



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Christmas Ghost

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

In front of Jane White's house roared and surged, beating the rocky shores with unfailing tides, the great Atlantic. The waves floating an occasional fishing vessel, were all that passed before her front windows. From gazing all her life at such stern and mighty passers, the woman's face had gotten a look of inflexible peace. Jane White looked as if she would always do her duty, but as if she would spare neither herself nor her friends, if they came in the way; as if nothing could interpose between herself and her high tide mark, not even her own happiness nor that of others.

She was not an old woman, but she seemed to have settled into that stability of old age which comes before the final greatest change of all. Her days were absolutely monotonous. She lived alone, she kept her old house in order, she made her simple garments; always on Saturdays she harnessed her old horse into the wagon, and drove to the village three miles away for groceries; on Sundays she drove as regularly to church. These simple excursions for bodily and spiritual food were all that brightened her life. There were only two houses near hers. In one of them lived a bedridden old woman, and her elderly son and daughter; in the other, David Gleason. The bedridden old woman and the son and daughter had not been on friendly terms with Jane for years, and they had not entered each other's houses. Sometimes Jane used to look down the road to the gray slant of the Rideing house rising out of the hollow, with a scowl of dissent. She could hate with vigor, in spite of the severe peace of her expression. There was a mighty grudge between them. Once the son, Thomas Rideing, had paid attention to Jane White (that was in her mother's day), and Thomas's mother and sister had interfered, and broken off the match. They had told stories as to Jane's temper and poor housekeeping, and the young man had believed them. He had ceased courting Jane, and she had known the reason. Once afterward, coming home from church, she had stopped her wagon in the narrow, sandy road, beside the Rideing team, and taxed the mother and sister with it openly. Thomas had been driving his old gray horse. His mother and sister sat one on each side of him — that was before the old woman got the hurt which laid her up for life. Jane's mother sat at her left hand, quivering with resentment. She had been a wiry little woman, with a fierce temper.

"Whoa!" said Jane to her horse. Then she spoke out her mind once for all to Sarah Rideing and her mother. "I know just what you've said about me; you

needn't think I don't," said she.

"And it's all lies, every word of it," said her mother, in a panting voice.

"We've got ears, and we've heard the loud talkin' when the windows were open and the wind our way!" Sarah Rideing had replied, with a vicious click of thin lips. Sarah Rideing was pretty, with a hard, sharp prettiness.

"And we've seen the clothes on the line," said her mother. Mrs. Rideing wore a false front, and that and her bonnet were grotesquely twisted to one side.

"We ain't never had a word in our family betwixt us, and as for our clothes, I'd be ashamed to hang such lookin' things as yours be out on the line!" panted Jane's mother.

"We've got eyes and we've got ears," repeated Sarah Rideing.

"Then I should advise your mother to look in the glass when you get home, and set her wig an' her bunnit straight," said Jane's mother, unexpectedly.

"Don't, mother," whispered Jane. Then she shouted g'lang to her horse, as did Thomas Rideing to his, but Jane passed him. Thomas had not spoken a word during the whole; he left the talking to the women. He had sat still, with his rather clumsy, good-humored face fixed on his horse's ears. He was a little flushed; otherwise he showed no sign of agitation. "Thomas Rideing is dreadful woodeny, anyhow; you ain't missed much," Jane's mother had observed, as they sped along the sandy road. Once she looked back and saw, with that glee over petty revenge which is often seen in an old woman who has lived a narrow life, old Mrs. Rideing trying to straighten her front piece and her bonnet, which was trimmed with tall, nodding purple flowers. "She'd better talk," said she. "She'd better get on her own bunnit and wig straight before she talks about other folks not being neat."

"I most wish you hadn't said that," said Jane.

"Why not, I'd like to know?"

"I wish you hadn't. It didn't have anything to do with it. It's like sticking in pins when folks have come at you with hammers."

"I hope you ain't goin' to get cracked because Thomas Rideing has jilted you," said her mother, sharply.

