THE LIVE GHOST

by FRED BASON

On December the first, 1955, I was standing outside the Apollo Theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue. I was wearing my one and only best suit, with a flower in my buttonhole. I'd been to tea with Gwen Ffrangçon-Davies, the actress, whom I hadn't seen for twenty years. At least I hadn't actually had tea because we'd been chatting about Ellen Terry, and other actresses, and a lot of other things, and we never seemed to get round to pouring out the tea.

So there I was, having had no blooming tea, gazing into the window of a wine shop in Shaftesbury Avenue, and reflecting on the variety of different drinks I could buy if my third Diary was a best-seller. And, as I turned from the window, I got the biggest surprise of my life.

There, standing on the corner, barely six feet away from me, was a one-legged man.

Now, reader, go to your bookshelves, please, and take down volume nine of The Saturday Book. Turn to page 105, and there, at the bottom of the page, you will read how, in the main street of Langstone, a small village near Havant in Hampshire, I saw a ghost. This ghost, which I saw with my own eyes, was a one-legged man, aged about seventy, very thin and bald, with a hawk-like nose. He had only half a right leg. He was stark naked. And the vision of him was there before my eyes for about six seconds, before it vanished entirely.

Now, in Shaftesbury Avenue, ten years later, before my own eyes, was the same man again.

Let me describe him. He was very tall—I would say he was an inch or two over six feet. He was very thin. He had deep-set eyes and sunken cheeks. He wasn't naked now, of course; he wore a very battered trilby hat and a grubby trench coat. There was a haversack slung over his back. He had a very big left foot, wearing a blackened boot which seemed to be of good make.

I stared at him in amazement. No, there was no doubt about it. I couldn't mistake that face, that hawk-like nose, and those sunken eyes. I counted six. But no, he didn't vanish this time. He appeared to be quite alive. I walked up to him.
'Excuse me, sir,' I said, 'I don’t want to be rude. I’m looking at you, and what I see is a real live ghost.'

He turned in surprise. He sniffed. 'That settled it. There couldn’t be any mistake about that nose—the Duke of Wellington style. Clean shaven, he was, but grey hair sprouting from his ears. His teeth were ill-fitting, and as he answered me they clicked.

He didn’t tell me to go to hell, or accuse me of being proper darf. He said just one word: 'Explain!'

'Could you kindly give me your name and address, sir?' I asked.

'No,' he answered.

'Then would you care to come and have tea with me, sir?' I said.

'No,' he answered.

I then asked him if he would step under the shelter to the gallery entrance of the Apollo Theatre, so that we could talk out of other folk’s way. He agreed to that. I offered him a cigarette, which he took, without a thank-you, and lit. Ghosts, it seemed, could smoke.

As he smoked, I told him, as briefly and politely as I could, of the ghost I had seen at Langstone ten years before, and its resemblance to himself. He didn’t interrupt at all. When I’d finished he just said: 'Well?'

'Well, it’s you!' I said. 'I haven’t been drinking, and Miss Ffrangcon-Davies in this theatre will certify that I’m in full possession of my senses. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?'

'Well?' he said again.

'Are you over seventy?' I asked.

He said he was sixty-seven.

'Have you ever been to Langstone?' I asked.

He seemed to think he hadn’t. He had perhaps been in that part of the world twenty years before, but the name Langstone meant nothing to him. I explained that it was only a tiny little village of some twenty houses, just by the toll bridge over to Hayling Island. No, it conveyed nothing to him.

So then I told him how, after I’d written about this ghost in The Saturday Book, an elderly man had visited me, and told me how he’d seen a similar ghost there in 1940. This man, whose account I recorded in The Saturday Book the following year, had made a rough drawing of his ghost, which seemed the spit and image of mine, even to the little fringe of hair at the back of his head and the long matted hair on his chest.

'Have you got hair on your chest?' I asked the man in Shaftesbury Avenue.

'Do you want me to strip?' he replied, with a rather grim laugh.

'No,' I said, 'I don’t want to be personal. But can you tell me where you were ten years ago last September? And where were you in June or July of 1940, which was when the other man saw your ghost?'

He didn’t answer for a while—seemed to be thinking. So, to encourage him, I said, 'I don’t want to take up your time for nothing. Look, here’s seven-and-six. Please will you accept it and go on talking to me?'

He pushed the money back at me. 'I don’t want to be paid to talk,' he said. 'I’m interested.'

Then he said: "Ten years ago . . . Ten years . . . I was in Iceland, or just coming away from Iceland. Several times I’ve been to Iceland. In 1945 for sure. And in 1940? I’m not certain. I don’t remember where I was then. But not in England, that’s for sure."

I then told him that Mr Greer, the other man who had seen the ghost at Langstone, had made inquiries in the district, and had eventually found someone who remembered a one-legged evangelist who used to carry around a small haversack containing little Bibles, coloured texts, and pamphlets. This one-legged evangelist had been seen from time to time between 1932 and 1933, but never again afterwards.

'That couldn’t have been me,' said my live ghost. 'I’ve been many things in my life, but I’ve never been an evangelist.'

'Have you a twin brother, or one who looks very like you?' I asked.

'No,' he answered, 'I have no relations.'

Then I again asked him his name.

'Call me "Pat,"
he replied.

'Well, Pat,' I said, 'Come home with me and I’ll give you a real good meal—the best my landlady can dish up—and I’ll show you the two sketches of your ghost which I’ve got at home. I think you’ll agree that though they are rough drawings they are the dead image of you.'

'The dead image?'

He seemed to hesitate, so I added: 'I’ll bet you a bob that if you take off your hat I’ll see you are bald, and have a little fringe of hair right at the back.'

Off came his hat, and, blimey, I was right!
'What is all this leading up to?' he asked.
'I don't really know, sir,' I admitted. 'It's all so fantastic. But everything I've told you is the naked truth. And if I were you I should give Langstone in Hampshire a wide berth.'
'Why?' he asked.
'Well, ain't it obvious?'
'A man's got to die somewhere,' he said.
'But you don't have to hop to trouble,' said I.
He put his hand into the pocket of his trench coat and drew out of it the largest watch I have ever seen—twice the size of an ordinary one, and he carried it loose in his raincoat pocket!
He glanced at it, made no comment, and slipped it back in his pocket again. Then he pulled his haversack round to the front, groped in it, took out a small bottle, poured two pills out of it, and swallowed them.
'Heart,' he said.
I said I was sorry.
'Must be going,' he then said. 'Many things to do. Getting late. Any more questions?'
I could have asked him a dozen. 'What's your business? How do you earn your living?' I said.
'Bits and pieces. A little pension. Just enough. No ties.' He had a curious way of talking, clipping everything he said into short lengths.
'Well, I must go,' he said. 'It's all been very interesting, Mr...'
I told him my name. It meant nothing to him.
'I am glad to have met you, Mr Bason,' he said. 'An interesting meeting. Me a ghost!' And he laughed.
I asked him if he'd shake hands. He held out a very thin hand with long fingers. It was a very cold hand. I drew mine away quickly. He made no comment. Pulling his crutch towards him he began to hobble away. Then, when he was about six paces away, he turned.
'Are you saved?' he shouted. I was too afraid to answer him. He turned and hobbled up Berwick Market and the misty night swallowed him up.