

Spooks in Books

Characters

Dixie	Drue	Gary	Gil	Fiddler
Headless Horseman		Hamlet	Ghost, Hamlet's father	
Spirits		Miss Harper, the librarian		

Time: Late afternoon, October
Setting: A corner of the school library
At Rise: Four young people, Dixie, Gary, Drue, and Gil, are working at a table. They are so absorbed in their work that the curtains remain open for several seconds before one of the speaks.

DIXIE: (*pushing back the big book from which she has been taking notes*) Thank goodness! That's finished! Just before every holiday, our teacher has us look up its origin and customs. (*to her neighbor*) Gary, did you know that *Halloween* means *hallowed* or *holy* evening because it comes before All Saints' Day?

GARY: No, and I don't care. I'm too busy beating my brains out on a composition. I have twenty-five Halloween topics to choose from and I can't even get started.

DRUE: You'd better make up your mind fast. We don't have much more time before the library closes. I've almost finished my history notes.

GIL: I can't possible finish this book tonight. There's no use trying. Besides, I'm hungry and it's getting dark in here. Let's go.

DIXIE: Suits me. I accomplished a lot.

DRUE: It was a good idea to meet here and finish our homework. Now no one can possibly find any objections to our going to the Halloween party.

GIL: I'll take my book over to the main desk and check it out. Be back in a minute.

DRUE: I'll go with you. I want to take this book out too.

(*Exit Drue and Gil*)

GARY: I don't see how you girls do it!

DIXIE: Do what?

GARY: Write compositions the way you do. I have to think for hours before I can get anything on paper, and then it's never any good.

DIXIE: Maybe you just don't select the right topics. (*Looking at his list*) Now, if I were doing this assignment, I'd choose the topic about a haunted house.

GARY: What do I know about haunted houses?

DIXIE: Well, haven't you ever been to one?

GARY: Of course not!

DIXIE: Well, can't you imagine what a haunted house would look like and how you'd feel if you went inside ... all tingly and creepy with shivers running up and down your spine?

GARY: I guess I just don't have any imagination. I never could shiver and shake over a lot of make-believe.

(*Gil and Drue re-enter*)

DRUE: Say, the main reading room's closed and Miss Harper isn't at her desk.

GIL: There's not a soul anywhere around and the door's locked.

ALL: (*In alarm*) What?

GIL: That's right. The door's locked and everyone's gone.

DIXIE: But it can't be! (*Looking at her watch*) My watch must have stopped! I don't know what time it is.

GARY: The library's always open until after five o'clock. And my watch says four-thirty.

GIL: Something's funny somewhere. Mine says half-past ten.

DRUE: I noticed the clock in the reading room had stopped at two-thirty.

DIXIE: What difference does the correct time make? Our problem is to get out of here. We'll be late for supper.

GIL: There's no door to this room except the one leading into the main reading room, and the reading room door is locked.

GARY: Do you mean to say we're locked up in this place?

DRUE: It looks that way.

DIXIE: Golly! I'm scared.

GARY: Silly! What are you scared of? There's nothing to be afraid of in a library.

DIXIE: But it's getting darker every minute, and ... look at those shadows in the corners. They ... they ... almost look like spooks!

GIL: Spooks! Imagine spooks in a library!

DRUE: That might not be as silly as it sounds. There are plenty of spooks in books.

(The lights grow dim. There is the sound of a cat meowing.)

ALL: What that?

GIL: It's only a cat!

DIXIE: But what would a cat be doing in a library?

GIL: I have no idea ... unless it's in the *catalogue*!

GARY: Don't be any funnier than you can help, boy. This is not time for bad jokes.

DRUE: But there *is* a cat in here someplace. Listen!

(The meowing grows louder)

DIXIE: It sounds as if it's coming from one of the top shelves. Can't someone turn on the lights?

GIL: I tried the wall switch a minute ago. There's no juice.

DRUE: Wait a minute. I think I have a pocket flashlight in my bag.

(The stage is quite dark. Drue flashes her light around the room, revealing a large black cat perched on one of the shelves. The meows seem to come from that direction.)

GIL: There! There it is! I see it. How did it ever get way up there? (*Calling*) Here, kitty, kitty, kitty! Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!

DIXIE: Stop! Stop it! Don't call that cat down here whatever you do.

DRUE: For heaven's sake, why not?

DIXIE: Look! Look where it is ... right on the Edgar Allan Poe shelf.

