

Curse of the Stalwart

By Phillip Hall

Vice President Chester A. Arthur paced back and forth in the small front room of his New York home. He looked to the clock to see it was 10:32 PM then rubbed his tired eyes and finally took a seat. It had been eighty days since President James Garfield had been shot and he continued to worsen. The doctors had not been able to retrieve the bullet from him and feared infection had set in.

Chester had received the news only one hour earlier that President Garfield would not last through the night. He struggled with his thoughts and emotions. On one side he tried to prepare himself for taking over the presidency but on the other he hoped James would pull through. Suddenly a shiver ran down his spine and he felt as if something dreadful had occurred. He felt an eerie feeling of someone watching him but shook his head and then spoke.

“It was nothing but a cold chill. That’s all.”

He spoke more to calm himself than anything. He took a deep breath and released it but still his stomach would not unclench. There was a loud knock at the door which caused him to jump. He steadied his breathing then regained his composure.

“Enter,” he said.

The door opened and in came a messenger with a folded telegram. The man handed it to him then quickly left.

Chester held the paper for a long moment then slowly opened it. As he read the words a mixture of feelings overcame him. The President was dead and now he would have to step into a role he wasn't sure he was ready for. He rubbed his tired eyes again and walked over to a small couch. He lay down and closed his eyes. A chill overtook him and he shook.

“Was it you, Chester?” a quiet voice whispered.

Chester bolted up from the couch and stood, searching the room frantically. His heart was pounding as he found no one there.

“Who... who is there?” Chester called out in a weak voice.

The room was silent and the only sound Chester could hear was the rapid pounding of his heart. He quickly walked to a table nearby and poured himself a glass of brandy. He took a small sip and then another.

“Was it you, Chester?” the hushed voice asked again.

Chester sprayed the brandy from his mouth and dropped the glass. He recognized the voice as that of the now dead James Garfield. He bolted towards the door but stepped on the dropped glass and tumbled roughly to the floor. He came up to his hands and knees and saw a pair of black dress shoes standing before him. Chester slowly looked up to meet the gaze of James Garfield. His eyes were white and blood trickled from his mouth. He wore black dress pants and a white button up shirt that was torn and soaked through with blood. Chester scrambled backwards, shattering the glass he had dropped and cutting his hand. The pain didn't register as all reason had left him and he sought nothing but escape from the nightmarish specter of Garfield.

“Did you have your Stalwarts do this to me, Chester?” Garfield questioned as blood dripped from his mouth.

Chester's back ran into the wall and he quickly found himself on his feet and looking for an escape route. There was no way out except through the hellish ghost before him.

“James I swear it! I swear to you I had nothing to do with it,” Chester replied wearily.

Garfield raised his arm and pointed his blood covered hand towards Chester.

“You were one of the Stalwarts, Chester. Did you think because I had been shot I didn't hear my assailant yell out ‘I am a Stalwart of the Stalwarts! Arthur is president now?’”

It was true that Chester had cast his lot with the Stalwart group inside the Republican Party and had only been selected as Vice President to appease those members. Chester had heard the accusatory murmurs for months now because of the shooter's infamous shouts to the surrounding crowd.

Chester shook his head violently.

“No, no, no! James, I had nothing to do with this. I swear it! On my soul, James, I had no part in this villainous act.”

Garfield's white eyes stared blankly into Chester's as the ghastly figure walked

closer. Chester cried out as the ghost gripped his throat and began to slowly squeeze the life from him. He struggled to pull the hands away but no mortal flesh could break the specter's cold grip.

There was a loud knock on the door. Chester cried out with all of the strength left in him.

“HELP!”

The door flew open and in rushed John Brady, the New York Supreme Court Justice who was there to swear in Chester as the new President. There were two policemen following closely behind. They were all shocked to find the Vice President covered in blood while clutching his own throat.

“What the devil is going on, Mr. Vice President?” Brady shouted.

Chester realized the ghost of Garfield was no longer there. He slowly released his own throat, then noticed his hand and arm soaked in blood. Sanity and reason flooded back in and he struggled to understand what had happened.

“I uh.. I got the telegram and dropped my glass. I believe I must've tripped on it and cut myself on the glass,” Chester said, trying to convince himself more than Brady.

One of the policemen helped clean Chester's hand up while the other cleaned the broken glass. The time was 12:13 AM when everything was settled. Brady began the swearing in procedure and the two policemen acted as witnesses. Chester placed his hand upon the Bible and raised his other. Brady then started to give the oath.

“I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States.”

“I do solemnly swear that I...” Chester repeated, then stopped.

Standing down the hall he had seen the bloody ghost of Garfield walk from one room to the other. The dead white eyes had been staring right at him as he went past. Chester whimpered a bit and Brady stepped forward to help him.

“Are you okay?” Brady asked.

Chester nodded his head and swallowed hard, staring past Brady and down the hall. He took a deep breath and continued on.

“I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States.”

The rest of the swearing in went quickly in spite of Chester's frequent stops to stare darkly down the hall. Brady and the policemen were all too ready to leave as Chester

had thoroughly rattled them. The new President stood at the door as they walked out onto the street.

“I am aware it’s after 1:00 AM but are you certain you don’t wish to stay a little while longer, gentlemen?” Chester inquired.

