

Dead End Job: A Critical Edition of “The Transferred Ghost” by Frank Stockton

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The following critical edition of Frank R. Stockton’s “The Transferred Ghost” focuses on the ways in which the rise in spiritualism parallels the emergence of the middle class and white-collar positions in the United States in the late 1800s. By analyzing Stockton’s story along with other comedic ghost stories from the period, this edition will show how humor hid deeper anxieties about the era’s economic and social developments.

General Introduction

Francis Richard Stockton, pen name Frank Stockton, was an American author who wrote primarily science-fiction and fantasy for children and eventually adult novels and short stories. In a 1920 edition of the *Sewanee Review*, Edwin Bowen states, “Stockton shows a delightful quality of humor—not boisterous, irreverent, or exaggerated...but spontaneous and sparkling, bubbling up as if from an inexhaustible fountain” (453). The short biography of Stockton in Bobby Ellen Kimbel’s *Dictionary of Literary Biography* states that Stockton worked as the assistant editor for *St. Nicholas Magazine* “so diligently that he was forced to take a recuperative vacation... because he had become temporarily blind” (343). This detail from Stockton’s biography shows that he knew something of the inescapable and debilitating nature of white collar and office work, and it is this perspective that is partially channeled into his writing of “The Transferred Ghost.”

Stockton initially gained popularity for his shorter, comedic stories. Bowen suggests that, “the secret of his success with the short story lies in his droll humor” (Bowen 462). “The Transferred Ghost” certainly conveys his brand of humor as the ghost repeatedly appears in inopportune situations between the protagonist and Madeline, the woman he is pursuing, which leads to amusing misinterpretations. Stockton’s use of humor can

be explained by his alleged genial disposition. In Henry L. Golemba’s study, *Frank R. Stockton*, Stockton’s wife, Marian Stockton, is quoted as saying, “He shed happiness all around him, not from conscious effort but out of his own bountiful and loving nature....He usually looked either upon the best or the humorous side of life” (Golemba 73). This humor is probably what keeps “The Transferred Ghost” from seeming too gloomy, despite its haunting idea that even the dead care about the corporate ladder.

Stockton’s humor, although central to much of his writing, eventually led to a decline in the popularity of his work because, according to Kimbel, “he seem[ed] too amused by life for twentieth-century tastes” (Kimbel 345). Stockton wrote “The Transferred Ghost” in 1881, at the height of the Industrial Revolution, a time when his humor and optimistic style could still be appreciated in a nation on the economic rise. Like “The Transferred Ghost,” both of the contextual documents in this edition use a similar tone and humor to discuss ghosts, class, and capitalism. “A New Business” was written in 1876, and “A Benevolent Ghost” was written in 1884, around the same time as “The Transferred Ghost” and in the same time period in which the decline in popularity of comedy had not yet begun.

During the time that Stockton wrote, two main cultural and economic issues were at the forefront and are key for understanding “The Transferred Ghost”: the Industrial Revolution (along with the rise of the white collar

worker) and Spiritualism. The Industrial Revolution was a time when “scarcely another cultural phenomenon affected as many people or stimulated as much interest as did spiritualism” (Moore 4). This fascination was so widespread that religious philosopher Theodore Parker stated, “[I]t seems more likely that spiritualism would become the religion of America than in 156 that Christianity would be the religion of the Roman Empire” (qtd. in Moore 4). It seemed that everyone from the uneducated to justices of the Supreme Court participated in pursuits associated with spiritualism. Public events such as séances, medium communication, automatic writings, and haunted tours inspired many facets of American imagination, including scientific experiments, attempts to correspond with passed loved ones, religious experiences, and entertainment.

In its treatment of ghosts, Stockton’s “The Transferred Ghost” is social satire that is very fitting of the times. Another prominent issue that he was responding to was the influx of workers and new technological streamlining of labor, which allowed for a new kind of work, commonly referred to as “the desk job.” “In the heyday of the Industrial Revolution, during the nineteenth century, the nation moved from a tool-based to a machine-based system of production” (Gini 34). These radical changes of the industrial process led to greater need for organization and management. This new managerial work created the white-collar class of jobs: “By the early 20th century, white-collar was growing at a faster rate than industrial labor. Whereas in 1870 only 6 percent of the labor force held jobs as managers, salaried professionals, sales-people, and office workers, by 1910 white-collar work encompassed some 13.5 percent of the total workforce” (Greenberg and Watts 56). This doubling of white-collar workers shows how radically the business world had changed.

Stockton’s own view of the business world, as portrayed in his story about the War of 1812 called “The Great War Syndicate,” is that it is devoid of excitement. Kimbel says of this story that it suggests that Stockton thought that “business consortia” could end war because it would “strip war of all glamour and romance. His war is made to be as dull, mechanical, and unheroic as the filling out of insurance forms” (Kimbel 344). Just as Stockton believed that business could make war void of its allure, in “The Transferred Ghost” he shows a mundane, bleak, even humdrum afterlife in which souls are transferred in a business-like manner.

Hinckman’s ghost treats his haunting like a desk job

within a capitalist society. He, like the white-collar workers of the time, must compete with other ghosts for employment. The ghostship he gets stuck with, Hinckman’s, did not work out as the ghost imagined. He complains about his employment’s redundancy and inconvenience as one would complain about a dead end desk job. This terrifying theme—that we can be forced to keep working awful jobs even after we die—in an otherwise lighthearted story is an example of what Henry L. Golemba describes as Stockton’s habit of “[i]ncluding sinister truths but camouflaging them with pleasantries” (Golemba 51). If we follow the idea that the class system is the sinister truth, it is reasonable to assume that Stockton was critical of some aspects of the class system but saw no way out of it, hence forcing his ghost character into a dead-end job.