GARY: Edgar Allan Poe? Who's he?

DIXIE: You know perfectly well who Edgar Allan Poe is ... or rather, who he was! He was the author of the most horrible horror stories in all the world. That's who he was. And that dreadful cat must be Pluto!

GIL: Pluto! That's a fancy name for a cat all right.

DRUE: Oh dear! I'm getting scared, too. Dixie's right. I read that Poe story. It's called "The Black Cat," and it's certainly not the sort of thing you'd want to read when you're alone in the house at night. Pluto, the cat, was the witness to a horrible murder. Let's get out of here before any more monsters come to life out of these books.

GIL: How dizzy can you get? All we have to do is telephone Miss Harper or Mr. Niles, the custodian, and one of them will come and let us out.

GARY: Now you're talking. Come on, Gil. We'll phone from the main desk.

DIXIE: (*Grabbing hold of Gary*) Oh no you don't! Not *both* of you! One of you is going to stay right here with us.

GARY: For Pete's sake! What's got into you? Your imagination must be working overtime.

GIL: I'll go phone and we'll be out of here in ten minutes.

(*Gil exits*)

DRUE: I hope so. I'd hate to think of being shut up in here for very long with these ... these awful creatures.

GARY: You talk like a nitwit. The only awful creatures in this library are books, and a book never hurt anyone.

DRUE: It's not the books themselves, stupid. It's the creatures *in* the books. Suppose they got out!

GARY: Suppose! Suppose! I can't suppose any such thing.

DIXIE: But that book I was reading on Halloween customs said that all sorts of strange things happen on All Hallows Eve.

DRUE: If ghosts come out of graveyards on Halloween night, they could just as easily come out of books.

GARY: I never heard such silly talk in all my life.

GIRLS: (*With a screech of fright*) What's that? What's that?

GARY: Where?

GIRLS: Over there ... by the door!

GARY: It must be Gil. (*He pauses as a tall dark figure moves into the room.*) Gil, is that you?

DIXIE: (*With a shriek*) Look! Look! It hasn't any head!

(*The figure moves to the center of the stage.*)

DRUE: (*Screaming*) Help! Help!

HEADLESS HORSEMAN: (*With a deep chuckle*) Don't be frightened, ladies! I really do have a head but it's underneath my cloak. Good disguise, isn't it? (*A terrible laugh*) When that simple-minded Ichabod Crane sees me, he'll be terrified out of his wits. (*Moves across stage. At exit, he turns.*) I left my horse outside, tethered to one of the stones in the graveyard. (*Another laugh*) Poor Ichabod! I laugh myself sick every time I think of him! (*Exits*)

GIL: (*Entering on opposite side*) I have news for you. Why, what's the matter? You all look as if you'd seen a ghost.

GARY: (*Collapsing into nearest chair*) I think we did!

DRUE: It wasn't exactly a ghost. It was Brom Bones.

GIL: What are you talking about?

DIXIE: The Headless Horseman. He was just here.

GIL: Are you people losing your minds?

DRUE: Not yet, but soon. Brom Bones stepped right out of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* by Washington Irving and walked across this room. He was on his way to frighten Ichabod Crane when Crane came from Katrina Van Tassel's party.

DIXIE: I never would have believed it, if I hadn't seen him with my own eyes.

GIL: Even you look a bit shaken, Gary. Is it all imagination?

GARY: I don't know what it was, but I saw it. How long do you think it will be till we get out of here? Is Miss Harper coming to unlock this place?

GIL: I'm sorry. I couldn't get in touch with her.

DRUE: I'm glad you got Mr. Niles. He lives in the next block so he'll get here sooner.

GIL: I ... er ... I couldn't get him either. The telephone is dead.

ALL: Dead?

DIXIE: But what are we going to do?

GIL: (*Shrugging his shoulders*) Stay right here, I guess, unless you know how to pick a lock with a bobby pin.

DRUE: But we can't stay here.

DIXIE: It isn't safe.

GIL: Aw, come on now. Don't get excited. The thing to do is to keep calm and not get excited. That's the way people always behave in books when there is an emergency.

DIXIE: Don't talk about books. They might be listening.

GARY: But what will we do to pass away the time?

DRUE: We can always read.

GARY: But the lights!

DRUE: I'll use my flashlight and read aloud to you.

DIXIE: Be sure to pick something cheerful. This place gives me the creeps.

DRUE: (*Picking up a book*) I'll try *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, that's really funny. Tom and Huck are always doing something to make you laugh. (*Leafing through the book*) Oh dear! I better not read this chapter.

