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Upper Grades

A Reluctant Ghost

A “spiritualist” who works to trick a woman trying to contact her dead brother is as surprised as anyone when she is able to connect with “the other side.”

by Craig Sodaro

Characters

MADELINE MEERS, a spiritualist
ROSALIND MEERS, her sister
EDITH GREENLEAF, a customer
NORBERT GREENLEAF, her husband
TIM, a ghost
SHERIFF HODGET
NELL WHITTY, an investigative reporter
CARRIE EDWARDS, a colleague

SCENE 1

TIME: 1910.

SETTING: A city street, played before the curtain.

BEFORE RISE: NELL WHITTY races on left followed by CARRIE EDWARDS, who holds a small notebook and pen.

CARRIE: Nell! Nell Whitty! You can’t run away from everyone. (NELL stops and slowly turns back.) The truth will have to come out eventually.

NELL: The truth? Who will believe it?

CARRIE: You’re a trusted journalist, a crusading writer who’s exposed fraud, corruption, even murder! Everyone will believe you.

NELL: I don’t know if I even believe what happened.

CARRIE: But rumors abound! The story must be told, and you’re the one person who can give me the real story. Look, I’ll give you full credit, even share a by-line.

NELL (Horrified): No! No one must know I’m your source.
CARRIE: But you’re a famous journalist. I’m just a novice!

NELL: Use my name, and I will deny it.

CARRIE: Then at least tell me what happened—off the record.

NELL (Shaking head; sighing with resignation): I don’t know when it actually began. I suppose the day the Meers sisters first began their table-tappings.

CARRIE: They communicated with the dead, right?

NELL: So they claimed. And apparently a good number of desperate fools fell for their act. Though maybe they weren’t fools after all. . . .(NELL and CARRIE exit right as curtain opens.)

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SCENE 2

TIME: A week earlier.

SETTING: The Meers parlor. A table center is set with two chairs. A long tablecloth covers the table and a lighted candle sits on top. A screen stands up right. Small desk or table at left has a newspaper sitting on it. A coatrack up right holds woman’s (Edith’s) coat.

AT RISE: MADELINE MEERS and EDITH GREENLEAF sit at table, MADELINE left, EDITH right. ROSALIND MEERS hides behind screen.

MADELINE: Come to us, Edgar! Your loving sister Edith so longs to hear your voice again!

ROSALIND (Disguising her voice): Edith? Edith, is that you?

EDITH: Edgar! My dear brother! How I’ve missed you!

ROSALIND: I’ve missed you too, Edie.

ROSALIND: No, Edith, I would never have done such a thing.

EDITH: I’ve been trying to convince Norbert of that.

ROSALIND: I don’t think I ever told you this, Edie, but your husband is one mean old man!

EDITH: I know you two never got along, but I hope you and he can maybe bury the hatchet now and be friends.

ROSALIND: Did I mention he’s stingy?

EDITH: No.

ROSALIND: Well, add that to the list!

NORBERT (Calling off left): Edith! Edith Greenleaf, where are you? (NORBERT GREENLEAF storms on left.)

EDITH: Norbert!

ROSALIND: I’ve missed you too, Edie.

NORBERT (To EDITH): Get your coat!

EDITH: But we’re not done.

NORBERT: Oh yes, you are. You’re done with this place for good. From here on out, I forbid you to visit, talk, or even nod to this woman if you see her on the
street. You’re making me a laughing stock!

EDITH: Norbert, how can you be so cruel?

NORBERT: And another thing! There’ll be no more pilfering my bank accounts to pay for this ridiculous charade.

EDITH: It’s not a charade! I’ve heard from Edgar. We spoke to one another.

NORBERT: There’s another worthless specimen!

MADELINE: Speak nothing but good of the dead, Mr. Greenleaf.

NORBERT: You keep out of this!

EDITH (To MADELINE): Don’t worry, Miss Meers. I’ll be back.

NORBERT: Not with any of my hard-earned money!

EDITH (Taking money from her purse): Here you go, Miss Meers. (NORBERT moves to grab the money, but MADELINE gets it first.)

NORBERT (To EDITH): You take that back!

EDITH: I will not! (EDITH stands, puts on her coat.) And stop acting like such a boar.

NORBERT: I am not acting like a boar!

EDITH: Good day, Miss Meers. (EDITH moves left.)

NORBERT: And just how does a boar act?

EDITH: It growls and snorts and smells like a pig! (She storms out left, NORBERT following. ROSALIND peeks out from behind the screen.)

ROSALIND: Coast clear?

MADELINE: The old boar is gone.

ROSALIND: Did we get paid?