While Stockton believed in the virtues of business, he saw the worker, not the employer as virtuous. He had a certain distrust of both the upper and lower classes. Golemba cites how “In fantasy stories like his still-popular children’s story ‘The Griffin and the Minor Canon’ the lower and upper classes are equally vilified; only children and those in middle-class positions like the minor canon are kind, truthful, and trustworthy” (52). This comes through in his protagonist, an upper-class man who is generally useless and is untruthful to Madeline about the ghost.

Given his affection for the middle class, it is not surprising that Stockton’s texts mostly appealed to them. Golemba describes “The ‘Middle Brow’ reader who was Stockton’s principal audience” (49). If we ascribe to the ghost in “The Transferred Ghost” a lower class than the narrator, hence the narrator’s derisive comment about “beings of his class” (Stockton 3), it makes sense that it takes his helpful, honest influence to solve the cowardly narrator’s problems. Henry Canby’s *The Age of Confidence* explores this mindset and the idea that the morally upstanding middle class individuals would rise in society, a perspective Stockton clearly shared.

This edition explores Stockton’s as well as wider cultural attitudes towards humor, labor, and capitalism. This edition of “The Transferred Ghost” investigates the ways in which those themes affect the representation of the ghost of John Hinckman and the actions of the story’s protagonist. Furthermore, our analysis of the contextual documents included with this critical edition will illuminate the presence of these themes to show their prevalence in the wider literary culture of the era.

Introduction to “The Transferred Ghost”

“The Transferred Ghost” by Frank R. Stockton is a distinct and amusing piece that presents its characters and situations in a humorous, friendly, and familiar style. Every character, from the nonchalant ghost to the self-conscious protagonist, are relatable to the audience throughout the piece. This story also provides audiences with a new perspective on ghosts’ roles and way of (after)life, and presents the only frightful idea in an otherwise pleasant story: that even dying does not allow one to escape from the constant struggle of capitalism and office jobs. This sinister theme in an otherwise cheerful story overshadows the comedy, and, once realized, haunts the reader long after the laughter dies.

The narrator of Stockton’s story is a young man hopelessly in love with Madeline, the niece of his close friend, Mr. John Hinckman. The narrator states that, “This gentleman was a good friend of mine, but it would have required a bolder man than I was at that time to ask him for the gift of his niece.” When Mr. Hinckman leaves for the far city of Bristol, he leaves the care of his country home and Madeline to the protagonist. The combination of Mr. Hinckman’s temper and Madeline’s seemingly unsure affection intimidate the protagonist, hampering him from addressing either of them about his affection for her. However, he uses his time alone with Madeline talking and eating meals together, gradually growing closer and more familiar with her.

One night, while lying in bed contemplating their relationship, the ghost of Mr. Hinckman enters the room. More frightened of the man than the ghost, the protagonist builds up the courage to question him. The ghost explains that, years before, Mr. Hinckman was intensely ill and, being an older gentleman, doctors assumed he would not survive. This ghost was hired and took on Mr. Hinckman’s form, ready to haunt the country estate. Unexpectedly, Mr. Hinckman achieved a sudden recovery. Since then, the ghost has been trapped in the house, spending his time hiding from Mr. Hinckman and keeping quiet because, as he states in the story, “I am [John Hinckman’s] ghost...and yet I have no right to be. And this is what makes me so uneasy, and so much afraid of him.”

The ghost enjoys talking with the protagonist and promises to speed the pace of his love affair in exchange for assistance in helping him find a new person’s soul to manifest. A series of awkward instances ensue in which

the ghost appears while the protagonist tries and fails to confess his feelings to Madeline. The next day, while trying to build up the courage to confess his love to Madeline, the ghost warns the protagonist when Mr. Hinckman is approaching the house. In the final scene, the ghost announces that he has found a new position as the ghost of a Russian nobleman and will soon leave. The protagonist, despairing that he should ever win Madeline’s affection, shouts at the ghost, “Oh! I would to heaven you were mine!” Madeline, who cannot see or hear the ghost, misunderstands the protagonist’s words to be a declaration of love rather than hopelessness. She finally admits that she cares for the protagonist as well.

Though light-hearted and whimsical compared to traditional ghost stories, “The Transferred Ghost” also contains the deadly serious theme of capitalism’s dominating power, a trend that appears in both serious stories such as Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw” and more light-hearted stories like “The Intoxicated Ghost” by Arlo Bates. This theme is most commonly seen in the ghost, the only character actively portrayed as participating in an economy in any manner. The scariest aspect of this story is the supposition that the desk job or “situation,” is necessary even in death.

It is made clear that it is essential that the ghost be employed as a means of personal importance and meaning though his insistence that he find a new body to manifest. The ghost states, “Now that I have started on my career I have got to be the ghost of somebody....” This statement implies that his work involves a sort of corporate ladder, insinuating that ghostship is a typical white-collar job. This also ties the ghost to the class system since the white-collar job was typical of the middle class. The narrator states that “[the ghost] was an exceptional case and I could not have objections to him which would usually arise with beings of his class.” The ghost is required, whether it be by circumstance or by nature, to hold a job or “situation.”

However, while the position as the Ghost of Hinkman is socially prominent, it is portrayed as a “dead end job.” The situation the ghost finds himself in is an undesirable one, similar to a job without a good status. In fact, he refers to the position as shameful: “My situation was now one of extreme delicacy and embarrassment.” Though he never states why one is better than the other, the ghost is excited when he obtains the ghostship of a Russian nobleman. He even tells the protagonist that he is “trans-

ferring”—the same term many workers would use for obtaining a promotion: “You can’t imagine how glad I am to be, at last, the real ghost of somebody.” His escape of this oppression is the climax and turning point of his career. The ghost cannot wait to begin his more permanent and promising situation.

