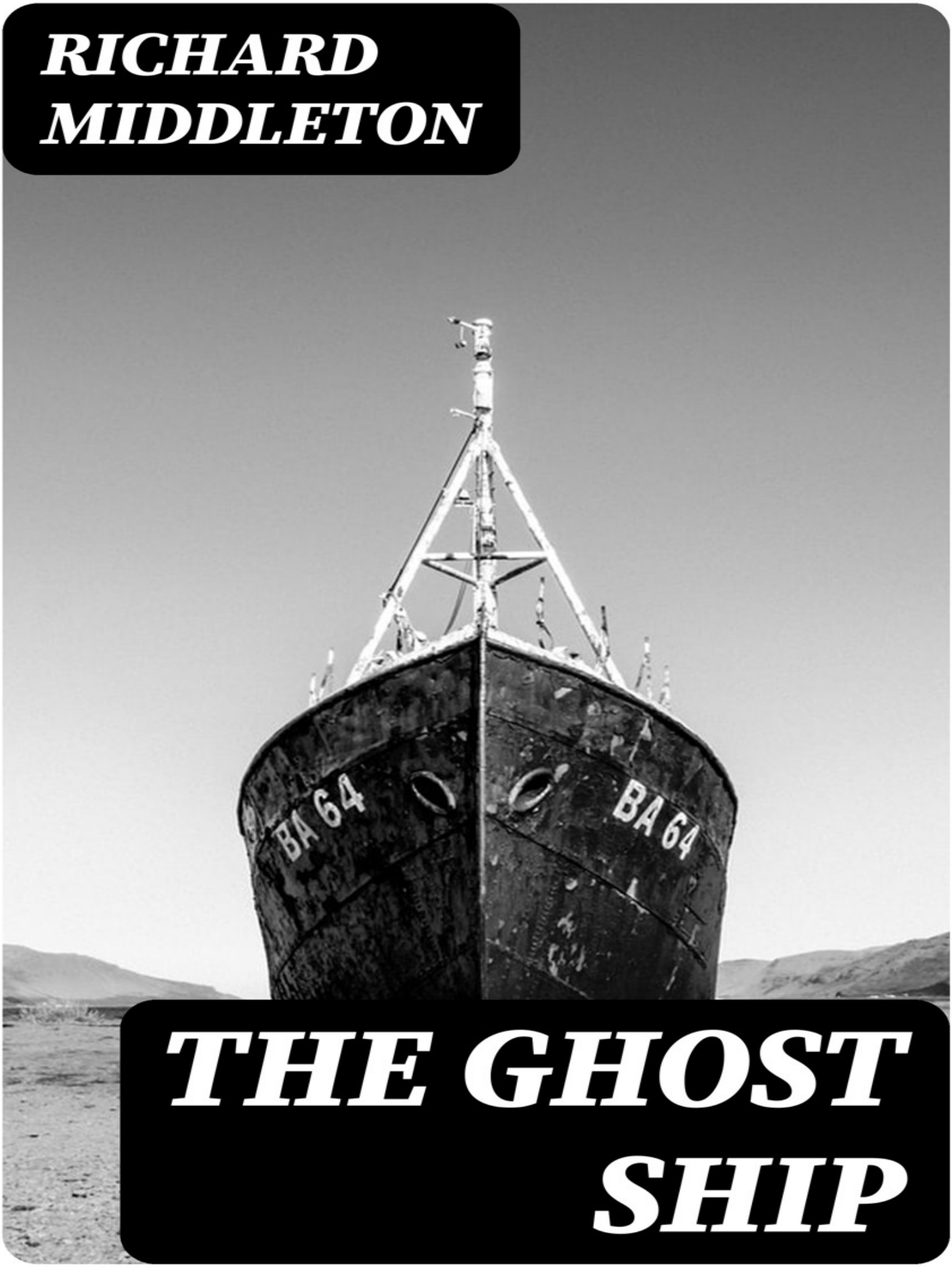
RICHARD MIDDLETON



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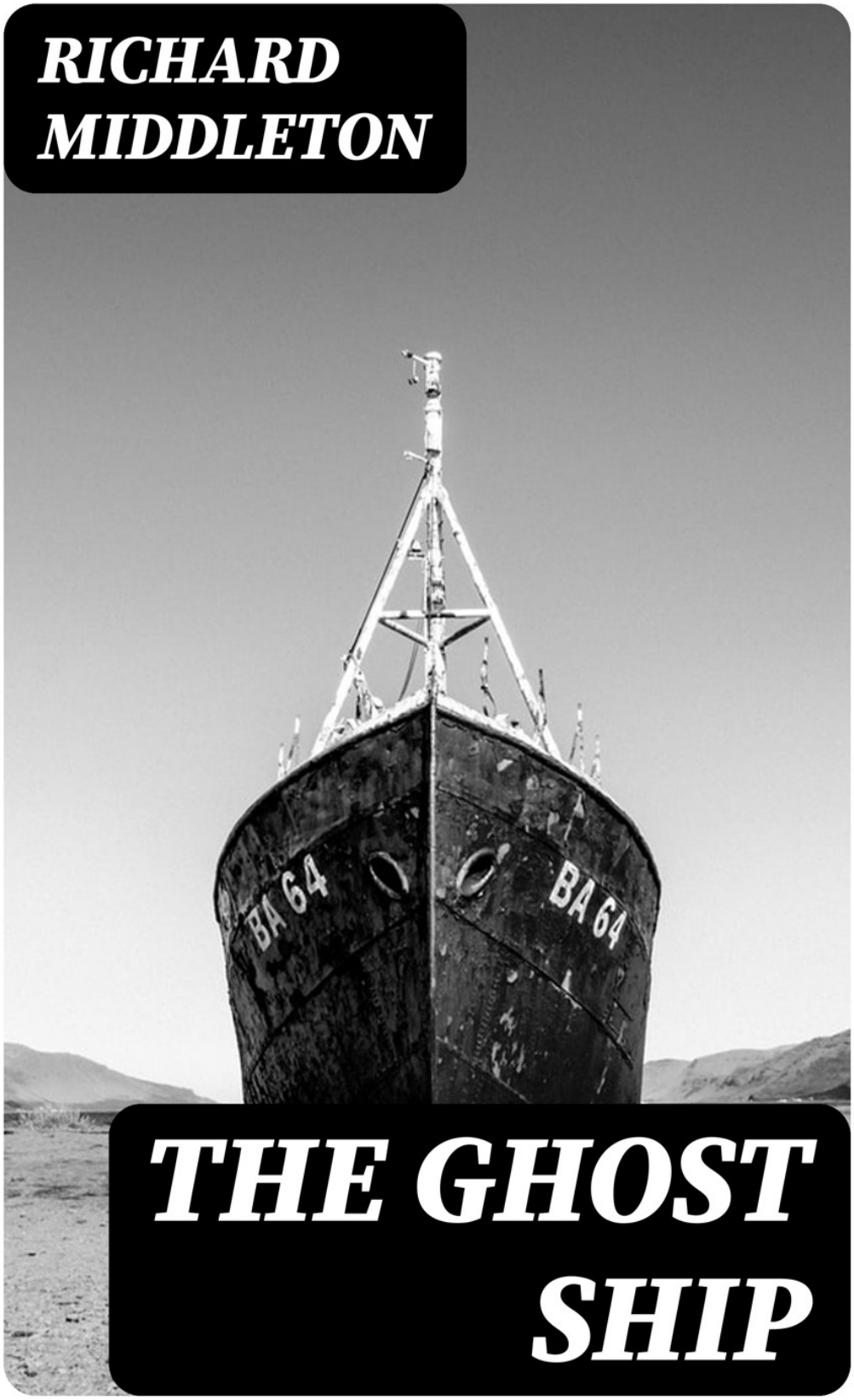

THE GHOST SHIP

Richard Middleton

The Ghost Ship

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Table of Contents

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Preface

The other day I said to a friend, "I have just been reading in proof a volume of short stories by an author named Richard Middleton. He is dead. It is an extraordinary book, and all the work in it is full of a quite curious and distinctive quality. In my opinion it is very fine work indeed."

It would be so simple if the business of the introducer or preface-writer were limited to such a straightforward, honest, and direct expression of opinion; unfortunately that is not so. For most of us, the happier ones of the world, it is enough to say "I like it," or "I don't like it," and there is an end: the critic has to answer the everlasting "Why?" And so, I suppose, it is my office, in this present instance, to say why I like the collection of tales that follows.