MADELINE (Fanning the money): And how. Now that Edith and Edgar are on speaking terms, she’s even more generous.

ROSALIND: But what about the boar?

MADELINE: He’ll come around.

ROSALIND: So, can I buy that new hat I’ve had my eye on?

MADELINE: I thought we were going to the lake for a week.

ROSALIND: I forgot. I shouldn’t be selfish. It’s your talent that puts bread on our table.

MADELINE: And where would I be without you, sister dear?

ROSALIND (In her disguised voice): I don’t have any idea! (In her normal voice) What time is it?

MADELINE (Checking her watch): Five-thirty.

ROSALIND: Oh, I’ve got to run! I promised Reverend Halsey I’d have the flower vases filled by seven.

MADELINE: Run along, then. I think I’ll just relax. Communicating with the dead can be so tiring. (She and ROSALIND laugh as ROSALIND exits left. MADELINE moves about the room dramatically.) Edgar! Oh, Edgar! Come to me, Edgar! Speak to me! (She laughs. The table begins to shake. Suddenly terrified) Who’s there? (She
grabs the candlestick off the table.) Who's under there? Come out this instant! Come out! (TIM lifts tablecloth and gingerly sticks his head out. MADELINE screams. TIM screams, and ducks under the table, which shakes. MADELINE lifts the tablecloth to reveal TIM cowering there.)

TIM (Terrified): Don't do that!

MADELINE: Do what?

TIM: Scream like you've seen a ghost!

MADELINE: Who are you?

TIM: A ghost. (MADELINE screams, TIM screams and pulls tablecloth down.) Stop that! You're scaring me! (MADELINE lifts tablecloth again.)

MADELINE: What are you doing here?

TIM: You called me.

MADELINE: You're Edgar? I thought you'd be a lot older.

TIM: I'm Tim. Tim Edgar. I guess I misunderstood. And now...now...

MADELINE: Can you come out from under there? You must be terribly cramped. (TIM comes out from under the table and stretches.)

TIM: Thank you.

MADELINE: You don't look like a ghost.

TIM: No? (He turns around. His jacket is shredded in the back with narrow black tire marks.)

MADELINE: Oh, you poor man! What happened?

TIM: A milk truck ran over me.

MADELINE: One of those big, heavy...?

TIM: Oh, boy, was it heavy! A real back-breaker, get it? (Chuckles)

MADELINE: It's not very funny.

TIM: No, but if I think about it too much, I'll just start crying. (TIM tears up.)

MADELINE: Oh, no, please don't do that. But how did a milk truck run over you?

TIM: I was walking along, just minding my own business, when I saw this kid walking down the sidewalk bouncing a ball. Quicker than you can say “Watch out! A truck!” the ball bounced into the street and the kid ran after it—right into the middle of Addison Street.

MADELINE: Oh, and motorcars go so fast on Addison!

TIM: So do milk trucks. Long story short, there's the kid in the middle of the street with the truck barreling down on him. Before I knew what I was doing, I ran into the street, pushed the kid out of the way, fell into the street face-first, and...and...

MADELINE (After a slight pause, with an angered laugh): This is ridiculous, you know! You're just making fun of me! You snuck into the house and hid under there during the séance. What are you, a reporter?

TIM: No! I'm an honest-to-goodness living, breathing ghost!

MADELINE: Ah ha! You can't be a living, breathing ghost!

TIM: Poor choice of words. (TIM notices newspaper.) Here, look! Here's my picture! (He holds up paper for her to see.)
MADELINE (Reading): Good Samaritan killed saving boy. (To TIM) That’s you?

TIM: It’s not my best side.

MADELINE (Reading): Tim Edgar, a newcomer to town. . .(To TIM) What a heroic thing to do! (MADELINE suddenly screams and runs behind screen.)

TIM (Holding his ears): Don’t do that, lady! Please!

MADELINE (Peeking out from behind screen): But you’re. . .you’re. . .a ghost!

TIM: I know, I know. But, please—ghosts get scared, too!

MADELINE: What are you doing here?

TIM: I told you. You called me. Well, you called “Edgar,” and I thought you meant me. I guess you didn’t, ha?

MADELINE (Coming from behind screen): Nobody’s ever come when I called them!

TIM: You must have some kind of special power.

MADELINE (With a laugh): This is crazy! Completely, hysterically crazy!

TIM: I’m glad you think it’s funny.

MADELINE: A ghost in my parlor! An honest-to-goodness chain-rattling, moaning ghost! Wait ’til I tell Rosalind.

TIM: Who’s Rosalind?

MADELINE: My sister. We’re in business together.

TIM: What kind of business?

MADELINE: You aren’t really very bright, are you?