The power of the white-collar capitalistic society is also shown in the ghost’s competition for a situation. A sort of independent free-market system is used in which the quickest and most savvy ghosts obtain the best ghostships. When the ghost describes the process to the protagonist, stating, “Whenever a vacancy occurs, if I may express myself in that way, there are crowds of applications for the ghostship,” the savvy and quickness of the ghost’s friends come to be of use in this system, and they help their friend find a new situation. The ghost obtained his desired position when “[m]y friends instantly applied for the situation for me, and obtained my transfer.” Though the ghost inevitably finds his new “assignment” through a friend, his original plea for help from the protagonist is indicative of his desperation to escape his dead end job. As Martin Griffin states in *Frank R. Stockton: A Critical Biography*, “Stockton’s ghosts are always amiable, frequently they require a mere mortal to extricate them from their predicament.” Even in the afterlife, the ghost must overcome the appearance of a ghastly, frightening figure and appear “amiable” in order to impress, essentially, potential employers. And just as employers in real life are mere mortals, often no more and occasionally less qualified or deserving of a job than a potential employee, the ghost must supplicate for a desirable assignment.

This story is important in the history of ghost stories and the literature of haunting because it is so remarkably different from our modern conception of ghost stories as horror. Stockton’s unconventional sense of humor and almost-human ghosts especially make this story unique. His twist on the traditional ghostly displacement theme also ensures the uniqueness of the piece. “The Transferred Ghost” is refreshing and novel in the way that it is told, the situations it presents, and in the concepts it offers, as well as in its ability to subvert expectations of a ghost story.

“The Transferred Ghost”¹

The country residence² of Mr. John Hinckman was a delightful place to me,³ for many reasons. It was the abode of a genial, though somewhat impulsive, hospitality. It had broad, smooth-shaven lawns and towering oaks and elms; there were bosky⁴ shades at several points, and not far from the house there was a little rill⁵ spanned by a rustic bridge with the bark on; there were fruits and flowers, pleasant people, chess, billiards, rides, walks, and fishing. These were great attractions, but none of them, nor all of them together, would have been sufficient to hold me to the place very long. I had been invited for the trout season, but should, probably, have finished my visit early in the summer had it not been that upon fair days, when the grass was dry, and the sun not too hot, and there was but little wind, there strolled beneath the lofty elms, or passed lightly through the bosky shades, the form of my Madeline.

This lady was not, in very truth, my Madeline. She had never given herself to me, nor had I, in any way, acquired possession of her. But as I considered her possession the only sufficient reason for the continuance of my existence, I called her, in my reveries, mine. It may have been that I would not have been obliged to confine the use of this possessive pronoun to my reveries had I confessed the state of my feelings to the lady.

But this was an unusually difficult thing to do. Not only did I dread, as almost all lovers dread, taking the step which would in an instant put an end to that delightful season which may be termed the ante-interrogatory period of love, and which might at the same time terminate all intercourse or connection with the object of my passion; but I was, also, dreadfully afraid of John Hinckman. This gentleman was a good friend of mine, but it would have required a bolder man than I was at that time to ask him for the gift of his niece, who was the head of his household, and, according to his own frequent statement, the main prop of his declining years. Had Madeline acquiesced in my general views on the subject, I might have felt encouraged to open the matter to Mr. Hinckman, but, as I said before, I had never asked her whether

Notes

1. This text is found in Frank Stockton’s *The Lady, or the Tiger? And Other Stories*, pages 11-27.
2. While never specified, it is likely this story takes place in Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia, where it was written.
3. We never learn what, in this story, the narrator is named; however in the sequel “The Spectral Mortgage” his sister-in-law refers to him as George.
4. Wooded.
5. Stream.

or not she would be mine. I thought of these things at all hours of the day and night, particularly the latter.

It was lying awake one night, in the great bed in my spacious chamber, when, by the dim light of the new moon, which partially filled the room, I saw John Hinckman standing by a large chair near the door. I was very much surprised at this for two reasons. In the first place, my host had never before come into my room, and, in the second place, he had gone from home that morning, and had not expected to return for several days. It was for this reason that I had been able that evening to sit much later than usual with Madeline on the moonlit porch. The figure was certainly that of John Hinckman in his ordinary dress, but there was a vagueness, and indistinctness about it which presently assured me that it was a ghost. Had the good old man been murdered? And had his spirit come to tell me of the deed, and to confide to me the protection of his dear? My heart fluttered at what I was about to think, but at this instant the figure spoke.

“Do you know,” he said, with a countenance that indicated anxiety, “if Mr. Hinckman will return to-night?”

I thought it well to maintain a calm exterior, and I answered:

“We do not expect him.”

“I am glad of that,” said he, sinking into the chair by which he stood. “During the two years and a half that I have inhabited this house, that man has never before been away for a single night. You can’t imagine the relief it gives me.”

And as he spoke he stretched out his legs and leaned back in the chair. His form became less vague, and the colors of his garments more distinct and evident, while an expression of gratified relief succeeded to the anxiety of his countenance.

“Two years and a half!” I exclaimed. “I don’t understand you.”

“It is fully that length of time,” said the ghost, “since I first came here. Mine is not an ordinary case. But before I say anything more about it, let me ask you again if you are sure Mr. Hinckman will not return to-night?”

“I am as sure of it as I can be of anything,” I answered. “He left to-day for Bristol, two hundred miles away.”

“Then I will go on,” said the ghost, “for I am glad to have the opportunity of talking to some one who will listen to me; but if John Hinckman should come in and

catch me here, I should be frightened out of my wits.”

