

PRACTICAL JOKER

by

S.M.Cashmore

PRACTICAL JOKER

We thought at first it must be one of the boys - or both of them together. Patrick, at eight, was certainly big enough and John, at six, certainly had the necessary imagination. And of course neither of them appeared to be troubled by any sort of conscience.

"Who put the gravy powder in the tin for the chocolate powder?" screamed Ann, my wife. "Patrick! John! Come here!"

The boys skidded into the kitchen and - as usual - denied that it had anything to do with them.

"Well, I hope that you like gravy cake," said Ann ominously. "Because there'll be no more until it's all gone. All eaten up," she amended. The boys had minds like barristers when it came to finding a way out of parental conditions.. "Do you understand?"

"But mum....." began Patrick.

"But nothing."

"It wasn't us, mum."

"I said....." Anne paused. This was out of the ordinary. The usual escape clause was *It wasn't me, mum*, but Patrick had said *us*. It was unusual that he was trying to excuse his younger brother. In fact, it was almost unbelievable. On the other hand, who else could it be?

"Don't give me that," she snapped. "Who was it who superglued the fridge door shut, eh? I suppose it was your grandmother when she was here! And who put the red paint in the shower head, eh? Answer me that!"

Patrick shrugged uncomfortably.

"It wasn't....."

"..... wasn't me, mum," mimicked Ann. "Well, who else could it be?" She glared at the boys, challenging them to contradict her. Patrick looked away, biting his lip, but John hesitated and then said something unexpected.

"Perhaps..... perhaps it was the ghost, mum."

Ann's jaw dropped.

"Ghost? What ghost? If this is another of your....."

"No, mum. Really."

It was unlike John to interrupt his mother when she was in full flow. Both Ann and I stared at him thoughtfully.

"Haven't you seen it?"" asked John. He turned to his brother. "Have you?" Patrick shook his head and tried to look both disdainful and interested at the same time.

"What does it look like, this..... thing?" asked Ann.

"Oh." John shrugged. "Like a ghost. You know, sort of white and blotchy. It floats about a lot." John might have a vivid imagination but it seemed that his powers of description left something to be desired.

"Oh?" said Ann sceptically. "And where exactly does it float?"

"All over," said John in a serious voice. "Sometimes it's in the kitchen - there." He nodded over to where I was standing, and I must admit that I shivered. "Sometimes it's in the living room, by the bookcase. But mostly....." John paused and looked worried for the first time.

"Yes?"

"Well, mostly I see it in our room at night....."

Patrick looked surprised and mildly apprehensive.

"..... or in your room in the morning."

"In my room?" squeaked Ann.

John nodded. "I thought everyone knew," he said. "I mean, it's just a blob floating about and I never thought..... well, I never thought....."

"In my room?" squeaked Ann again. And then, with the sort of mental acrobatics with which I had become familiar over the years: "What sort of a blob?"

John considered.

"Don't know," he said.

Ann stared at him for a few more seconds, then shook her head as if waking herself up.

"And this..... thing," she said, "this ghost, is what has been playing all the practical jokes. Eh? I can just see it," she said heavily. "A sort of blob, floating from room to room, putting all the clocks forward an hour."

"Well, it wasn't me, mum."

Ann squealed in fury and waved her arms. "Out! Out! Get yourselves ready for bed and....."

The boys turned and ran, and she shouted after them.

"..... I don't want to hear anything more about ghosts! Do you hear?"

It was not clear whether they heard or not, because their footsteps were thundering up the stairs at the time. Ann shook her head again and looked despairingly at the cake which she had just taken out of the oven. It smelled just like the Sunday roast. I tried not to smile.

I wondered about John's story. There was something about it which I did not quite like. Perhaps it was because it did not sound like something John would make up. Perhaps it was the unnerving thought of someone - or something - looking at my family during the night. I didn't like the thought of that, even if it was all in the imagination.

I thought about it all evening, after the boys had gone to bed, and could not put my finger precisely on what it was that bothered me. Ann obviously thought the whole thing was an attempt to sidestep being blamed for the practical jokes. That was the most likely explanation, of course. But there was something..... something.....

I went up several times to check on the boys. They slept in one room at the front of the house, where the streetlight outside shone through the curtain and illuminated the furniture in a weird checkerboard fashion. I looked at the deep dark of the corners hidden from the window, and the stripes of light angling across the beds, floor and cupboards. It would be easy to imagine a ghost, or a monster, or a floating white blob, standing there. I had to admit that.

There were no streetlamps shining into our window, though, and certainly there was little chance of faint lights - floating or otherwise - being visible in the glare of the kitchen.

Patrick and John slept soundly as I paced around the room. I saw nothing, of course. I hardly expected to. But even so, there was something..... something.....

We went to bed about ten thirty. It had turned very cold and I let Ann precede me into the bathroom so that she could get to bed first. I checked on the boys again. They were still fast asleep and the light was still shining through the curtain - with a faint blue tinge, I noticed. I wondered why that should be. It occurred to me that I had no idea whether the light shone all night or whether it went off at midnight or some such predetermined time. Still thinking about it, I took my turn in the bathroom, and could not resist stuffing some soap up the tap. That would give someone a surprise in the morning!

Ann was already in bed, sitting with a shawl around her shoulders and a book in her lap. She looked up quickly as I went in and wrapped her arms about herself. She was shivering.

"Paul?"

The bedside lamp threw her shadow across the room. When she moved, it was as if the whole wall shifted and jumped. Her eyes were wide.

I moved forward and bent to kiss her cheek. Curiously, her gaze remained fixed on the doorway, as if she could still see something there. I looked back, but there was only the dark, empty hall outside the door.

Ann sat up straight. Her jaw tightened with determination.

"Paul, if it's you, stop it. Stop the practical jokes!"

Well, what a thing to say! I hovered uncertainly between the door and the bed, wondering if I was really wanted. I tried to lock gazes with Ann, but she avoided my eyes and insisted on looking out into the hall.

Suddenly her composure broke. She burst into tears and flung herself sideways onto the pillows.

"Oh, Paul," she wailed in a muffled voice. "I do love you....."

That was all right, then. I could stay.

"I love you too, Ann," I whispered.

She sat up again, eyes glistening.

"Paul, it is you, isn't it? Paul....." She breathed deeply, as if bracing herself. "No practical jokes, okay? We had enough of those before, before....."

I went out into the hall, grumbling to myself. I didn't want to hear about *before*.

I floated into the bathroom and wondered how on earth I was going to get the damned soap back out of the damned tap.