Jane laughed. "I ain't one of the kind to be cracked," said she. And she spoke the truth. She had taken the young man's attentions as a matter of course, very much as she had always taken the unfolding of the leaves in the spring. This was something which came to most women, and it seemed to be coming to her. When she saw that she was mistaken, she no more thought of questioning the

justice of it, than she would have done if a cloud which promised rain had cleared away to fair weather, or the bush which budded last spring had failed to do so this. Matters of that kind she relegated entirely to a higher Power, and it was the easier for her to do so since Thomas Rideing was not a young man to awaken easily any girl's imagination. He was such a solid, incontrovertible fact of clumsy flesh and blood, and slowly, steadily working brain, that he could arouse only observation and acquiescence — never dreams. Jane was fully alive to the humiliation of being jilted, and wrathful as to the interference of Thomas's sister and mother, but in reality that, and the stigma cast upon her temper and her neatness, hurt her more at the time than the cessation of the young man's nightly visits. Ever afterward the clothes which flaunted from the White line shone like garments of righteousness, as, indeed, they had done before. Jane White's little domicile fairly shone with cleanliness, as did her person. Not a hair was out of place on her head; she was clean as one of the wave-washed pebbles on the beach. As for her temper, her mother died soon afterward, and there was no one for her to attack with a loud tongue, as she had been accused of doing, unless, indeed, she attacked that hard Providence in whose shaping of her destiny she believed. She was absolutely alone from one week's end to the other, since she and the Rideings never exchanged calls, and as for David Gleason, he was a single man, and many said an underwit, and he kept to himself, and never went into another house than his own, and Jane certainly could not call upon him. He was a small, fair-haired man, who had come to the place and built his little shack some ten years ago. Nobody knew from whence he came, nor anything about him. He seemed to be quiet and peaceable, and to have enough money for his simple needs, and the stigma of underwit had somehow attached itself to him from his secrecy. People argued that a man would be likely to tell something to his credit if there was anything to tell, and as nobody could imagine him to be a criminal with such a physiognomy, they concluded that he must be lacking in his intellects. He was commonly said to be love-cracked.

Sometimes Jane used to see this man going down the road, moving with a gentle shuffle and slight stoop, and wonder if he were love-cracked. Now and then she felt inclined to ask him to ride, when she passed him on the way to church — he kept no horse — but she never did. The man used to look after her, sitting up straight in her wagon, and disappearing between the scrubby pines of the coast country, with admiration, as any man might have done. The red coil of hair on the back of her head gleamed under her bonnet like a mat of red gold, she held her head and shoulders superbly. She was, in fact, a very handsome woman. The severe repose of her face had kept wrinkles at bay, and she had one of those rare complexions which the sea-air does not tan, and seam, and harden, but awakens to life and rosy color. People used to say that there wasn't a young girl that went to church who was any handsomer than Jane White; still, she had

never had an opportunity to marry since Thomas Rideing deserted her. Everybody, in fact, believed her to be a slovenly housekeeper, and to have a bad temper. A fire of scandal is a hard thing to stamp out, and the sparks fly wide, and kindle afar.

Jane lived alone, with a sort of rigid acquiescence to the will of the Lord, and a smouldering hatred of the human instruments who had brought it to pass. In spite of her severe calm of demeanor, she had the natural weaknesses and longings of her kind. There were times, as the years went on, when she longed for Thomas Rideing to come again, as she had never longed at first. She was often afraid alone in her house, especially in the winter time. She confessed her fears to no one, hardly to herself. "What good does it do to be afraid? I know I've got to live alone, and there's no way out of it," she said. "I might as well get over it first as last." But she never was able to conquer her nervous fears. Often when the murmur of the waves on the shingle below the bank on which the house stood arose to a roar, and the winter wind was shaking the walls, this lonely human soul in the midst of it would light her candle, and peer about the house for the evil which she seemed to feel to be present; then she would extinguish her candle, and, shading her eyes, press her face close to the window, but she could see nothing except the wild drive of the storm outside. Then the saying in the Bible about the "Prince of the Powers of the Air" would come to her mind, and if she had been a Catholic she would have crossed herself. A vague fear, which was none the less terrible because it was vague, seemed to hold her as in a vise. However, Jane White's health, in spite of her sensitive nerves, was superb. She had never an ache nor ail until two days before Christmas, ten years after her mother died. Then she had a sudden attack of rheumatism, after a spell of damp, warm, unseasonable weather. It was all she could do to hobble about the house. When it came to going to the well for water, she thought at first she could never manage it. Finally she succeeded, fairly hitching herself over the ground, one step at a time. She thought of having the doctor, but she had no one to send for him, unless she could waylay some one passing. Both the Rideing and the Gleason houses were out of hailing distance, and had they not been, she would not have asked any of the dwellers therein to go for the doctor, unless it had been David Gleason. She thought that she might ask him, if she were to see him going by — he looked good-natured. But she did not see him nor any one passing that day. It was midwinter, and toward noon the snow began to fall. The lonely woman thought dejectedly that she didn't know what she was going to do. The stitch in her back was no better; she had no remedies to apply to it; she saw no likelihood of getting the doctor. It was much as ever she could do to keep up her fire and make herself a cup of tea at night-fall. A sense of utter loneliness, which was fairly desolation, smote her as she sat alone that evening. She heard the wind roar and the waves break, and the dash of the sleet on the window. She seemed to herself loneliness personified — one little human spark