I think that I have found a hint as to the right answer in two of these stories. One is called "The Story of a Book," the other "The Biography of a Superman." Each is rather an essay than a tale, though the form of each is narrative. The first relates the sad bewilderment of a successful novelist who feels that, after all, his great work was something less than nothing.

> He could not help noticing that London had discovered the secret which made his intellectual life a torment. The streets were more than a mere assemblage of houses, London herself was more than a tangled skein of streets, and overhead heaven was more than a meeting-place of individual stars. What was this secret that made words into a book, houses into cities, and restless and measurable stars into an unchanging and immeasurable universe?

Then from "The Biography of a Superman" I select this very striking passage:—

> Possessed of an intellect of great analytic and destructive force, he was almost entirely lacking in imagination, and he was therefore unable to raise his work to a plane in which the mutually combative elements of his nature might have been reconciled. His light moments of envy, anger, and vanity passed into the crucible to come forth unchanged. He lacked the magic wand, and his work never took wings above his conception.

Now compare the two places; "the streets were more than a mere assemblage of houses;" . . . "his light moments . . . passed into the crucible to come forth unchanged. He lacked the magic wand." I think these two passages indicate the answer to the "why" that I am forced to resolve; show something of the secret of the strange charm which "The Ghost-Ship" possesses.

It delights because it is significant, because it is no mere assemblage of words and facts and observations and incidents, it delights because its matter has not passed

through the crucible unchanged. On the contrary, the jumble of experiences and impressions which fell to the lot of the author as to us all had assuredly been placed in the athanor of art, in that furnace of the sages which is said to be governed with wisdom. Lead entered the burning of the fire, gold came forth from it.

This analogy of the process of alchemy which Richard Middleton has himself suggested is one of the finest and the fittest for our purpose; but there are many others. The "magic wand" analogy comes to much the same thing; there is the like notion of something ugly and insignificant changed to something beautiful and significant. Something ugly; shall we not say rather something formless transmuted into form! After all, the Latin Dictionary declares solemnly that "beauty" is one of the meanings of "forma" And here we are away from alchemy and the magic wand ideas, and pass to the thought of the first place that I have quoted: "the streets were more than a mere assemblage of houses," The puzzle is solved; the jig-saw—I think they call it —has been successfully fitted together, There in a box lay all the jagged, irregular pieces, each in itself crazy and meaningless and irritating by its very lack of meaning: now we see each part adapted to the other and the whole is one picture and one purpose.

But the first thing necessary to this achievement is the recognition of the fact that there is a puzzle. There are many people who go through life persuaded that there isn't a puzzle at all; that it was only the infancy and rude childhood of the world which dreamed a vain dream of a picture to be made out of the jagged bits of wood, There

never has been a picture, these persons say, and there never will be a picture, all we have to do is to take the bits out of the box, look at them, and put them back again. Or, returning to Richard Middleton's excellent example: there is no such thing as London, there are only houses. No man has seen London at any time; the very word (meaning "the fort on the lake") is nonsensical; no human eye has ever beheld aught else but a number of houses; it is clear that this "London" is as mythical and monstrous and irrational a concept as many others of the same class. Well, people who talk like that are doubtless sent into the world for some useful but mysterious process; but they can't write real books. Richard Middleton knew that there was a puzzle; in other words, that the universe is a great mystery; and this consciousness of his is the source of the charm of "The Ghost Ship."

I have compared this orthodox view of life and the universe and the fine art that results from this view to the solving of a puzzle; but the analogy is not an absolutely perfect one. For if you buy a jig-saw in a box in the Haymarket, you take it home with you and begin to put the pieces together, and sooner or later the toil is over and the difficulties are overcome: the picture is clear before you. Yes, the toil is over, but so is the fun; it is but poor sport to do the trick all over again. And here is the vast inferiority of the things they sell in the shops to the universe: our great puzzle is never perfectly solved. We come across marvellous hints, we join line to line and our hearts beat with the rapture of a great surmise; we follow a certain track and know by sure signs and signals that we are not mistaken,

that we are on the right road; we are furnished with certain charts which tell us "here there be water-pools," "here is a waste place," "here a high hill riseth," and we find as we journey that so it is. But, happily, by the very nature of the case, we can never put the whole of the picture together, we can never recover the perfect utterance of the Lost Word, we can never say "here is the end of all the journey." Man is so made that all his true delight arises from the contemplation of mystery, and save by his own frantic and invincible folly, mystery is never taken from him; it rises within his soul, a well of joy unending.