All three men politely declined and hurried away. Chester heard a loud thump behind him. He couldn’t force himself to turn, knowing it was the spirit of Garfield coming down the hall to finish what he’d started. He panicked as he tried to figure if he should run outside, call after the policemen, or chance shutting the door. Then he smelled blood and felt a cold breath on his back.

“I won’t kill you now Chester but I will remind you nightly of what you’ve done,” Garfield said in a violent tone.

Chester didn’t turn but merely walked out the door, leaving it wide open. He didn’t want to appear insane so instead of running he took off walking down the streets. He could hear the footsteps behind him and the constant whisperings of threats. He walked until he couldn’t hear the voice anymore. It had been hours and he was exhausted as he headed back to his home.

Each night after that was the same. After 10:35 PM the nightmarish image of James Garfield appeared to Chester, always accusing and haunting him until finally he’d flee out into the night, walking the streets of New York until he lost his tormentor.

It wasn’t but a few weeks when Chester visited the White House to view what would soon become his new home. He spent the night but refused to sleep in the room where Garfield had slept. Still the nightmare found him. Not long after 10:35 PM he heard the thumping walk and spotted the grizzly form approaching. Chester jumped from his bed and made his way quickly out into the hallway of the White House. He finally lost the bloody specter in the streets of Washington DC. On his way back as the sun was rising he had an idea.

“You mean to say you are remodeling and redecorating the entire White House? What about all of the furniture, desks, beds and...” James said.

James Blaine was the Secretary of State appointed by James Garfield and he was not

happy with having to serve under President Arthur. He viewed this latest idea as an outrage.

“No need to worry James, I have hired twenty four wagons that will be here shortly. Everything will be loaded up and shipped off,” Chester answered.

James stormed off shaking his head and Chester watched as he left. He was so tired but he managed a smile knowing this trick had to work.

Twenty four cart loads and many hours later, every single piece of furniture was gone from the White House. Soon the carts arrived with new furniture. Chester watched as they unloaded everything. He followed them in and showed them the new master bedroom. He watched as new paint went up, new rugs were unrolled and even the paintings on the wall were taken down and moved to new places.

Chester looked at the clock and saw it was 9:40 PM. He had to be in bed before 10:35 PM in order for his plan to have a chance. He shoed away the workers and assistants. He then sent the servants on their way and then slipped into bed. It didn't take long until he heard someone walking down the hallway. It went on for hours and finally he heard a loud cry echo throughout the White House.

“Damn you Chester! I will find you and when I do I will kill you this time!” Garfield screamed out.

Chester pulled the covers over his head and laid there until he drifted off to sleep.

A year went by and each night Chester heard the ghost stalking the corridors searching for him but his trick had worked. Changing every single thing Garfield had known when he was there confused the vengeful spirit just enough to keep him from finding the new President. However, over the past few months Chester had taken ill and found it very tough to stay in his room all night long. He had been vomiting, having terrible headaches and pains in his lower back.

Finally one night it was too much for him to bear and he called for a servant. When the man arrived he was gravely concerned.

“Mr. President, what may I do to help? You look terrible!”

“Harold, fetch the doctor and make haste, please,” Chester said weakly.

He had been getting sick like this off and on but tonight was the worst he had experienced since it began. After a short time Harold returned with Dr. Brown. Both men rushed into the room and the Doctor immediately began examining the ailing President. Chester lay still, trying not to vomit, and he looked over and saw that the door to his room was open.

“Harold the door! Shut the door man,” Chester said, panicking.

The servant went to do as he was told but Dr. Brown spoke up.

“Please leave the door open. It's a bit stuffy in here.”

Chester struggled to sit up.

“No, no, no. You don't understand, the door must be closed at all times during the night or he will find me!” Chester said.

Dr. Brown looked deeply concerned. He felt of Chester for fever.

“Mr. President you are not feeling well, that is all. We'll leave the door open for now to get some cool air in here,” Dr. Brown said.

Chester shook his head, then looked at the Doctor to argue. But it was too late. There standing in the doorway was the bloodied ghost of James Garfield, his white eyes staring through him. He smiled and blood ran down his chin and dripped to the floor.

“Did you think you could hide forever Chester? Now it's time to die for what you did to me,” Garfield said.

Chester shook his head violently back and forth.

“No, No, No, No! Leave me alone! I didn't have you killed,” Chester cried out.

Dr. Brown looked to Harold and shook his head. He motioned for the servant to hold the President down so he could get some medicine in him to help calm him.

“Mr. President you are suffering from Bright's Disease. I didn't think it was this far along but I must've been wrong. Remember we talked that you'd have at least four to five years to live, but it may be more like two to three. You must relax and let this medicine take effect and we will talk about the rest tomorrow,” Dr. Brown said as he patted Chester's arm.

Soon the drugs took effect and Chester calmed in spite of his best efforts not to. The bloody ghost stood in the doorway smiling and staring at him with his unholy eyes. Dr. Brown and Harold left the room. Chester watched through a drug induced haze as the nightmare walked to his bedside. Blood was dripping on Chester's face and he could

smell death.

“Well, well, looks like you’ve got your death sentence already, Chester. Bright’s Disease is a horrific way to go. I won’t give you an easy out by killing you here. See you in hell, Chester,” Garfield said cheerfully.

The bloody ghost turned and walked out the door, never to return again.

Copyright © 2011 Phillip Hall