TIM: My teachers all kept telling me that.

MADELINE: You poor man. Rosalind and I call up the spirits of dead relatives so people can talk to them. You know, their aunts, uncles, parents, whoever.

TIM: And I’m the first real ghost you’ve called up?

MADELINE: I’m afraid so.

TIM: Then you’re a fake.

MADELINE: I won’t tell if you won’t. How’d you get here? (Looking up) Fall through the cracks?

TIM: They said if we hear our name whispered on the wind, we should ignore it. I guess I should have listened. (Looking around the room) No offense, lady, but I don’t like it here.

MADELINE: Why don’t you go haunt your own family—you know, where you feel more at home.

TIM: I don’t have a family. Pa ran off when I was born. Said I cried too much and walked right out the front door. Ma died when I was thirteen.

MADELINE: No brothers or sisters?

TIM: One brother older than me, but he’s still on your side. He’s a cop and one time he arrested me. His own brother!

MADELINE: I’m sure it must have been a mistake.

TIM: You’re telling me. He said I was robbing a jewelry store. What would I want with jewelry? I was robbing the candy store next to it.
MADELINE: Did you go to jail?

TIM: Naaah. I was only ten. But I learned my lesson.

MADELINE: It’s wrong to steal.

TIM: And worse to get caught! So I figured I’d stay on the straight and narrow. I got a job working at a mill back home, but then they put in machines to do our jobs, and so that’s why I came here. I was out looking for work and ended up here, under a milk truck. At least the kid was all right.

MADELINE: I’m sure he’ll be forever grateful.

TIM: Yeah, but now I’m stuck between two worlds.

MADELINE: Well, why don’t you just go back to wherever. I mean, you got here, didn’t you? I’m sure there’s some way to go back.

TIM: That’s just it. I don’t remember how.

MADELINE: You forgot?

TIM: I guess I didn’t listen very well.

MADELINE: Someone did show you how, didn’t they?

TIM: Yeah, Joseph did.

MADELINE: Who’s Joseph?

TIM: He said he’s my spirit guide, but between you and me, he takes a lot of time off.

MADELINE: Well, what did he tell you to do?

TIM: He said to do something like this. (He makes a number of subtle gestures.)

MADELINE: Aren’t there any magic words?

TIM: Nope. Just something like this. (His gestures become a bit more dramatic.)

MADELINE: That doesn’t seem to be working.

TIM: I’ve been trying everything I can think of, but nothing works.

MADELINE: Well, don’t give up!

TIM: Yeah, I’d be stuck here, and, like I said, no offense, but this place is creepy.

MADELINE: Especially with a ghost hanging around.

TIM: Maybe it’s this. (He tries more gestures.)

MADELINE: What if you do this? (MADELINE shows him a variation.)

TIM: It seemed more like this. (He tries again.)

MADELINE: Maybe if you raise your right arm more.

TIM (Raising his right arm): Like this? That doesn’t feel right. Gosh, darn it! I don’t want to be a ghost! Maybe if I— (TIM flails his arms around in frustration. Lights black out. When they come up, TIM is gone. MADELINE begins a search of the room.)

TIM: Tim? Tim?

ROSALIND enters left holding a bouquet of flowers.

ROSALIND: Madeline, what are you doing?

MADELINE: You didn’t happen to see a young man outside with tire tracks on his back, did you?
ROSALIND: Good gracious! Of course not! (With concern) Madeline, are you all right?

MADELINE: Rosalind, I did it! For real!

ROSALIND: Did what?

MADELINE: I called a spirit and he came! Right here!

ROSALIND: Where you’re standing?

MADELINE: No. . .under the table, actually. But he was here!

ROSALIND: Was it Edgar?

MADELINE: No, this fellow. (She shows ROSALIND the newspaper.) Tim.

ROSALIND (Horrified): Run over by a milk truck? You let a complete stranger into the house?

MADELINE: I didn’t let him in. He just showed up. He said he thought I was calling his last name and got confused, the poor dear.

ROSALIND: You spoke to him?

MADELINE: Oh, he was quite friendly, poor man—a very reluctant ghost.

ROSALIND: Madeline, you need to have a nice cup of tea and try to remember we make our living fooling people.

MADELINE: But Tim said I have power. Real power! We don’t have to fool people anymore! (Curtain falls.)

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SCENE 3

TIME: The following day.

SETTING: An alley behind the house, played before the curtain.

AT RISE: NORBERT paces center stage.

SHERIFF enters right.

SHERIFF: This better be good, Mr. Greenleaf.

NORBERT: I tell you, Sheriff, that Meers woman’s a fraud! She’s bilking people of their hard-earned money right under your nose!

