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THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

A SHORT STORY

Written for "The Listener" by

A. P. GASKELL



CHRISTMAS, before the War, was always something to look forward to. Not that we ever did anything very startling, but it made a sort of finish to the year; and with Christmas cards and presents and one thing and another, we thought of people we had forgotten for a time, so there was a kind of continuity about it too. And of course Maude always insisted on the boys being home for Christmas. "I don't care where you go the rest of the year," she would say, "but I'm going to have my family around me at Christmas."

So there we were. Les would come home from his country school in the Waikato and tell us how slow Invercargill seemed after the North Island towns. Syd would rise to the bait and say how solid the mercantile firms in the Crescent were, compared with the North Island "boom-and-bust outfits." The expression is his. It was rather funny really. Young Syd is only an office boy, and he's never been past Christchurch, but with his usual bounce and confidence he doesn't mind acting as spokesman for local business. The two boys got on well together. I suppose that lately they had seen so little of each other that they hadn't time to become bored. Les, as I said, had been nearly two years in the Waikato, and even when he was home on holiday Syd would be at work all day, and most week-ends he was away gallivanting around the countryside in an old car that his gang owned on a community basis. He wasn't home much at all. I don't know what methods Maude used to keep them home over Christmas. I'm sure they wouldn't have done it for me. Anyway, there we were on this particular occasion I'm thinking of. It was a beautifully fine Boxing Day, and we were going off for a picnic to Fortrose.

FORTROSE had been my choice. I had been brought up beside the sea, and I always like to go back and have another look at it. I knew that if I suggested Bluff or Riverton I would see that rather patronising look appear on the boys' faces—it surprises me at times how paltry they find my suggestions—so this time I was careful not to name a place too close at hand. Syd, of course, with his wanderlust and grandiose ideas, had wanted to "do" Eglinton Valley; Maude said she didn't care where she went "as long as I get away from this backyard for a while," and Les supposed it would be all right there at Fortrose on the cliffs.

So it was to be Fortrose.

Before we set off, there was the usual argument about who was to drive.

Syd was first in behind the wheel. "Pack in, folks," he said, "and I'll have you there in under the hour."

Les stood looking at him in his tall, rather embarrassed fashion. It evidently surprised him a good deal to see Syd

growing up and taking over his position as the young despot of the car. I'm not keen on driving, so Les always used to take us.

"What about me?" he said. "You have the car here all the time, whereas I don't get a drive nowadays from one year's end to another."

"Bad luck, my boy, bad luck. You'll be out of practice. I'd better take her." I don't know where Syd gets that cocky manner. All his gang are the same, off-hand about everything, whether they take it or leave it. Probably there's no harm in it, but I don't like it. And as for treating me with any respect!

"For goodness sake stop arguing and let's get started," said Maude. "One of you can drive there, and the other can drive home. Now Les, you get in." It's wonderful how she speaks to them, and they take it without a murmur. If I adopt that sharp tone towards them they're bristling up aggressively at once. Evidently I've done something wrong when they were younger, according to those books on child psychology.

WELL, Maude sat beside Syd and kept an eye on the speedometer, so that it was an hour-and-a-half later when we swung down the final hill and curved along the Mataura. I enjoyed the ride out. I liked the only half-tamed look of the countryside, and Les said that the tree skeletons reminded him of the King Country. He went on a good deal about burning the forests and erosion. They had told him at Training College that erosion was New Zealand's Problem No. 1.

"What about the Labour Government?" asked Syd over his shoulder. "You ask the cockies what they think of that problem."

"You watch the road," said Maude, "or it won't matter to us whether the Government's Labour or anything else."

I like the country around Fortrose on a fine day. There's the river-mouth, the sea, the sandhills and scrub on the other side, and those smooth rounded hills on the left, and lots of sky and seagulls, and that old red shed, a few boats, and a skeleton wharf. If you like to think of it, there are the old timber days when the river-mouth was navigable and the place was a port; and further back still there are the whaling days, and sixteen whales taken just offshore. I can amuse myself for hours rooting around these old places.

We pulled in beside the red shed, and Les and Syd went off to find a spot among the lupins where we could have lunch.

"I hope Syd's not going to be as tall as Les," said Maude, as we watched these two strangers going off.

"But it's his big ambition," I said. "Don't you remember a couple of years ago he wrote away for a booklet on 'How to increase your height,' and the chap kept pestering him for months to take the course."

"I know. It's nice to be tall. But not too tall. Les thinks he's too tall. It makes him awkward and shy. He thinks everybody's looking at him."

Of course he had always been tall. We always used to have trouble over his fare on trams and trains until he was old enough to pay full fare. I remember how he sometimes begged me to pay full price for him because he was so embarrassed by the way the conductor looked at him. Syd was a good deal slighter in build. I didn't think he would be as tall.

THE two of them came back laughing.

They had found an old hat and Syd was wearing it. "I only wear this hat when I'm tiger-huntin' or feedin' swans," he was saying.

"Syd, you take that old thing off this instant," said Maude. "You don't know who's had it."

"Or buyin' a raffle ticket," prompted Les.

"Tiger-huntin' or feedin' swans or buyin' a raffle ticket," said Syd. He threw the hat over the bushes.

"What's all that silly nonsense about swans?"

"Aw Mom, your memory is cracking up. Don't you remember I made you listen to that, the other day? It's Harry Tate, 'Motoring down to Portsmouth'."

"Oh, I can't remember half the silly rot, you call me in to hear. Did you find a place?"

So it was one of those wireless comedians. Les and Syd had a kind of private store of humour, culled from wireless, films and American magazines. They were liable to shoot bits of it across to each other at any moment, and if their cue were taken, they would laugh and choke together in a fashion that left Maude and me standing outside and feeling old. I often felt like an outsider. I couldn't see a great deal to laugh at in their foolery. It made me feel that my generation was a thing of the past. When I was young and laughed a lot more than I do now, we used to find practically all our fun in local affairs, but these boys ranged the world for their humour.

The spot they found was sheltered and not far off the road, and Syd was able to back the car in. The boys went off to have a look around.

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