly turning to his companions, "you be at Uncle Zeb's north window at a quarter of nine to-morrow night. Be watching for the phantom light."

"What good will that do?" asked Cora. "Didn't we see it to-night, right close up, and what did we find out?" "To-morrow the light may be different." On the remainder of the journey home, though the girls questioned him eagerly, Ballard would say no more.

That night it snowed. The next day it thawed, but again at six it cloudburst and a dumpy sprinkling of white sifted down over the bleak, leafless mountain sides.

At eight-thirty next night, sitting astride a brown pony, his uncle's only horse, Ballard might have been seen close beside the railway track a little way up from the station at Ages Creek. Here and there along the tracks were coal mines. At each mine there was a station. A mile further up, close to Ballard's home was the station called Dog Wood Bend. The twice-a-day local train was due to go up the valley in a few minutes. "Conductor and engineer already run in at Aunt Sally's for a cup of coffee and doughnuts," he mumbled to himself. "That'll give me time enough." His mind was working fast. His spirits were light with hope. He thought first of the mysterious light; then of old Uncle Jimmie's gleaming gravestone.

Ballard was suddenly aroused, for the

train was coming round the curve. A moment later, having watched the engineer and fireman leave their engine for Aunt Sally's kitchen, he leaped from his horse, sprang for the engine, climbed the cowcatcher, and having drawn a square of cloth from his pocket in a moment's time, completed the task of lying this cloth over the face of the engine's headlight. Having accomplished this, he hurriedly mounted his horse and raced away up the river. "Beat 'em," he muttered to the pony.

He did beat the train to the next station. Having hitched his pony to a sapling in a dark corner, he walked beside the track and, before the engine had come to a standstill, leaped upon the cowcatcher and snatched the cloth away. He was not seen by the engineer and fireman, who came lumbering forward.

"What you know about that, Hill?" the fireman exclaimed. "The 'shinin' white again. I'd of swore it showed red."

"So would I." The men squinted at the headlight for a moment; then went back to their cab, two very much puzzled men.

As for Ballard, he was hurrying to his uncle's cabin. "Well," he exclaimed as he burst into the cabin, "how did the light look to-night?"

"Didn't look," replied Cora, solemnly. "There wasn't any."

"Wasn't—?" Ballard's face grew suddenly sober.

"Not the least sign," corroborated Elizabeth.

"That—that, why, that's awful queer," Ballard left the cabin in a somber mood. What had happened? Had he been wrong? Was the prize lost? He could not bear to think it was, and yet, what was he to think?

His way home led down the river past Uncle James' grave. As he came opposite it, he let out a low exclamation; then vaulting a rail fence, went over to the great boulder tombstone. "That," he said solemnly, "explains it. Covered with snow." The usually shining surface of the stone was covered with dull, dead white, clinging snow.

Next day the snow was gone. For four days after that the people of Ages Creek talked of but one thing, of the phantom light. That light was behaving mysteriously indeed.

As for the smiling trio, Elizabeth, Cora, and Ballard, they did not seem the least bit disturbed. Soon a visitor came to the region, he was the scientist who had offered the prize. Ballard had sent for him. At Ages Creek Station, after fusing with the engine headlight, Ballard hurried the scientist into a saddle and away they raced up the river road.

"Here," the boy exclaimed as he halted at a spot where two oaks, breathless young ladies were waiting, "you can see it here Professor."

The next moment, as the train came thundering up the creek, her headlight sent a splash of red over them.

"What—" "The light!" exclaimed Ballard. "Watch it! The phantom light on the hill!"

"Why!" exclaimed the professor, "I've turned red since I saw it last."

"Yes," replied Ballard. "Easy enough to understand." In a few words he explained the phantom light was but the light of the engine reflected to the mountain side by the unusual tombstone. "The fact," he concluded, "that when I tied a red handkerchief over the headlight the phantom turned red, proves that my theory is correct."

"Proves it conclusively!" agreed the scientist. "The prize is yours."

Once the cause of the light had been discovered, it was not difficult to solve the mystery of its variations. It did not appear in summer. This was because a dense clump of heavily leaved trees growing between the strange tombstone and the railway track had shut off the light.

Ballard, Cora and Elizabeth have long since returned to college, but their mountain friends will not soon cease marveling and boasting over the way their three young friends solved the mystery of the phantom light. "Beat the best science folks of the world," they often add, "Beat 'em all hollow."