“This is all very strange,” I said, greatly puzzled by what I had heard. “Are you the ghost of Mr. Hinckman?”

This was a bold question, but my mind was so full of other emotions that there seemed to be no room for that of fear.

“Yes, I am his ghost,” my companion replied, “and yet I have no right to be. And this is what makes me so uneasy, and so much afraid of him. It is a strange story, and, I truly believe, without precedent. Two years and a half ago, John Hinckman was dangerously ill in this very room. At one time he was so far gone that he was really believed to be dead. It was in consequence of too precipitate⁶ a report in regard to this matter that I was, at that time, appointed to be his ghost. Imagine my surprise and horror, sir, when, after I had accepted the position and assumed its responsibilities, that old man revived, became convalescent, and eventually regained his usual health. My situation was now one of extreme delicacy and embarrassment. I had no power to return to my original unembodiment, and I had no right to be the ghost of a man who was not dead. I was advised by my friends to quietly maintain my position, and was assured that, as John Hinckman was an elderly man, it could not be long before I could rightfully assume the position for which I had been selected. But I tell you, sir,” he continued, with animation, “the old fellow seems as vigorous as ever, and I have no idea how much longer this annoying state of things will continue. I spend my time trying to get out of that old man’s way. I must not leave this house, and he seems to follow me everywhere. I tell you, sir, he haunts me.”

“That is truly a queer state of things,” I remarked.

“But why are you afraid of him? He couldn’t hurt you.”

“Of course he couldn’t,” said the ghost. “But his very presence is a shock and terror to me. Imagine, sir, how you would feel if my case were yours.”

I could not imagine such a thing at all. I simply shuddered.

“And if one must be a wrongful ghost at all,” the apparition continued, “it would be much pleasanter to be the ghost of some man other than John Hinckman. There is in him an irascibility of temper, accompanied by a facility of invective⁷, which is seldom met with. And what would happen if he were to see me, and find out, as I am sure he would, how long and why I had inhabited his house, I can scarcely conceive. I have seen him in his

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6. Premature, without careful consideration.

7. Insulting, highly critical.

bursts of passion, and, although he did not hurt the people he stormed at any more than he would hurt me, they seemed to shrink before him.”

All this I knew to be very true. Had it not been for this peculiarity of Mr. Hinckman, I might have been more willing to talk to him about his niece.

“I feel sorry for you,” I said, for I really began to have a sympathetic feeling toward this unfortunate apparition. “Your case is indeed a hard one. It reminds me of those persons who have had doubles, and I suppose a man would often be very angry indeed when he found that there was another being who was personating himself.”

“Oh, the cases are not similar at all,” said the ghost. “A double or doppelganger lives on the earth with a man, and, being exactly like him, he makes all sorts of trouble, of course. It is very different with me. I am not here to live with Mr. Hinckman. I am here to take his place. Now, it would make John Hinckman very angry if he knew that. Don’t you know it would?”

I assented promptly.

“Now that he is away I can be easy for a little while,” continued the ghost, “and I am so glad to have an opportunity of talking to you. I have frequently come into your room, and watched you while you slept, but did not dare to speak to you for fear that if you talked with me Mr. Hinckman would hear you, and come into the room to know why you were talking to yourself.”

“But would he not hear you?” I asked.

“Oh, no,” said the other, “there are times when any one may see me, but no one hears me except the person to whom I address myself.”

“But why did you wish to speak to me?” I asked.

“Because,” replied the ghost, “I like occasionally to talk to people, and especially to some one like yourself, whose mind is so troubled and perturbed that you are not likely to be frightened by a visit from one of us. But I particularly wanted to ask you to do me a favor. There is every probability, so far as I can see, that John Hinckman will live a long time, and my situation is becoming insupportable. My great object at present is to get myself transferred, and I think that you may, perhaps, be of use to me.”

“Transferred!” I exclaimed. “What do you mean by that?”

“What I mean,” said the other, “is this: Now that I have started on my career I have got to be the ghost of somebody; and I want to be the ghost of a man who is really dead.”

“I should think that would be easy enough,” I said.

“Opportunities must continually occur.”

“Not at all! Not at all!” said my companion, quickly. “You have no idea what a rush and pressure there is for situations of this kind. Whenever a vacancy occurs, if I may express myself in that way, there are crowds of applications for the ghostship.”

“I had no idea that such a state of things existed,” I said, becoming quite interested in the matter. “There ought to be some regular system, or order of precedence, by which you could all take your turns like customers in a barber’s shop.”

“Oh dear, that would never do at all!” said the other. “Some of us would have to wait forever. There is always a great rush whenever a good ghostship offers itself—while, as you know, there are some positions that no one would care for. And it was in consequence of my being in too great a hurry on an occasion of the kind that I got myself into my present disagreeable predicament, and I have thought that it might be possible that you would help me out of it. You might know of a case where an opportunity for a ghostship was not generally expected, but which might present itself at any moment. If you would give me a short notice, I know I could arrange for a transfer.”

“What do you mean?” I exclaimed. “Do you want me to commit suicide? Or to undertake a murder for your benefit?”

“Oh, no, no, no!” said the other, with a vapory smile. “I mean nothing of that kind. To be sure, there are lovers who are watched with considerable interest, such persons having been known, in moments of depression, to offer very desirable ghostships, but I did not think of anything of that kind in connection with you. You were the only person I cared to speak to, and I hoped that you might give me some information that would be of use; and, in return, I shall be very glad to help you in your love affair.”

“You seem to know that I have such an affair,” I said.

“Oh, yes,” replied the other, with a little yawn. “I could not be here so much as I have been without knowing all about that.”

