

The Haunted House

North Street Tales

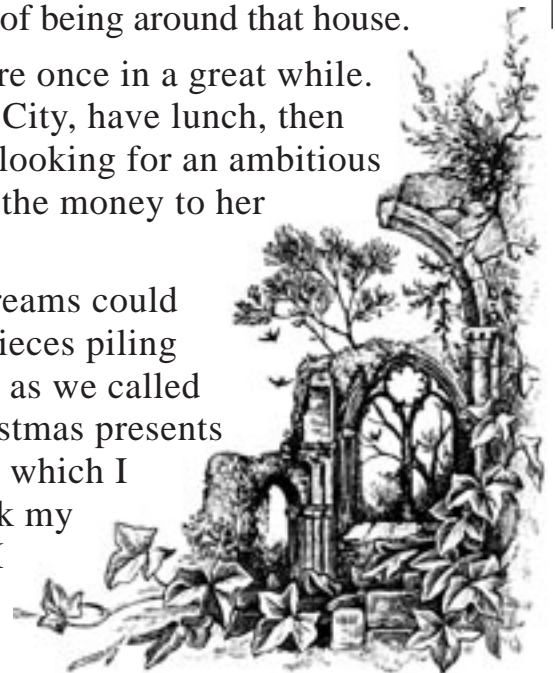
It had been raining most of the day. I had just finished reading my library book when I heard voices coming from the kitchen. I knew the voices; one was mother's the other belonged to Mrs. Burke. Mrs. Burke was a neighbor who lived just a few doors down the street from us. She often came over at teatime to enjoy a cup of tea and a good visit with my parents. I liked her. Many times when she came over she had a little tin pail with her. In that pail was real Irish stew made with lamb stew meat and loaded with vegetables. All that mother had to do was to heat it up and there was our supper. Today, however she didn't have the pail with her as I found out when I came into the kitchen. She was sitting at the table waiting for mother to pour the tea. I asked Ma if I could have some tea. She told me to get a cup into which she poured about a tablespoon of tea, a teaspoon of sugar and then filled the cup with milk. That's what I expected though I knew it really wasn't tea. Youngsters my age would "stunt their growth" if they drank tea or coffee!

Once the tea was poured and the cookies passed, mother sat down and the time came for visiting or at least I thought that was what would happen. Instead, Mrs. Burke turned to me and said, "Would you like to earn some money?" Wow! Would I. I immediately said, "Yes! How much? It turned out that I would be mowing the grass at a house, that I knew only too well, located at the corner of Second and North Streets.

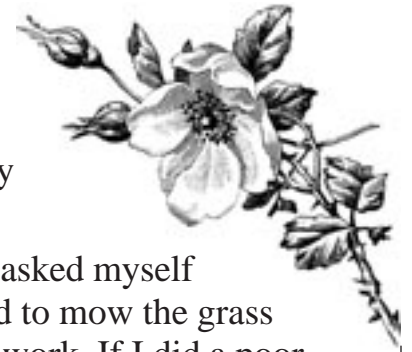
I wasn't comfortable walking by that house even in daylight to say nothing of at night. It had reputation, among the kids that I knew as being HAUNTED. I was trapped and I knew it. I had already said that I wanted to earn some money and when I found out that I would be paid fifty cents every time I mowed the lawn, my yearning for my own money overcame my fears of being around that house.

The people who owned that house only visited there once in a great while. They would arrive in the morning from New York City, have lunch, then depart by evening. Mrs. Burke said that they were looking for an ambitious boy to keep the lawn mowed and they would send the money to her to pay me.

I began to dream of making a fortune and in my dreams could see great piles of those beautiful silver fifty cent pieces piling up. The Sears and Roebuck catalog, the wish book as we called it, had pages and pages of things I could buy. Christmas presents for Mom and Dad, games for me and even a canoe which I could use to travel to far away places. I didn't think my sisters and brother would really want anything so I didn't include them in my plans.



Reality set in soon. In a few days I took our old, iron wheeled, unsharpened lawnmower and wheeled it down the sidewalk to the lawn awaiting my care. It made a metallic thump over every bump in the sidewalk. It was a noisy walk.