Hence it is that the consciousness of this mystery, resolved into the form of art, expresses itself usually (or always) by symbols, by the part put for the whole. Now and then, as in the case of Dante, as it was with the great romance-cycle of the Holy Graal, we have a sense of completeness. With the vision of the Angelic Rose and the sentence concerning that Love which moves the sun and the other stars there is the shadow of a catholic survey of all things; and so in a less degree it is as we read of the translation of Galahad. Still, the Rose and the Graal are but symbols of the eternal verities, not those verities themselves in their essences; and in these later days when we have become clever—with the cleverness of the Performing Pig—it is a great thing to find the most obscure and broken indications of the things which really are. There is the true enchantment of true romance in the Don Quixote—for those who can understand—but it is delivered in the mode of parody and burlesque; and so it is with the extraordinary fantasy, "The Ghost-Ship," which gives its

name to this collection of tales. Take this story to bits, as it were; analyse it; you will be astonished at its frantic absurdity: the ghostly galleon blown in by a great tempest to a turnip-patch in Fairfield, a little village lying near the Portsmouth Road about half-way between London and the sea; the farmer grumbling at the loss of so many turnips; the captain of the weird vessel acknowledging the justice of the claim and tossing a great gold brooch to the landlord by way of satisfying the debt; the deplorable fact that all the decent village ghosts learned to riot with Captain Bartholomew Roberts; the visit of the parson and his godly admonitions to the Captain on the evil work he was doing; mere craziness, you will say?

Yes; but the strange thing is that as, in spite of all jocose tricks and low-comedy misadventures, Don Quixote departs from us with a great light shining upon him; so this ghost-ship of Richard Middleton's, somehow or other, sails and anchors and re-sails in an unearthly glow; and Captain Bartholomew's rum that was like hot oil and honey and fire in the veins of the mortals who drank of it, has become for me one of the *nobilium poculorum* of story. And thus did the ship put forth from the village and sail away in a great tempest of wind—to what unimaginable seas of the spirit!

> The wind that had been howling outside like an outrageous dog had all of a sudden turned as melodious as the carol-boys of a Christmas Eve.
>
> We went to the door, and the wind burst it open so that the handle was driven clean into the plaster of the wall. But we didn't think much of that at the time; for over our heads, sailing very comfortably through

the windy stars, was the ship that had passed the summer in landlord's field. Her portholes and her bay-window were blazing with lights, and there was a noise of singing and fiddling on her decks. "He's gone," shouted landlord above the storm, "and he's taken half the village with him!" I could only nod in answer, not having lungs like bellows of leather.

I declare I would not exchange this short, crazy, enchanting fantasy for a whole wilderness of seemly novels, proclaiming in decorous accents the undoubted truth that there are milestones on the Portsmouth Road.

Arthur Machen.

The Ghost-Ship

Fairfield is a little village lying near the Portsmouth Road about half-way between London and the sea. Strangers who find it by accident now and then, call it a pretty, old-fashioned place; we who live in it and call it home don't find anything very pretty about it, but we should be sorry to live anywhere else. Our minds have taken the shape of the inn and the church and the green, I suppose. At all events we never feel comfortable out of Fairfield.

Of course the Cockneys, with their vasty houses and noise-ridden streets, can call us rustics if they choose, but for all that Fairfield is a better place to live in than London. Doctor says that when he goes to London his mind is bruised with the weight of the houses, and he was a Cockney born. He had to live there himself when he was a little chap, but he knows better now. You gentlemen may

laugh—perhaps some of you come from London way—but it seems to me that a witness like that is worth a gallon of arguments.

Dull? Well, you might find it dull, but I assure you that I've listened to all the London yarns you have spun tonight, and they're absolutely nothing to the things that happen at Fairfield. It's because of our way of thinking and minding our own business. If one of your Londoners were set down on the green of a Saturday night when the ghosts of the lads who died in the war keep tryst with the lasses who lie in the church-yard, he couldn't help being curious and interfering, and then the ghosts would go somewhere where it was quieter. But we just let them come and go and don't make any fuss, and in consequence Fairfield is the ghostiest place in all England. Why, I've seen a headless man sitting on the edge of the well in broad daylight, and the children playing about his feet as if he were their father. Take my word for it, spirits know when they are well off as much as human beings.

