

*A True Ghost Story*  
by Judge Clark

Half way up the mountain side, looking down upon the valley of the Cumberland, twenty years ago, stood a country inn, famous for the goodness of its cheer and the heartiness of its host, Cleophas Coote by name.

In the summer of 1850, the “Mountain Home”—so the inn was called—had more than its usual quota of visitors, one of whom had come to die. After a few days he kept his room, and in a few more he breathed his last, whispering the names of loved ones far away.

When the stranger’s trunk was opened, (which was done by the landlord in the presence of two of his guests—one a doctor, the other a clergyman—at least we took him for such, on the strength of his cravat and conversation.) it was found to contain a considerable sum in banknotes. Of these Mr. Coote made a complete list, noting their numbers and denominations; after which he carefully sealed them up, and locked them in a drawer in his own bedroom—facts to which he likewise called the attention of the doctor and the minister.

On the evening of the funeral, the conversation, as was natural, took a serious turn.

From death the transition was easy to the subject of departed spirits and their *status*. And here an animated discussion sprang up between the clergyman and the doctor.

“Whatever may or mayn’t be,” interposed our worthy host, “there’s *one* thing some of you may have reason to believe in before you leave these parts.”

“What’s that?” I ventured to ask.

“The Man of the Mountain,” Mr. Coote answered.

“And who’s he?” inquired several.

“That’s the question,” said Mr. Coote. “I can only tell you what *I* saw of him; many others describe him differently. It was early one morning, as I stood on a spur of the mountain looking down in to the valley, that I saw at a distance, and gazing straight at me, a frightful object of human shape, *at least forty feet high—*”

“Oh, Mr. *Coote!*” screamed the ladies.

“It’s every word true, and I can bring twenty witnesses who’ll tell a similar story.”

“Well, what did you do?” someone inquired.

“What any sensible man would,” said Mr. Coote—“took to my heels and ran away.”

It was plain out host was not joking; and all felt convinced that he thought he had seen what he said he had.

That there is a dash of superstition, even in the most skeptical, is a saying as true as trite. I doubt if anyone ever slept quite comfortably in a chamber reputed to be haunted, or crossed a graveyard alone in the dark, without wishing himself safely over. Mr. Coote's account, it was easy to see, made a deeper impression than any of us would have cared to own; and there is reason to believe that more than one inmate of the Mountain Home went to sleep that night with their heads covered.

I had lain for some time musing on Mr. Coote's curious statement, and had just fallen asleep, when I was aroused by a loud shout, followed by a succession of terrific screams. Springing from the bed and opening the door, I ran straight in the direction of the sounds, which led me straight to Mr. and Mrs. Coote's chamber.

Before I had time to ask what was the matter, half the lodgers had appeared on the scene, and Mr. Coote, lamp in hand and followed by his spouse—both pale and trembling—rushed into the hallway.

“The ghost! The ghost!” the pair exclaimed together.

“The ghost—what ghost?” queried all the spectators at once.

“The dead man's ghost!” cried poor Coote, in a voice shaken with terror. “We had gone to sleep with our lamp burning, mother and I. Mother's a light sleeper. The least noise wakes her. I might have dozed through it, if she hadn't nudged me. When I woke, she was all in a tremble and too frightened to speak. She motioned toward the bureau where the dead man's money was; and sure enough, there he stood in his winding-sheet, his face pale and ghastly as we saw it in his coffin! He had either taken the key from my pocket, or brought another in his own; for at once he proceeded to unlock the drawer and take out the packet of money, after which he passed out, and mother and I gave the alarm as soon as we were able.”

The first idea of those self-possessed enough to have any, was that a skillful robbery had been committed, and that it might not be too late to discover the thief. Lights were procured and an immediate search begun. The first object found was the skeptical doctor, standing in the passage, shivering and speechless. His eyes were fixed, as if spell-bound, on the door of the chamber lately occupied by the dead man.

“What's the matter, doctor?” I hastened to ask.

It was not till the question had been several times repeated that an answer was given.