There was something horrible in the idea of Madeline and myself having been watched by a ghost, even, perhaps, when we wandered together in the most delightful and bosky places. But, then, this was quite an exceptional ghost, and I could not have the objections to him which would ordinarily arise in regard to beings of his class.

“I must go now,” said the ghost, rising, “but I will see

you somewhere to-morrow night. And remember—you help me, and I’ll help you.”

I had doubts the next morning as to the propriety of telling Madeline anything about this interview, and soon convinced myself that I must keep silent on the subject. If she knew there was a ghost about the house she would probably leave the place instantly.⁸ I did not mention the matter, and so regulated my demeanor that I am quite sure Madeline never suspected what had taken place. For some time I had wished that Mr. Hinckman would absent himself, for a day at least, from the premises. In such case I thought I might more easily nerve myself up to the point of speaking to Madeline on the subject of our future collateral existence, and, now that the opportunity for such speech had really occurred, I did not feel ready to avail myself of it. What would become of me if she refused me?

I had an idea, however, that the lady thought that, if I were going to speak at all, this was the time. She must have known that certain sentiments were afloat within me, and she was not unreasonable in her wish to see the matter settled one way or the other. But I did not feel like taking a bold step in the dark. If she wished me to ask her to give herself to me, she ought to offer me some reason to suppose that she would make the gift. If I saw no probability of such generosity, I would prefer that things should remain as they were.

That evening I was sitting with Madeline in the moonlit porch. It was nearly ten o’clock, and ever since supper-time I had been working myself up to the point of making an avowal of my sentiments. I had not positively determined to do this, but wished gradually to reach the proper point when, if the prospect looked bright, I might speak. My companion appeared to understand the situation—at least, I imagined that the nearer I came to a proposal the more she seemed to expect it. It was certainly a very critical and important epoch⁹ in my life. If I spoke, I should make myself happy or miserable forever, and if I did not speak I had every reason to believe that the lady would not give me another chance to do so.

Sitting thus with Madeline, talking a little, and thinking very hard over these momentous matters, I looked up and saw the ghost, not a dozen feet away from us. He

was sitting on the railing of the porch, one leg thrown up before him, the other dangling down as he leaned against a post. He was behind Madeline, but almost in front of me, as I sat facing the lady. It was fortunate that Madeline was looking out over the landscape, for I must have appeared very much startled. The ghost had told me that he would see me some time this night, but I did not think he would make his appearance when I was in the company of Madeline. If she should see the spirit of her uncle, I could not answer for the consequences. I made no exclamation, but the ghost evidently saw that I was troubled.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said—“I shall not let her see me; and she cannot hear me speak unless I address myself to her, which I do not intend to do.”

I suppose I looked grateful.

“So you need not trouble yourself about that,” the ghost continued; “but it seems to me that you are not getting along very well with your affair. If I were you, I should speak out without waiting any longer. You will never have a better chance. You are not likely to be interrupted; and, so far as I can judge, the lady seems disposed to listen to you favorably; that is, if she ever intends to do so. There is no knowing when John Hinckman will go away again; certainly not this summer. If I were in your place, I should never dare to make love¹⁰ to Hinckman’s niece if he were anywhere about the place. If he should catch any one offering himself to Miss Madeline, he would then be a terrible man to encounter.”

I agreed perfectly to all this.

“I cannot bear to think of him!” I ejaculated aloud.

“Think of whom?” asked Madeline, turning quickly toward me.

Here was an awkward situation. The long speech of the ghost, to which Madeline paid no attention, but which I heard with perfect distinctness, had made me forget myself.

It was necessary to explain quickly. Of course, it would not do to admit that it was of her dear uncle that I was speaking; and so I mentioned hastily the first name I thought of.

“Mr. Vilars,” I said.

This statement was entirely correct, for I never could bear to think of Mr. Vilars, who was a gentleman who had, at various times, paid much attention to Madeline.

“It is wrong for you to speak in that way of Mr.

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8. The narrator comes clean about the spectral presences to Madeline in the sequel, and she takes it in stride. Stockton, a noted feminist, clearly wanted to mock the idea of women being fragile, along with the character for thinking it.

9. Period of history in which significant events take place.

10. ‘Make love’ here being comparable to “flirt,” though the modern use is not impossible.

Vilars,” she said. “He is a remarkably well educated and sensible young man, and has very pleasant manners. He expects to be elected to the legislature this fall, and I should not be surprised if he made his mark. He will do well in a legislative body, for whenever Mr. Vilars has anything to say he knows just how and when to say it.”

This was spoken very quietly, and without any show of resentment, which was all very natural, for if Madeline thought at all favorably of me she could not feel displeased that I should have disagreeable emotions in regard to a possible rival. The concluding words contained a hint which I was not slow to understand. I felt very sure that if Mr. Vilars were in my present position he would speak quickly enough.

“I know it is wrong to have such ideas about a person,” I said, “but I cannot help it.”

The lady did not chide me, and after this she seemed even in a softer mood. As for me, I felt considerably annoyed, for I had not wished to admit that any thought of Mr. Vilars had ever occupied my mind.

“You should not speak aloud that way,” said the ghost, “or you may get yourself into trouble. I want to see everything go well with you, because then you may be disposed to help me, especially if I should chance to be of any assistance to you, which I hope I shall be.”

I longed to tell him that there was no way in which he could help me so much as by taking his instant departure. To make love to a young lady with a ghost sitting on the railing near by, and that ghost the apparition of a much-dreaded uncle, the very idea of whom in such a position and at such a time made me tremble, was a difficult, if not an impossible, thing to do; but I forbore to speak, although I may have looked my mind.

“I suppose,” continued the ghost, “that you have not heard anything that might be of advantage to me. Of course, I am very anxious to hear, but if you have anything to tell me, I can wait until you are alone. I will come to you to-night in your room, or I will stay here until the lady goes away.”