GARY: Why not?

DRUE: It's called "Midnight in the Graveyard."

DIXIE: Oh, my goodness! Can't you do better than that? (*Takes book*) Just begin reading anywhere. Here ... start here.

DRUE: (*Reading*) "There in the middle of the moonlit valley below them stood the spooky house all alone."

DIXIE: (*Covering her ears*) No! No! Don't read that.

GARY: Go on, Drue. I need the description of a haunted house for my composition.

DRUE: (*Reading*) "Its fences were gone long ago. Weeds grew up to the very doorsteps. The chimney had fallen down, and a

corner of the roof had caved in. The boys looked to see if any of the blue lights would appear in the windows. Then, talking in low tones, they started off, far to one side to go around the spooky house and took their way home through the woods.”

DIXIE: That’s enough! That’s enough. Don’t read any more.

DRUE: Don’t you want to hear the next chapter called “In the Spooky House”?

DIXIE: Heavens no! I tell you I’ve had enough of spooks! If you *must* read, why don’t you read something serious and sensible?

GARY: Like what?

DIXIE: Oh, I don’t know. Like Shakespeare, for instance.

GIL: Shakespeare? What do we know about Shakespeare?

DRUE: Not very much, but we can learn. (*Looking for book on shelves*) We should find some of his plays over in this section.

DIXIE: Be careful. Don’t go snooping in dark corners. There’s no telling what we might find.

DRUE: It won’t take me a second to find a play. Here ... here’s a copy of *Hamlet*. (*Opens book and reads aloud*) “Scene V – Enter Ghost and Hamlet.”

(*Blue spotlight picks up Ghost entering from left. As he beckons, Hamlet follows.*)

HAMLET: Where wilt thou lead me? speak, I go no farther.

GHOST: Mark me.

HAMLET: I will.

GHOST: My hour is almost come, when I to sulphurous and tormenting flames must render up myself.

HAMLET: Alas, poor ghost!

GHOST: Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing to what I shall unfold.

HAMLET: Speak; I am bound to hear.

GHOST: So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.

HAMLET: What?

GHOST: I am thy father’s spirit.
Doom’d for a certain term to walk the night,
And, for the day, confin’d to waste in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purg’d away. But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul; freeze thy young blood;
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres;
Thy knotted and combin’d locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand on end,
Like quills upon the fretful porcupine.

DIXIE: (*Holding her hands over her ears*) Stop! Stop! If you close the book, maybe they’ll go away.

(*Drue closes book which is the cue for Ghost and Hamlet to exit.*)

GARY: They’ve gone!

DRUE: Where? Where did they go?

GIL: Back into the woodwork, I guess. Boy, oh boy! I never knew Shakespeare wrote that kind of blood and thunder.

DRUE: Oh yes! His plays are simply dripping with murders, but literary ones!

GARY: I've had enough of this kind of reading. With all of these books in the library, why must we stick to stories and plays?

DRUE: What would you suggest?

GARY: Almost anything would be better than Hamlet's ghost, under these circumstances. (*Picking up book at random*) Here! What's this?

GIL: (*Looking over his shoulder*) It's a book on Music Appreciation.

GARY: Music is supposed to soothe people and steady their nerves. Let's see what this has to offer.

GIL: Oh my sainted aunt! Here we go again! *The Dance of Death* – or, in French, *Danse Macabre* – by Saint-Saens.

(*As he speaks a recording of "Danse Macabre" by Saint-Saens is played offstage. He begins to read the following poem in accompaniment to the music. During the reading of the poem and the playing of the music, a skeleton fiddler leads a group of spirits in a mad interpretive dance.*)

GIL: Zig-a-zig, zig-a-zig!
Death is dancing a jig!
He leaps on a tombstone and taps with his heels.
Zig-a-zig, zig-a-zig!
Death is dancing a jig!
His fiddle is calling the tunes for the reels.
The groans and the moans and the rattle of bones,
Are mingled in fury and dark of the night!
From out of the shadows, the skeletons caper,
Their shrouds and their grave clothes a glistening

white!

Zig-a-zig, zig-a-zig!