The grass hadn't been mowed in quite some time. I groaned and asked myself what I had gotten into. However, I didn't have any options, I had to mow the grass because Mrs. Burke would be checking to see if I had done my work. If I did a poor job my parents would soon hear of it. So I began to mow.

That first mowing took all afternoon. It took two passes with the mower to cut through the grass. I could feel blisters forming on my thumbs from the friction on the wooden handle. It was a warm day so the salty sweat kept getting in my eyes. I was the most miserable kid on the street that afternoon. I could have kicked myself for getting into this mess. At least I didn't have to worry about the ghosts that lurked behind the shuttered windows in the house. However, I did notice that the back of the house looked as if were collapsing into the cellar. I didn't get too close to investigate, figuring it was none of my business. After I got home, mother asked me how it went. I said that we needed a new mower because it wasn't cutting right. She said that Dad would sharpen it when he got home from work. There went my attempt to get a new mower, even though I knew when I said we needed one that there was no money for things like that.

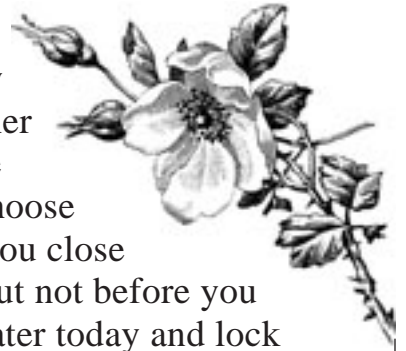
I continued to mow the lawn week after week through the July and into August. There was, unfortunately, lots of rain that summer, so the grass seemed to grow faster than I could mow it. I was earning about two dollars per month, a fortune in my eyes. I was always paid on time in real silver fifty-cent pieces by Mrs. Burke.

One fine Saturday morning I decided to do the front lawn first, then the side and finally out back. It was the reverse order from what I usually did. The mowing went quickly and I was anticipating finishing in time so that I could go to the Saturday matinee at the Riveria Theater. There was a double feature on, a Laurel and Hardy film and a Gene Autry western. I finally came around to do the back lawn. It was the easiest to mow because it was the smallest section. Just as I started I happened to glance over at the house and noticed that the back door was open. I didn't know what to do. After a minute to think about the situation, I decided to finish the mowing, then I would take the mower home stopping at Mrs. Burke's house to tell her about the open door. I rushed up North Street giving no mind to the noise I was making. I pushed the mower into our garage, then went into the house to tell mother that I was going down to tell Mrs. Burke about the door. Then I would be home for lunch before I went to the movies. Well, I thought that everything would work out as I had planned it. I didn't know what awaited me.

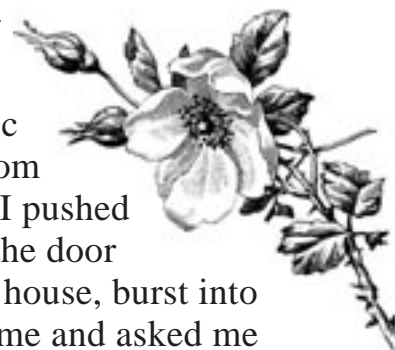
It only took a couple of minutes for me to get to the Burke residence. I knocked on the door. Mrs. Burke answered it and asked me in while she got my fifty cents. She kept the money in her pocket book which she retrieved from the kitchen.