“You need not wait here,” I said; “I have nothing at all to say to you.”

Madeline sprang to her feet, her face flushed and her eyes ablaze.

“Wait here!” she cried. “What do you suppose I am waiting for? Nothing to say to me indeed!—I should think so! What should you have to say to me?”

“Madeline,” I exclaimed, stepping toward her, “let me

explain.”

But she had gone.

Here was the end of the world for me! I turned fiercely to the ghost.

“Wretched existence!” I cried. “You have ruined everything. You have blackened my whole life. Had it not been for you”

But here my voice faltered. I could say no more.

“You wrong me,” said the ghost. “I have not injured you. I have tried only to encourage and assist you, and it is your own folly that has done this mischief. But do not despair. Such mistakes as these can be explained. Keep up a brave heart. Good-by.”

And he vanished from the railing like a bursting soap-bubble.

I went gloomily to bed, but I saw no apparitions that night except those of despair and misery which my wretched thoughts called up. The words I had uttered had sounded to Madeline like the basest insult. Of course, there was only one interpretation she could put upon them.

As to explaining my ejaculations, that was impossible. I thought the matter over and over again as I lay awake that night, and I determined that I would never tell Madeline the facts of the case. It would be better for me to suffer all my life than for her to know that the ghost of her uncle haunted the house. Mr. Hinckman was away, and if she knew of his ghost she could not be made to believe that he was not dead. She might not survive the shock! No, my heart could bleed, but I would never tell her.

The next day was fine, neither too cool nor too warm; the breezes were gentle, and nature smiled. But there were no walks or rides with Madeline. She seemed to be much engaged during the day, and I saw but little of her. When we met at meals she was polite, but very quiet and reserved. She had evidently determined on a course of conduct, and had resolved to assume that, although I had been very rude to her, she did not understand the import of my words. It would be quite proper, of course, for her not to know what I meant by my expressions of the night before.

I was downcast and wretched, and said but little, and the only bright streak across the black horizon of my woe was the fact that she did not appear to be happy, although she affected an air of unconcern. The moonlit porch was deserted that evening, but wandering about the house I found Madeline in the library alone. She was reading, but I went in and sat down near her. I felt that, although I could not do so fully, I must in a measure explain my conduct

of the night before. She listened quietly to a somewhat labored apology I made for the words I had used.

“I have not the slightest idea what you meant,” she said, “but you were very rude.”

I earnestly disclaimed any intention of rudeness, and assured her, with a warmth of speech that must have made some impression upon her, that rudeness to her would be an action impossible to me. I said a great deal upon the subject, and implored her to believe that if it were not for a certain obstacle I could speak to her so plainly that she would understand everything.

She was silent for a time, and then she said, rather more kindly, I thought, than she had spoken before:

“Is that obstacle in any way connected with my uncle?”

“Yes,” I answered, after a little hesitation, “it is, in a measure, connected with him.”

She made no answer to this, and sat looking at her book, but not reading. From the expression of her face, I thought she was somewhat softened toward me. She knew her uncle as well as I did, and she may have been thinking that, if he were the obstacle that prevented my speaking (and there were many ways in which he might be that obstacle), my position would be such a hard one that it would excuse some wildness of speech and eccentricity of manner. I saw, too, that the warmth of my partial explanations had had some effect on her, and I began to believe that it might be a good thing for me to speak my mind without delay. No matter how she should receive my proposition, my relations with her could not be worse than they had been the previous night and day, and there was something in her face which encouraged me to hope that she might forget my foolish exclamations of the evening before if I began to tell her my tale of love.

I drew my chair a little nearer to her, and as I did so the ghost burst into the room from the doorway behind her. I say burst, although no door flew open and he made no noise. He was wildly excited, and waved his arms above his head. The moment I saw him, my heart fell within me. With the entrance of that impertinent apparition, every hope fled from me. I could not speak while he was in the room.

I must have turned pale, and I gazed steadfastly at the ghost, almost without seeing Madeline, who sat between us.

“Do you know,” he cried, “that John Hinckman is coming up the hill? He will be here in fifteen minutes,

and if you are doing anything in the way of love-making, you had better hurry it up. But this is not what I came to tell you. I have glorious news! At last I am transferred! Not forty minutes ago a Russian nobleman was murdered by the Nihilists.¹¹ Nobody ever thought of him in connection with an immediate ghostship. My friends instantly applied for the situation for me, and obtained my transfer. I am off before that horrid Hinckman comes up the hill. The moment I reach my new position, I shall put off this hated semblance. Good-bye. You can’t imagine how glad I am to be, at last, the real ghost of somebody.”

“Oh!” I cried, rising to my feet and stretching out my arms in utter wretchedness, “I would to heaven you were mine!”

“I am yours,” said Madeline, raising to me her tearful eyes.

Contextual Documents

Two related documents cover multiple themes from “The Transferred Ghost,” including the humorous potential of ghosts, the class structure of the era, and capitalism. We use each document to place “The Transferred Ghost” more firmly in its time period by giving examples of the way some of his contemporaries pursued similar themes to Stockton by using a humorous ghost story. These humorous themes were popular during the early 1880s when the country seemed to be on the rise in light of the Industrial Revolution. This so called “Age of Confidence” was one in which hard work would merit just rewards, and everyone was expected to do their part. In the pieces we include in this edition, we demonstrate that this mentality was playfully extended to include ghosts.

“A New Business”¹²

The following article, published in the *New York Times* on April 25, 1884, describes a new business starting in Chicago, in which a medium with control of a congress of ghosts is working them to funnel information from the Other Side and has commercialized this enterprise. It is reasonable to assume this article was satirical, but true or false it still shows a highly capitalistic bent to ghostly phenomena.