in the midst of an infinity of space and storm. At nine o'clock she went to bed. She slept upstairs. She had left the little bedroom on the first floor since her mother died. Her chamber was icy cold. She had heated a soapstone, and she rolled herself in an old flannel blanket, and clambered into bed with groans of pain.

It was a long time before she went to sleep; then she slept soundly for a few hours. It was perhaps four o'clock when she awoke with a shock of deadly terror. She knew some one was in the house. She was no longer suspicious that some one was in the house; this time she knew. The storm was still howling outside. She could hear the constant surge of the ocean, and the small drive of the sleet on the window. The room was absolutely dark; it must be still far from the winter dawn. She was sure that there was some one in the house.

She reached out for the matches which she always kept on the table beside her bed, and, as she did so, a cramp of pain seized her from the rheumatism. She nearly screamed, and the matches were gone. She usually moved them from the mantel-shelf when she went to bed, but she must have omitted to do so — it had been so difficult for her to get about the night before. Jane endeavored to rise. She thought she would grope her way across the room to the shelf and get the matches, but the pain in her back was so great that she dare not make the attempt. She said to herself, What if she should fall and break a bone out there in the dark? It seemed to her that she was safer in the bed. So she lay still, listening fearfully. She became more and more convinced that there was somebody in the house. She heard movements, soft and guarded, but plainly evident to a sharp ear, below. Once or twice she was sure that she heard a door open and shut. Later on she heard the pump out in the yard, which had a peculiar creak. She lay bathed in a cold sweat of terror, expecting every moment to hear steps on the stairs; and presently the first cold glimmer of dawn was in the room, and she heard a door shut below — then she heard nothing more. Everything was still.

It was late before Jane succeeded in dragging herself up, with groans and frequent pauses, and getting dressed and down stairs. She felt convinced that the visitor, whoever he was, had gone; but she thought of her mother's silver teaspoons, and the clock, and a gold watch which had belonged to her father and would not go, but was still an impressive gold watch, and very dear to her, and she thought of her table linen, and everything which was of any value; for she had no doubt then that the visitor was a thief.

But when she reached the kitchen, moving by slow and painful stages, she gasped, and stared, and stared again. A bright fire was burning in the stove (she had wondered if she could, by any possibility, make a fire with those pains like screwing knives in her back and shoulders), and the table was laid for breakfast,

and the room was full of the aroma of coffee, for the pot was on the stove, and a pan of something covered with a towel stood on the back, and when she took off the towel fearfully, there were fresh biscuits. Then a nice little bit of beefsteak was in the frying-pan, all ready to cook, and the tea-kettle was full of hot water, and the water-pail in the sink was full. Outside the storm was still raging, but the kitchen seemed like a little oasis of warmth and comfort in the midst of it. Even the geraniums in the south window had been watered. She heard the cat mew, and opened the cellar door. The cat had been out when she went to bed, for she had called her in vain. Somebody had let the cat in and put her down cellar, lest she steal the beefsteak.

"Who let you in?" said Jane feebly to the cat.

She looked at the beefsteak and at the biscuits doubtfully, as if they might be fairy food, and have some uncanny property of harm. "I was out of meat, and to-day's Saturday, and I couldn't have got down to the store," said she; "and I didn't have a mite of bread mixed, and I don't know how I could have done it."

Finally Jane White cooked the beefsteak, poured out a cup of coffee, and ate her breakfast, though it was still with an unreasoning terror. It seemed a kindly deed, and yet it was so unexplained that it struck her with all the horror of the unusual. She ate suspiciously, almost as if she thought the food were poisoned. When she crept into the pantry to put away the dishes, she had another surprise, for she found on the shelf a little roasting piece, two pies, two loaves of bread, a piece of squash cut ready to boil, and some washed potatoes.