Miller's Worm Powders will purge the stomach and intestines of worms so effectively and so easily and painlessly that the most delicate stomach will not feel any inconvenience from their action. They recommend themselves to mothers as a preparation that will restore strength and vigor to their children and protect them from the debilitating effects which result from the depredations of worms.

EQUALITY Some people would have you believe that, because all men are created free and equal, that all people are equal. That sounds silly, when you stop to think about it. If you go ahead and work and educate yourself and make a big success, you are better than the fellow who is too lazy to work, to educate himself, or to make a success. He had a chance to keep on being your equal, but when he refused he failed to keep up.

The liquor drinkers try to tell us that everyone deserves equal rights, and that they should be allowed to sell and drink intoxicating liquor when they want it. That is a poor doctrine of equality, that will make a man, who is respectable when he is sober, drunk, and then let him go home to beat his wife, who, being sober, is more than his equal in decency, but is not his equal in strength. Or is it not poor equality that will deliberately give him the whip until he becomes intoxicated, and takes all his money, while his family have to go without food? Those are the conditions that existed everywhere before prohibition. Some people call them myths nowadays, they do not exist anymore, because we have prohibition. We do not want any more of that sort of "equality."

THE OTHER FELLOW'S JOB

What is it that makes the other fellow's job attractive? Is it because he gets at it with such a display of pleasure that it looks like a soft snap? Anyone who looks with longing eyes at some other person happily, comfortably, and profitably employed will do well to make a critical study of the elements that enter into the position and the worker before being envious, for envy quickly drives out happiness and usefulness.

A young man who looked with envy at a trim, dapper young bank clerk, and thought how wonderful it would be to have a job that took him from nine in the morning until three-thirty in the afternoon in a clean, well-lighted room, suddenly had the chance to take up that kind of work. "Why the bank even has an adding machine to prevent errors and all interest is computed from a table already worked out," he boasted to a friend. "I never dreamed that Uncle James would give me a place in his bank. My future success is assured. Why, it is worth much, my father says, just to associate with successful men."

The young man quickly found out that his father's remark was correct. He discovered that his Uncle James was not only a successful man, but he had the faculty of helping others to get on the road to success, for he not only worked hard himself but required that all in his employ do the same. In bitterness of soul the youth complained to a friend who worked near him that relationship did not seem to count with a man who could make his own nephew go to night school to improve his English and penmanship and other studies, and who made him remain after banking hours to help with whatever work was on hand, even when he knew that the said nephew was an ardent baseball player. In fact, the young man had been forced to resign from the team or lose his place in the bank. Whereupon the other worker informed the nephew that relationship did count, for if any other person had shown the spirit that the boy had, and had made as many errors, he would have been dismissed without mercy. The young fellow who gave the sound advice and information was the very youth he had once thought of as having a soft and easy task.

There is no job worth having that has not its difficulties and responsibilities, and many of them. Perhaps everyone has read the old story of the chained burdened mortals had to cast their troubles on a large heap and choose instead the burden that somebody else had laid down. In a short time each was back for the burden he had become accustomed to carrying, and all went home better satisfied. If it helps you to know that somebody is probably envying you, your shoulders will square themselves and your head will go up. You can assume an air of contentment, at least and get in line for promotion. The best recommendation for a bigger job is the air of doing the present work as if it absorbed your whole mind and thought. That is indeed the result which comes to the worker who envies no one, but does his best in the hope of a bigger job, and one with more hard work and responsibility along in the future. Overflowing one job brings a bigger one, not envying the other fellow—Hilda Richmond.

LIKE A LAMB!

The girl: "Do you've seen Daddy, darling? Did he behave like a lamb?" Sultor, (grimly): "Absolutely! Every time I spoke he said 'Bah!'"

LOYALTY

How our hearts swell on Armistice Day, or the first of July; but when it comes to everyday patriotism and everyday loyalty, one sometimes ignores his obligations.

A young man seeing a smooth stretch of road before him stopped on the gas and broke the speed limit. Of course his excuse was that it was an hour when no one was on the road, that he had a new machine in good repair, and that he was a skilled driver. All of which excuses counted for naught, and the officer was right. The law was made for all and all should obey it.

Loyalty means loving one's country enough so that there is no wish to disobey the laws. It means that whether we think the law is just or right we shall live up to it. It means standing by our officials when they are law enforcing beings and supporting everything that makes for the betterment of our nation. The young man or the young woman who says loudly that it is worse than useless to vote is a poor citizen.