This proposal puts ghosts in a very strange liminal

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11. Nihilists: The Nihilists were a Russian political party that advocated the fall of the oppressive government, favoring the people over the rulers.

12. “A New Business” was published in the *New York Times* on 25 April 1884.

space. They are both being worked by the medium in hordes, and thus would seem to be in a lower, working class space, but at the same time they are being treated with great respect, requiring mollification, like an actor. However, most tellingly, the ghosts are much more of a resource than an actual group of people, which in the end is how the upper class would likely have considered many of the workers in their employ. The reducing of ghosts to a series of numbers and ratings based on high-grade and low-grade ghosts resembles the reduction to numbers and ability to produce product experienced by many workers, and sounds remarkably like the de-individualization of servants, possibly even slaves. Note that the article states that a Medium has “control” of ghosts, not “companionship” or “employ.” It is possible to conclude that the medium can force ghosts to do as ordered, and being ghosts, they have no way to argue, fight back, or escape, as there’s nowhere left to go.

This article illustrates the proclivity for a businesslike mind of the times in other ways. It wastes no time wondering about the existence of ghosts. It is of apparently no surprise to the author of the article that ghosts exist, and thus the article spends much more time exploring the lucrative possibilities of a career mining ghostly information. It would apparently be worth a fortune, as a ghost’s messages could sell for \$40-\$100 dollars per ton. The article does not elaborate on how one weighs ghostly messages, or why they would be weighed in tons, and while it may have simply been a handy unit, it also relates back to the mining theme prevalent through the whole article. This focus on conceptualizing the ghostly world as a place to be mined belies a ruthless, business-like mentality ready to take advantage of the new options for upward mobility now available to even those not in the upper-class gentry.

With all of this in mind, some of the oddities in “The Transferred Ghost” become more clear. In “The Transferred Ghost,” the ghost of John Hinckman indicates that there are more desirable ghostships, finally taking a role as the ghost of a Russian nobleman. However, he never expands on why there are benefits to being the ghost of one person or another. This article offers the idea that the ghosts of someone important, a high-grade ghost, might be more likely to be contacted, more likely to be pampered. In a similar way to “The Transferred Ghost,” the article frames the Other Side as a place where ghosts are employed in jobs and are possible targets of labor

exploitation. There is no rest from the labor conditions of modern American capitalism, not even after death.

Our second contextual document is the article “A Benevolent Ghost,” which was published in the *New York Times* in 1876, and it is similar to both “A New Business” and “The Transferred Ghost” in its use of humor. The article is a satirical piece written about the ghost of a woman residing in St. Louis. The author goes on to argue that this ghost stands apart from the average “idle, frivolous, and meddling” specter. Instead of haunting for her own amusement or for selfish reasons, the specter haunts a woman in order to hold her accountable to a promise made many years before. The article ends happily with the family sending for the little boy, the son of the ghost, who the woman has sworn to care for as her own son.

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A stock company for working ghosts has been established in Chicago. An enterprising person obtained, with the aid of a medium, control of three hundred and ten ghosts. He thereupon organized a stock company for the purpose of obtaining and selling ghostly information, and found no difficulty in selling shares. If his scheme proves successful a new business will have been established and we shall have scores of similar companies.

The business of working ghosts by means of stock companies is unlike any other, though in some respects it resembles both mining and theatrical management. The medium who, prospecting for desirable ghosts, finds, let us suppose, a hundred high-grade ghosts each one of which can furnish messages from the other world worth, say, a hundred dollars per ton, cannot develop the whole of his ghostly property for the simple reason that he can “sit” as a medium only a certain number of hours daily, and hence cannot work more than ten or a dozen ghosts to advantage. It is no object to him to hire other mediums to assist him, for that is merely equivalent to giving away his surplus ghosts. If, however, he can induce a number of capitalists to join with him, he can develop all his three hundred and ten ghosts and make for himself and his associates a great deal of money.

The method of organizing a stock spiritual company would be as follows: Capitalizing the 310 ghosts at \$500,000, the medium and his capitalists would sell \$400,000 worth of shares; divide \$300,000 of the proceeds among them; place \$100,000 in the treasury as working capital, and retain for themselves the remaining

\$100,000 of shares. They would then hire a sufficient force of mediums, paying them salaries large enough to secure their exclusive services, and set them at work. Ghosts can be worked day and night, as they require no sleep, and relays of mediums could draw uninterrupted streams of messages from 310 ghosts. The sale of these messages at \$100 a ton—supposing the ghosts to be high-grade ghosts—would yield enormous dividends, and even low-grade ghosts, yielding not more than \$40 per ton of crude information, could be worked at a handsome profit. So far the business closely resembles silver mining, except in the particular that the stockholders would receive dividends instead of being called upon for assessments.

It would, however, be necessary to keep the ghosts in good humor. Otherwise they might at any moment refuse to furnish ghostly information, in which case the spiritual stock company would be compelled to announce that, owing to fault in its ghosts, it would be necessary to make a call upon the stockholders for funds with which to prospect for a new vein of ghosts. In other words, the company would be ruined. Only an experienced theatrical manager would be able to keep the peace among two or three hundred ghosts of all ages, nationalities, and sexes—whatever may be the number of the latter in the other world. George Washington could hardly be expected to work side by side with Benedict Arnold, and what Boston female ghost would feel at ease when working in company with a Western mining ghost? It is this great difficulty of inducing ghosts to dwell together that will stand in the way of spiritual stock companies, and it will require the combined abilities of an experienced opera manager and a successful mining expert to work a vein of miscellaneous ghosts successfully.