Jane looked at them, white as ashes. "My land!" said she. She staggered back to the warm kitchen, sat down, and reflected. She tried to think who could have done it, but she was entirely at a loss. For a moment she had a wild idea of Thomas Rideing and his old love for her, then she dismissed it. "He'd never get round to it," she said to herself. Then she thought of David Gleason, to dismiss that more peremptorily than the other. "There ain't anybody in creation who would do anything like this for me, and what's more, there wasn't anybody knew I had the rheumatism and couldn't do it myself," she argued.

She gave it up. She roasted her meat, and cooked the squash and potato, and remained alone all day. The storm continued until sunset. Then, when the west was a clear, pale gold, the flakes stopped falling, and the earth looked like a white ocean frozen suddenly in the midst of a tumult of rage. As for the real ocean, she could hear the boom of that louder than ever, for its fury does not subside so quickly as that of the earth. It cleared off very cold. Jane heaped her stove with wood when she went to bed (she burned wood from her own woodland), but she feared it would not last until morning, and she feared that she could not get down-stairs to replenish it. As night came on her rheumatism was worse, and then her fears arose to such a pitch that, had it not been for the

cold and her illness, she would actually have gone over to the Rideings. She went to bed, and lay quaking with sheer terror for some time. At last all was still and she fell asleep, to awaken as she had done the night before, at the sounds below. This time her matches were in reach. She struck one and lighted a candle. Then she pulled up the blanket with painful efforts, and wrapped it around her; then she crept out of bed. Along with the woman's timidity was a spirit of investigation. Had she been a man she would have been afraid enough to make an excellent soldier. The battle would have been, for her, the only method of ridding herself of her panic. She could never have borne to cower behind breastworks.

She crawled down stairs, feeling as if she were a stiff lay figure instead of herself. She planted her feet rigidly as if they were wood; every step was agony, but she kept on. At that moment she was more terrified, if anything, to confront the stranger — because he had conferred benefits upon her — than if he had worked her harm. It would not have seemed so uncanny. In spite of her religious training the thought of the supernatural was strong in the woman's mind. She thought of her mother, of her father — how they would have felt to know she was all alone, sick with rheumatism in the winter storm, and God knew what she thought next.

When she opened the kitchen door her face was ghastly, peering over her candle. The kitchen was lighted; the fire burning; she smelled coffee; it was later than she had thought — five o'clock in the morning. She had only a vision of a figure swiftly moving out of sight into the pantry. Then she sprang, with a stab of pain, to the pantry door, and shot the bolt. She had a bolt on the pantry door, because the pantry window had no fastening; but she had never used it. After she fastened it she heard the person whom she had locked in trying to open that window, and said to herself grimly that he could not do it. That north window must be frozen down so hard that it would be impossible to stir it without hot water. The man, whoever he was — she was sure it was a man, there had been no flirt of feminine skirts on that flying figure — must have come in through the cellar. The bulkhead had never had a lock, for Jane and her mother, reasoning with the innocent fatuity of some women, had always said, "Nobody will ever think of coming through the cellar."

The person whom Jane had locked into the pantry did not pound or try to get out. Finally she took the carving-knife from the table — he had been slicing some sausage for her breakfast, apparently — and she went to the pantry door, and leaned her head toward it, curving her body at a careful distance. "Who be you?" said she.

There was no response.

Then she spoke again: "Who be you?"

"A well wisher," came in a feeble voice from the pantry.

Then a cold shiver ran again over the woman. Again the supernatural terror reasserted itself. It was much more alarming that a well wisher should come to her house, and do these kindly deeds for her on this wicked earth the night before Christmas — she remembered with an additional shiver that Christmas Day was dawning — than a burglar. She went over to the kitchen door, and stood there, all ready to run should the person in the pantry make a motion to escape. She kept her eyes riveted on the pantry door. She made up her mind that as soon as it was light enough she would go for the Rideings, no matter how they had treated her in times gone by. It seemed to her that the full day would never come; but at last the light broadened and deepened over the blue hollows and white crests of snow, and then she saw that a nice path was dug from her door to the well. "My land!" said she. She took a shawl off the peg, wrapped it around her, putting one corner over her head; succeeded, after many painful efforts, in getting into her rubbers, and was about to set out when she caught a glimpse of a man's figure going down the road. It was David Gleason going for his milk, which he got from a farmhouse two miles toward the village.

Jane crept out in the yard a little way and called. He heard her, and came shuffling toward her in a light spray of snow.