She rummaged around in her pocketbook and finally found my money which she put into my outstretched hand. Then I told her about the open door and asked her what I should do or did she want to go down there and close it. I was hoping she would choose the latter alternative. However all she said was, "Why didn't you close it? Now you get down there and make sure you slam it tight but not before you check inside to see that everything is all right. I will stop by later today and lock it." I saw my Saturday afternoon plans gradually slipping away from me. I was always respectful of adults and obedient to their wishes because that is what my parents had taught me. I had no choice but to do what that kind, generous lady asked me. I ran most of the way back to the house. As I went round the house to the back my pace slowed considerably. I started remembering the stories my friends had told me of strange noises coming from the house and flickering lights that had been seen by passers by. I approached the open back door with caution. The sun was shining but the inside was in shadow because of the closed shutters. I noticed that the door and its frame seemed slanted to one side and I began to wonder how I was to close it. I decided that I had better first check to see that all was OK inside, then try to close the door. Summoning practically every bit of courage I stepped into the kitchen. The floor was slanting to my left and before I could think too much about that I looked in that direction to see that the big coal kitchen range had broken through the floor and had fallen into the cellar. There it lay, on its back surrounded by the dark of the cellar. Only a few rays of light penetrated that gloom, just enough for me to make out that it was the stove down there. I gave that hole a wide circle and went into what was a sitting/dining room. Heavy drapes covered the windows. Cobwebs were hanging from the ceiling, draped over furniture, decorating the corners of the room. It reminded me of some of the scenes in the monster movies that were popular then. I had to pull those dusty drapes back in order to see. There was so much dust disturbed that I sneezed. It was then that I thought I heard a rustling noise from coming from upstairs. A shiver went up and down my spine. My only thought now was to get out of there and run to the safety of my home. However, I also realized that Mrs. Burke would question me about the house so I had better look around.

The next thing that I focused my attention on was the round table in the center of the room. It was covered with what had been a white tablecloth but was now a yellowish color and it was covered with what looked like crumbs. There were four plates on the table with what looked like dried crumbly pieces of cake. Obviously the mice had been nibbling at that cake and scattering the crumbs all over. There were also four cups and saucers, stained with the remains of tea or coffee. Then, I again heard that strange noise from upstairs. This time it seemed to be coming from the stairs that went up from this room. I still had to check what turned out to be the parlor. The door was closed. The hinges squealed as I pushed the door open. The room was dark. I found my way to a window, pushed aside the drapes,



turned around to see another room draped with cobwebs and a center table. Gleaming out of the darkness were two eyes. Panic overwhelmed me. I ran out of that room, through the sitting room and kitchen, and tried to slam the door shut. It wouldn't move. I pushed again. No luck. To heck with it, I thought. I didn't care then if the door was closed or not. I ran most of the way up North Street to my house, burst into the kitchen where Ma had lunch all ready. She took one look at me and asked me what in heaven's name was the matter. I told her the whole story, including seeing those awful eyes. She said that surely must be mistaken and to sit down, eat my lunch, then go down to Mrs. Burke's and tell her all about it. I wasn't very hungry, but managed to eat a hard-boiled egg, bread and butter (oleo) with jelly, and drink my milk. A sugar cookie topped everything off.



Mrs. Burke was a good listener. She heard me out, then said that I was to come along with her. She put on her hat and a sweater and off we went. We walked down to "the house." When we got to the back door she said that the stove falling through the floor had caused the whole back wall to tilt. She would have to write the people in New York about it and ask them what to do. In the meantime she would get her son, Bill, to come down and nail some boards across the open door. Then we went on into the sitting room. I kept looking around for those eyes but saw nothing. I did see a little smile on Mrs. Burke's face. I didn't see anything funny about this at all.

Mrs. Burke then turned to go back through the kitchen. I asked if she wasn't going to check the parlor.

She smiled again and replied, "No." I didn't question her because I was just happy to be getting out of that awful place.

As we emerged from the house I started going out to the North Street sidewalk. Mrs. Burke called me back. I was fearful that she was going to send me back into that dreaded place. Reluctantly, I obeyed her and returned to see what she wanted. She told me to come with her and proceeded to the south side of the house. I had never mowed there because there were huge bushes that covered the narrow strip of land between the house and the house next door. Pushing aside the branches, Mrs. Burke said, "I thought so, I told Bill a month ago that he had to fix that hole in the cellar wall. That's where Mrs. Burdick's cat has been getting into the house." Then she turned to me and once again smiled. I managed to mow the lawn for the rest of that summer but I never did stop crossing the street to avoid walking by the haunted house. Years later some people from Geneseo purchased the house, tore off the collapsed kitchen. Fixed up the interior and made the house their home. Light now shines from the windows at night, light that probably scares away any ghosts that might be thinking of making that house their home.