Still, I must admit that the thing I'm going to tell you about was queer even for our part of the world, where three packs of ghost-hounds hunt regularly during the season, and blacksmith's great-grandfather is busy all night shoeing the dead gentlemen's horses. Now that's a thing that wouldn't happen in London, because of their interfering ways, but blacksmith he lies up aloft and sleeps as quiet as a lamb. Once when he had a bad head he shouted down to them not to make so much noise, and in the morning he found an old guinea left on the anvil as an apology. He wears it on his watch-chain now. But I must get on with my

story; if I start telling you about the queer happenings at Fairfield I'll never stop.

It all came of the great storm in the spring of '97, the year that we had two great storms. This was the first one, and I remember it very well, because I found in the morning that it had lifted the thatch of my pigsty into the widow's garden as clean as a boy's kite. When I looked over the hedge, widow—Tom Lamport's widow that was—was prodding for her nasturtiums with a daisy-grubber. After I had watched her for a little I went down to the "Fox and Grapes" to tell landlord what she had said to me. Landlord he laughed, being a married man and at ease with the sex. "Come to that," he said, "the tempest has blowed something into my field. A kind of a ship I think it would be."

I was surprised at that until he explained that it was only a ghost-ship and would do no hurt to the turnips. We argued that it had been blown up from the sea at Portsmouth, and then we talked of something else. There were two slates down at the parsonage and a big tree in Lumley's meadow. It was a rare storm.

I reckon the wind had blown our ghosts all over England. They were coming back for days afterwards with foundered horses and as footsore as possible, and they were so glad to get back to Fairfield that some of them walked up the street crying like little children. Squire said that his great-grandfather's great-grandfather hadn't looked so dead-beat since the battle of Naseby, and he's an educated man.

What with one thing and another, I should think it was a week before we got straight again, and then one afternoon I met the landlord on the green and he had a worried face. "I

wish you'd come and have a look at that ship in my field," he said to me; "it seems to me it's leaning real hard on the turnips. I can't bear thinking what the missus will say when she sees it."

I walked down the lane with him, and sure enough there was a ship in the middle of his field, but such a ship as no man had seen on the water for three hundred years, let alone in the middle of a turnip-field. It was all painted black and covered with carvings, and there was a great bay window in the stern for all the world like the Squire's drawing-room. There was a crowd of little black cannon on deck and looking out of her port-holes, and she was anchored at each end to the hard ground. I have seen the wonders of the world on picture-postcards, but I have never seen anything to equal that.

"She seems very solid for a ghost-ship," I said, seeing the landlord was bothered.

"I should say it's a betwixt and between," he answered, puzzling it over, "but it's going to spoil a matter of fifty turnips, and missus she'll want it moved." We went up to her and touched the side, and it was as hard as a real ship. "Now there's folks in England would call that very curious," he said.

Now I don't know much about ships, but I should think that that ghost-ship weighed a solid two hundred tons, and it seemed to me that she had come to stay, so that I felt sorry for landlord, who was a married man. "All the horses in Fairfield won't move her out of my turnips," he said, frowning at her.

Just then we heard a noise on her deck, and we looked up and saw that a man had come out of her front cabin and was looking down at us very peaceably. He was dressed in a black uniform set out with rusty gold lace, and he had a great cutlass by his side in a brass sheath. "I'm Captain Bartholomew Roberts," he said, in a gentleman's voice, "put in for recruits. I seem to have brought her rather far up the harbour."

"Harbour!" cried landlord; "why, you're fifty miles from the sea."

Captain Roberts didn't turn a hair. "So much as that, is it?" he said coolly. "Well, it's of no consequence."

Landlord was a bit upset at this. "I don't want to be unneighbourly," he said, "but I wish you hadn't brought your ship into my field. You see, my wife sets great store on these turnips."

The captain took a pinch of snuff out of a fine gold box that he pulled out of his pocket, and dusted his fingers with a silk handkerchief in a very genteel fashion. "I'm only here for a few months," he said; "but if a testimony of my esteem would pacify your good lady I should be content," and with the words he loosed a great gold brooch from the neck of his coat and tossed it down to landlord.

Landlord blushed as red as a strawberry. "I'm not denying she's fond of jewellery," he said, "but it's too much for half a sackful of turnips." And indeed it was a handsome brooch.