He had a mild, pleasant face; but Jane, after the prevalent report as to the state of his intellects, felt a little afraid to ask him into the house. "You go to the Rideings, and ask Sarah and Thomas to come right over here as fast as they can," said she. She was almost crying. David Gleason looked at her anxiously. "Anything the trouble, anything I can do?" he began, but she interrupted him. "Go as quick as you can," said she. She was almost hysterical.

It seemed to her an age before she saw David Gleason plod into the Rideing house, and presently he and Sarah, not Thomas, emerge. "Where in the world is Thomas?" she thought. "What good can a woman do?" She was glad to see Gleason returning with Sarah. She thought she would not be afraid of Gleason if Sarah were with him, and nobody knew what was in the pantry.

Jane met them at the door. Suddenly her rheumatism seemed better; she moved quite easily.

Sarah Rideing looked at her half alarmed, half indignant. "What is the matter, Jane White?" said she.

"There's something in the house," replied Jane in an awful voice, and the other woman turned pale.

"What do you mean?"

"There's something in the house. It came last night and made up the fire, and

got breakfast, and got the water, and brought roast meat, and bread, and it came again to-night, and I came down and I locked it into the pantry."

"Did you see it?" asked Sarah, quivering. She grasped Jane's arm hard.

The two old enemies fairly clung together, drawn by mutual terror.

But David Gleason went close to the pantry door.

"It wasn't a woman, I know that," gasped Jane.

"Who's in there?" cried David Gleason.

There was no reply.

"It told me once it was a well wisher," said Jane, and Sarah Rideing trembled like a leaf. The reply struck her much as it had done Jane. Well wishers abroad in the deadly cold of a winter morning might well arouse terror.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I wish Thomas was here," cried Sarah. "I couldn't find him nowheres. I don't know but something has got him. Oh, dear!"

"Who's in there?" demanded David Gleason. He had a firm voice for such a small, slight man.

"He ain't any more half-witted than I be," thought Sarah Rideing.

Then the voice replied again, but with a trifle more emphasis, "A well wisher." Both women started.

"It's Thomas," cried Sarah Rideing. Then she flew to the pantry door and unbolted it. "Thomas Rideing, what be you doin' here?" she demanded. "Be you gone crazy?"

Thomas Rideing, emerging from the cold, blue depths of the frozen pantry, looked at once shamefaced and self-assertive. "You needn't say a word, Sarah," said he. "I saw her having such hard work to get out to the well yesterday mornin', and I knew she'd got the rheumatism, and when the storm begun, and I thought of her all alone over here, I couldn't stan' it, an'," he went on, his voice gathering firmness in spite of an agitation which made him tremble from head to foot, "I — I know it was all a lie you and mother told about her not bein' a good housekeeper. There it was neat as wax here, and she laid up with rheumatism, too, and as for her temper, anybody that can get around at all with the rheumatism, and not say anything to be sorry for, hasn't got much temper, and — I wouldn't have minded one mite if she had."



"I should think you'd gone crazy," said Sarah scornfully, and yet her voice softened.

Thomas looked pitifully at Jane. "It don't seem as if I could stan' havin' you live here alone any longer," he said brokenly, as if his unhappiness over her loneliness were the only thing to be considered. It was the refinement of masculine selfishness, but Jane liked it.

"I didn't know you thought so much of me, Thomas," said she; then her face flamed.

"Well, I haven't got anything to say; you must suit yourself," Sarah said, still in that softened voice; then she and Gleason went out.

Thomas Rideing approached Jane, and put his arm around her. "Ain't you been afraid here all alone?" said he.

"Yes, I have; but I didn't suppose you cared."

"I did," said he. "There's no use in rakin' up bygones, but I know I've treated you mean."

"Yes, you have," admitted Jane impartially, but her eyes upon his face were tender.

"It wasn't so much because I was afraid you were a bad housekeeper, and bad-tempered, I didn't believe it; and I wouldn't have minded if you had been, but I backed out because mother and Sarah felt so. I guess mother will feel different now, but I can't help it if she don't. As for Sarah, I can't help it either. You ain't goin' to be left alone here any longer. How's your rheumatism, Jane?"

"I guess it's better; I haven't thought of it," replied Jane.

Then the outer door opened suddenly, and Sarah Rideing looked in. David Gleason's face showed over her shoulder. "Wish you a merry Christmas!" said Sarah. Her thin, pretty face was quite transformed by a sudden triumph of the best within her. The man behind her beamed with friendliness toward these people who were nothing to him.

It was suddenly borne in upon the consciousness of Jane White that love and kindness were not such strangers upon the earth as she had thought.

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