Loyalty means more than just standing for one's country. It means holding to the ideals of the home, the school, the church, the community, and the refined social life. It is the very essence of patriotism that means rendering "an honest and a perfect man" wherever placed so far as it is possible. It is not throwing up the hat with loud hurrahs to-day and breaking the law to-morrow. It is a steady, progressive, sensible everyday appreciation of the best country on which the sun shines to-day, and determination to live and die for her ideals. Wicked men have fought bravely for their native land in time of great stress and strain, but it takes a good man to be a peace patriot.

THE BALANCED LOAD

In the western mountains we sometimes see little burros climbing steep trails with such a load on their backs that strangers feel the utmost sympathy for them. The probability is however, that the burro does not need any pity. His load is so well-balanced and packed so skillfully that he does not mind the weight. Let a novice try to load a pack animal, and the results will be very different.

There is much to be learned from the way the burro carries his load. It is not work that kills so much as that done at the wrong time or in the wrong way. Worry sets the pack to slipping, and changes an easy task to an impossible one. Anyone can carry a big load if it is properly balanced.

Gas on Stomach Is Dangerous

Gas, pain, bloating and sourness after eating almost always mean "too much acid" in the stomach. The condition is dangerous. Acid irritates the stomach lining and may lead to Ulcers. Gas forms and presses against the heart. The stomach needs an alkaline. Burated Magnesia—powder or tablets—is the ideal method of getting safe, quick, lasting relief. It neutralizes the excess acid, restores the stomach and sets up the gas, stops the pain and sourness. Food digests naturally. It must give prompt relief or money back say druggists everywhere who sell it on this iron clad guarantee.

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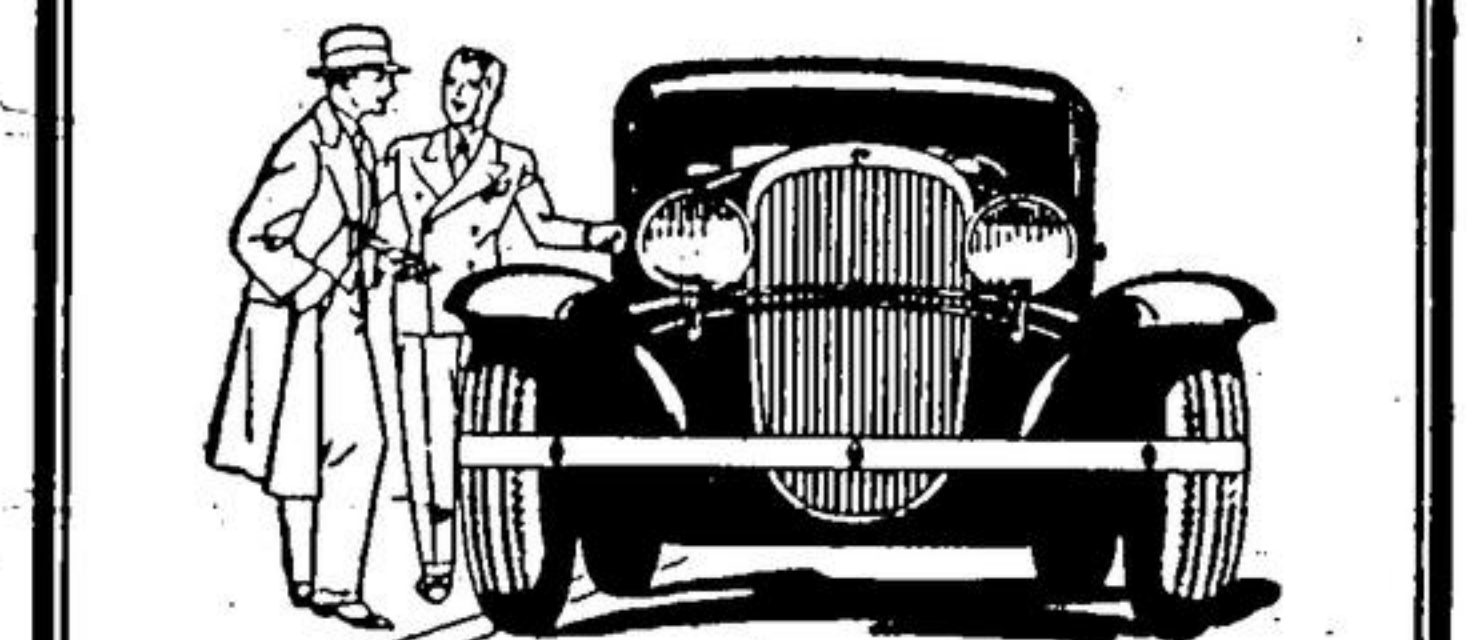
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