The captain laughed. "Tut, man," he said, "it's a forced sale, and you deserve a good price. Say no more about it;" and nodding good-day to us, he turned on his heel and went into the cabin. Landlord walked back up the lane like a man

with a weight off his mind. "That tempest has blowed me a bit of luck," he said; "the missus will be much pleased with that brooch. It's better than blacksmith's guinea, any day."

Ninety-seven was Jubilee year, the year of the second Jubilee, you remember, and we had great doings at Fairfield, so that we hadn't much time to bother about the ghost-ship though anyhow it isn't our way to meddle in things that don't concern us. Landlord, he saw his tenant once or twice when he was hoeing his turnips and passed the time of day, and landlord's wife wore her new brooch to church every Sunday. But we didn't mix much with the ghosts at any time, all except an idiot lad there was in the village, and he didn't know the difference between a man and a ghost, poor innocent! On Jubilee Day, however, somebody told Captain Roberts why the church bells were ringing, and he hoisted a flag and fired off his guns like a loyal Englishman. 'Tis true the guns were shotted, and one of the round shot knocked a hole in Farmer Johnstone's barn, but nobody thought much of that in such a season of rejoicing.

It wasn't till our celebrations were over that we noticed that anything was wrong in Fairfield. 'Twas shoemaker who told me first about it one morning at the "Fox and Grapes." "You know my great great-uncle?" he said to me.

"You mean Joshua, the quiet lad," I answered, knowing him well.

"Quiet!" said shoemaker indignantly. "Quiet you call him, coming home at three o'clock every morning as drunk as a magistrate and waking up the whole house with his noise."

"Why, it can't be Joshua!" I said, for I knew him for one of the most respectable young ghosts in the village.

"Joshua it is," said shoemaker; "and one of these nights he'll find himself out in the street if he isn't careful."

This kind of talk shocked me, I can tell you, for I don't like to hear a man abusing his own family, and I could hardly believe that a steady youngster like Joshua had taken to drink. But just then in came butcher Aylwin in such a temper that he could hardly drink his beer. "The young puppy! the young puppy!" he kept on saying; and it was some time before shoemaker and I found out that he was talking about his ancestor that fell at Senlac.

"Drink?" said shoemaker hopefully, for we all like company in our misfortunes, and butcher nodded grimly.

"The young noodle," he said, emptying his tankard.

Well, after that I kept my ears open, and it was the same story all over the village. There was hardly a young man among all the ghosts of Fairfield who didn't roll home in the small hours of the morning the worse for liquor. I used to wake up in the night and hear them stumble past my house, singing outrageous songs. The worst of it was that we couldn't keep the scandal to ourselves and the folk at Greenhill began to talk of "sodden Fairfield" and taught their children to sing a song about us:

"Sodden Fairfield, sodden Fairfield, has no use for bread-and-butter,
Rum for breakfast, rum for dinner, rum for tea, and rum for supper!"

We are easy-going in our village, but we didn't like that.

Of course we soon found out where the young fellows went to get the drink, and landlord was terribly cut up that his tenant should have turned out so badly, but his wife

wouldn't hear of parting with the brooch, so that he couldn't give the Captain notice to quit. But as time went on, things grew from bad to worse, and at all hours of the day you would see those young reprobates sleeping it off on the village green. Nearly every afternoon a ghost-wagon used to jolt down to the ship with a lading of rum, and though the older ghosts seemed inclined to give the Captain's hospitality the go-by, the youngsters were neither to hold nor to bind.

So one afternoon when I was taking my nap I heard a knock at the door, and there was parson looking very serious, like a man with a job before him that he didn't altogether relish. "I'm going down to talk to the Captain about all this drunkenness in the village, and I want you to come with me," he said straight out.

I can't say that I fancied the visit much, myself, and I tried to hint to parson that as, after all, they were only a lot of ghosts it didn't very much matter.

"Dead or alive, I'm responsible for the good conduct," he said, "and
I'm going to do my duty and put a stop to this continued disorder.
And you are coming with me John Simmons." So I went, parson being a
persuasive kind of man.

We went down to the ship, and as we approached her I could see the Captain tasting the air on deck. When he saw parson he took off his hat very politely and I can tell you that I was relieved to find that he had a proper respect for the cloth. Parson acknowledged his salute and spoke out