*“A Benevolent Ghost”*¹³

Unlike the ghosts in “The Transferred Ghost,” those in “A Benevolent Ghost” are not frivolous workers, and do not participate in any sort of economy. However, the way that the narrator views these ghosts reflects the idea that they are still expected to contribute to the economy and be productive. The article states that, “As a class ghosts are idle, frivolous, meddlesome, and apparently wholly devoid of moral sense.” In this way, both stories rely on

the humorous and terrifying notion that one must continue to be productive even in the afterlife.

The benevolent ghost and the transferred ghost play similar roles within their stories. Their ghostly positions in class and labor systems segregate them from people, but bind them to a productive, capitalist society. While humorous, the prevalence of this idea shows capitalism as foreboding and omnipresent. Stockton, a man who literally worked himself blind, was able to empathize with the white collar workers who helped create an economy that allowed him the ability to channel his resilient spirit into humorous prose. The increase of white-collar jobs made a contribution to the social fabric of America but also partially unsettled an America resistant to change. Stockton used humor as a way to deal with this anxiety and to cope with these transformations in the American economy. All three stories in this edition focus on the ridiculous notion that ghosts must participate in the economic or productive activities of the living world. This stems from the American notion that white-collar workers must always be productive and contribute to the economy. If these stories present the productive or working ghost as a ridiculous and humorous idea, they may speak to a broader anxiety and fear that participation in white-collar work during life is just as ridiculous. In the end, this combination of ghosts and humor relates to issues of the American economy, issues that still haunt us today.

It is not often that a modern ghost displays moral qualities which can be honestly approved. As a class ghosts are idle, frivolous, meddlesome, and apparently wholly devoid of moral sense. Benjamin Franklin, in a ghostly state, does not scruple to tell preposterous lies as to the whereabouts of Charlie Ross; and John Milton, who during his lifetime wrote poetry which even Mr. Taine does not consider wholly devoid of merit, now perpetuates ghostly verse of the most execrable quality. In consequence, ghosts have fallen into general disrepute among sensible people, and before they can expect to be heard with respect and attention, they must thoroughly change their present objectionable habits.

The recent conduct of a St. Louis ghost gives us reason to hope that a ghostly reformation has actually begun, and that at least a few of the swarming millions

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13. “A Benevolent Ghost” was published in the *New York Times* on 29 April 1876.

of hitherto lazy and frivolous ghosts have determined to do something to redeem the damaged reputation of their kind. That a ghost should choose to visit St. Louis is not, of course, creditable to ghostly taste, but the individual ghost just referred to went to St. Louis exclusively in the interests of humanity. A week or two since a St. Louis family were annoyed by the nightly ringing of the front-door bell by invisible hands. The local small boy and the household rats were in turn charged with the offense of malicious bell-ringing, but no proof of their guilt could be obtained. An astute plumber, whose advice was sought, alleged that the bell-ringing was due to electricity, and he accordingly undertook to suppress the nuisance by changing the direction of the bell-wire and putting in new gas-pipes and water-pipes throughout the house. Though his bill was of the most formidable proportions, the mysterious bell-ringing was not checked, and the household gradually accepted it as a necessary evil which no earthly remedy could cure. Of course, the bell was rung by a ghost, and when the latter found that no further good could be accomplished in that direction, she—for the ghost was of the gentler sex—changed her tactics. She adopted the habit of singing songs in the front parlor, accompanying her voice by playing on a closed and locked piano-forte. After thus opening the evening’s entertainment, she would move pictures, chairs, and bedsteads all over the house, and execute more noisy carpenter-work with an invisible hammer and saw than any live carpenter with a proper sense of loyalty to his carpenters’ union would be willing to do in a week of consecutive labor. Her most remarkable feats, however, were performed in connection with small boys, both actual and ghostly. The family were frequently astonished and delighted by seeing their private small boy suddenly raised by the hair two or three feet above the floor, and thus borne kicking and shrieking from the room. Unfortunately, the ghost always brought him back again, imbued with a sense of injury which led him to lie down on the floor and howl until his disappointed parents pacified him with the bootjack or other convenient sooth-

ing instrument. The ghost’s efforts to drive the family to despair were not, however, successful, until she adopted the plan of causing ghostly small boys to emerge from the fire-place and other unexpected localities. When the persecuted residents of the haunted house found that they could not open a closet or unlock a burglar-proof safe or remove the head of a whiskey-barrel without being shocked at the prompt appearance of a shadowy and unnaturally silent small boy, they became utterly demoralized and sent for a spiritual medium to negotiate terms of peace with their tormentor.

Now, what is remarkable and unprecedented in ghostly history is the motive assigned by the ghost for her prolonged disturbance of the household. She asserted, through the medium, that the lady of the house had once promised to treat her dead sister’s small boy as her own, and that instead of keeping this promise she had farmed him out to a heartless baby-farmer. The accused woman admitted with tears that such had been her faithless and wicked conduct, and she gladly acceded to the ghostly demand to send for the injured small boy, and to treat him with the utmost kindness. In consideration of this promise the ghost agreed to withdraw from the premises, threatening, however, to return and make things disagreeably lively for the family in case the promise should not be kept. The boy was sent for and the ghost withdrew, and thus the first known philanthropist ghost accomplished her humane purpose.

To say that this exceptional ghost deserves the respect and gratitude of all humane people is hardly necessary. It is to be hoped, however, that she will not content herself with having performed one good action. What she ought to do is form a ghostly society for the prevention of cruelty to children. Such a society could accomplish far more than any merely human society can hope to do, and all honest and kind-hearted ghosts can rest assured that if they will only enter upon a life of active benevolence, by persecuting cruel parents and guardians, they will soon earn the admiration of mankind, and reinstate themselves in the good opinion of the living.

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