“Has no one else seen it?” he at length commanded strength to utter.

“Seen what?”

“The ghost! the ghost!” he cried, repeating the words of father and mother Coote.

Being further questioned, the doctor made a revelation that indeed was passing strange. He had retired to his room, but not to bed, at the time of the alarm. Hurrying into the passage, he met a ghastly, sheeted form, whose progress he attempted to stay. It stopped and slowly raised its hand toward heaven, whence, in a solemn, unearthly voice, came the words “*Touch him at thy soul’s peril!*” The apparition then vanished into the room recently tenanted by the deceased stranger; and the doctor had remained motionless with fright, till found as already mentioned.

The first thing was to search the apartment in which the specter had taken refuge. The door not being locked, we hurried in; but nothing was discovered but the fact that no one was there, and the impossibility of any person’s having left the chamber, save by the entrance, which the doctor was positive no one had done. The only window of the apartment remained fastened on the inside, and a door communicating with the clergyman’s room, as that gentleman—whom we had some difficulty in waking—pointed out, was bolted on *his* side.

All efforts to unravel the mystery proved abortive. Whatever of spiritual agency the affair involved, two very *material* facts were patent: the dead man’s money was gone from the drawer, and the key found in the lock had been taken from Mr. Coote’s pocket.

Our little community began to be demoralized. Those who didn’t believe the house was haunted, thought there were thieves in it—the upshot being a universal packing up preparatory to a general stampede.

On the morning the first batch was to leave, I very greatly astonished the company by hinting at the propriety of a search of the baggage of every guest for the missing money—a course I had reasons for, as the reader will see presently.

In my customary ramble that morning I had made two important discoveries. Standing on a projecting rock, with my back to the sun, and looking across a glen from which a dense fog was rising, I saw a gigantic human figure, quite as tall as that described by Mr. Coote. It stood facing, and seemed looking intently at me. I was too much amazed at first to note, as I did a moment after, that its garb was the perfect counterpart of my own. Raising my hand to secure my hat against a sudden puff of wind, the motion was repeated by the figure with grotesque exactness, as were several other gestures I made by way of experiment. It was unquestionably *my own image*, reflected by the fog, and enlarged and thrown forward as by a concave mirror.

So much for the “Man of the Mountains.”

My next discovery bore upon the ghost question. Certain sounds at the base of the rock cause me to stoop forward and look in that direction. I saw a man in the act of prying up a stone. From beneath it he took a paper packet, and then walked hurriedly away; but the glimpse I had caught of his features filled me with even greater astonishment than had the Man of the Mountain. Suffice it to say, I felt that a search for the missing money might not prove fruitless.

When I proposed it, many grumbled at it as a needless annoyance. Nevertheless none felt at liberty to object. When everything had been overhauled to no purpose, I ventured to incur still further displeasure by laying my hand on the clergyman's arm and saying;

"I now propose a *personal* search, and to begin with this gentleman!"

"Fie! For shame!" chorused the ladies.

"This is really going a little too far," expostulated the doctor.

"It is an insult to my cloth!" said the minister, looking more frightened than indignant, however.

"His cloth!" interrupted a stranger who had just arrived—"that's the only clerical thing about him. I'm detective McClutchem, in quest of the biggest thief in America, *and there he is!*"

In a trice the officer had his game in hands and quicker than it takes to tell it, from one of the pseudo-parson's pockets was produced the parcel I had seen taken from under the stone. Mr. Coote found it to contain the identical bank-notes described in his list, of which he resumed charge, till they should be reclaimed by the late owner's friends.

The guests about to leave unpacked their trunks, and concluded to remain. The detective and his prisoner had urgent business elsewhere. In answering pressing solicitations, I gave a detailed account of the morning's discoveries. Everything was plain enough now. A sheet from his own bed, and a little chalk, had transformed the mock-minister into a very respectable ghost, while the communication between the two chambers accounted for his mysterious disappearance. The only puzzling fact remained was the voice that had so alarmed the doctor. But that, too, was finally cleared up. The thief was an accomplished *ventriloquist*.

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