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Death is leading a jig!
The specters are dancing a frenzied quadrille!
The fiddle is faster and Death is the master,
And each frantic spirit is dancing his fill!
But suddenly ... stillness!
The dancers are frozen
The crow of the cockerel has broken the spell!
A new day is dawning
And old graves are yawning
As Chanticleer solemnly crows out his knell!
The fiddle is silent,
The dancing is ended,
As Death leads them back to the cold, narrow bed.
With infinite yearning, the spirits returning
To rest once again in the land of the dead.

(*The dance finishes, the dancers exit, and music fades out on last lines of the poem.*)

DRUE: Horrors! Put that book away! We can't stand any more of that.

DIXIE: (*Selecting book*) You're always safe with Charles Dickens. He's a good solid English writer.

GIL: (*Taking book from her*) Don't kid yourself, Dixie. It says here that it was Dickens who really popularized the idea of the Christmas ghost.

DRUE: That's right. Remember the *Christmas Carol* with the Spirits of Christmas present, Past, and Future, and poor old Marley's ghost with his chain of cash boxes. We'd better put that book back where it belongs.

GARY: I told you to stay away from the fiction shelves. Those fiction writers have too much imagination. It runs away with them. What we need to settle our nerves is some plain, cold, every day facts.

GIL: Such as what, for instance?

GARY: *(Picking out book)* Such as would be found in a history book. *(Handing book to Drue)* Here ... read something out of this. We can calm down our own wild imaginings with a long list of dates in American history.

DRUE: Where shall I begin?

GARY: Anywhere. It doesn't matter. Just start to read.

DRUE: *(Opening book and letting out a small scream)* Oh!

ALL: What's the matter?

DRUE: It's all about witches.

GARY: How crazy can you get? How would witches get into a stuffy old history book?

GIL: *(Snapping his fingers)* Gosh! We've forgotten all about those awful Salem witch trials.

DRUE: Yes, that's what this chapter is about – the Salem witch trials. It says here that nineteen persons were convicted and hanged between July and September of a single year!

DIXIE: Horrors! How could people be so stupid and cruel?

GARY: Imagine a whole community being fooled by the pranks of two girls who claimed to be bewitched.

DRUE: Didn't they realize they were making a terrible mistake?

GIL: Not until after all those people had been killed. After the panic died down, the judges and the witnesses realized they had done a terrible thing.

DRUE: People are a lot smarter today, aren't they?

GIL: I'd like to think so. But when you read some of the articles in the paper these days, it makes you wonder. Remember we have headlines about witch hunts and witch trials today, but of a slightly different nature.

DIXIE: If people would only use their common sense, they wouldn't let themselves get carried away by fear and superstition.

GARY: Hey! What was that you said?

DIXIE: I said, if people would only use their common sense, they wouldn't let themselves get carried away by fear and superstition.

GARY: Then we'd better start practicing what you're preaching right this minute.

DRUE: What do you mean?

GARY: I mean that there's nothing wrong with us right now except that we've let our fears and superstitions run away with us.

GIL: You mean to tell me we're not locked in this deserted library? I tried the door myself.

GARY: Why not try it again? Maybe it was just stuck.

DRUE: But Miss Harper wasn't there either, and the telephone was dead.

(Phone rings offstage)

GARY: It doesn't sound dead now.

DIXIE: Maybe we'd better answer it.

DRUE: Let's not even bother. Let's get out of here.

(Miss Harper appears in doorway)

MISS HARPER: There was a phone call for Dixie Simms, but I thought you had gone home. You're to call 2628.

ALL: (Staring at her) Miss Harper!

MISS HARPER: Yes?

DRUE: Where did you come from?

DIXIE: We thought you had gone home.

GIL: The door was locked.

MISS HARPER: Well, my goodness! What's so unusual about that? I always snap the lock on the door when I go down to the office.

DIXIE: But the lights! We practically had a black-out.

MISS HARPER: That's why I went to the office. They've been out of order all day. The janitor says he'll have them fixed by tomorrow. What's wrong with you boys and girls? You all look so strange. Are you sick?

GARY: No, we're all right, Miss Harper.

MISS HARPER: Did you find all the books you needed for your Halloween assignment? We have a new one that just came yesterday. It's called *Ghosts! Ghosts! Ghosts!* I'll save it for you.

ALL: Don't bother.

MISS HARPER: But ...

GARY: We've had all the ghosts we can handle, Miss Harper. What we need is a book called *Common Sense*.

MISS HARPER: But dear me! That's Thomas Paine, and it doesn't have anything to do with Halloween.

GARY: Nevertheless, that is the book for us. How about it, kids?

ALL: You bet! It's common sense for us from now on!

The End