SHERIFF: My nose doesn’t have a thing to do with it.

NORBERT: It’s already cost me $300 so my wife can talk to her lame-brain brother who did us all a favor and died six months ago. That Meers woman’s got it rigged up so Edith just thinks she’s talking to Whatshisname. It’s fraud, I tell you! Fraud! (NELL enters briskly left, holding notebook and pen.)

NELL: Which is a crime, Sheriff.

SHERIFF: Who invited the press, Miss Whitty?

NELL: I don’t need an invitation. I represent the free press! The right of the people to know! It’s my duty to be here and report the truth.

SHERIFF (To NORBERT): You tell her about this?

NORBERT: Absolutely not. But she probably smells a rat, too!

NELL: Actually, Sheriff, I had a gut feeling something was up and followed you when you left the station.

NORBERT: Good for you! You can spread the word that Madeline Meers is a fraud, a trickster, a charlatan! (NELL scribbles wildly.)

NELL: All three?

NORBERT: She’s like a vulture picking
at the bones of the dead.

**NELL:** Whose bones would those be?

**NORBERT:** My worthless brother-in-law, for one. Right now my wife is in there talking to Edgar, but I’m sure as I’m standing here, it’s not Edgar who’s answering!

**SHERIFF:** Before any more hot air pollutes the atmosphere out here, let’s go in and find out.

**NELL:** And how! This might be my next big story!

**NORBERT:** And you’ll be doing the whole city a favor—no, the whole country a favor! Beware of wolves in sheep’s clothing! She’s one species we want to see extinct! (**NORBERT, SHERIFF, and NELL charge off right.**)

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**SCENE 4**

**TIME:** A few minutes later.

**SETTING:** The parlor, as before. The candle on the table is now lit.

**AT RISE:** **MADELINE** and **EDITH** sit as before. **ROSALIND** is behind screen.

**EDITH:** You mentioned something that happened recently, Miss Meers?

**MADELINE:** Yes. Just after your last visit I made contact with another spirit, a young man who was killed when he saved a small boy from being hit by a truck.

**EDITH:** How awful. The poor man.

**MADELINE:** He seemed so bewildered, so reluctant to realize what had happened to him. But the important thing is that my powers are at their peak, Mrs. Greenleaf.

**EDITH:** Oh, dear, does this mean you’re raising your price?

**ROSALIND** *(From behind the screen):* You better believe it, Edie!

**EDITH:** Edgar! Edgar, are you here?

**ROSALIND:** I came just to be with you, Edie.

**EDITH:** Oh, Edgar, I don’t care what it costs! Our time together is too precious.

**ROSALIND:** I was hoping you’d say that. (**NORBERT, SHERIFF,** and **NELL** enter left.) You know I’m here for you, Edie.

**NORBERT:** Yeah? Well, come on out here and show yourself, you lazy good-for-nothing!

**EDITH:** Norbert! How dare you!

**NORBERT:** I’ll dare anything. *(Pointing to **MADELINE**)* This woman’s a fraud!

**SHERIFF:** That true, Miss Meers?

**MADELINE:** Do you mean have I never contacted the spirit of someone on the other side?

**SHERIFF:** I guess that about sums it up.

**EDITH:** She has contacted my brother Edgar many times, Sheriff. In fact, he’s here right now.

**NELL:** Where? Where is he?

**EDITH:** He’s a spirit! You can’t see him because he shed his worldly body when he passed on.

**NORBERT:** A likely story!

**NELL:** But you say he speaks. Tell him
to say something.

**MADELINE:** Edgar, Edgar, let your presence be known.

**NORBERT** (*After a pause*): There, you see? Nobody’s here but us living breathing human folks.

**ROSALIND:** Don’t be so sure! (*All but NORBERT are startled.*)

**SHERIFF:** Who said that?

**EDITH:** Edgar, of course. (*To the air*) You remember Norbert, don’t you, dear?

**ROSALIND:** Like a bad toothache. (*NELL begins to snoop around room.*)

**NORBERT:** That’s not her brother! He had a deep voice and didn’t so much talk as growl. (*Mimicking*) More steak! More potatoes! More cake!

**EDITH:** Maybe he’s lost weight.

**NELL:** If he’s dead, didn’t he shed his earthly body?

**NORBERT:** He’s dead, all right, and would be much too lazy to come back for a visit. Sheriff, arrest that woman!

**SHERIFF:** Not without sufficient evidence of fraud. (*NELL stands by the screen.*)

**NELL:** Is this enough evidence? (*NELL folds back the screen.*)

**NORBERT:** Aha! I told you so! There’s your brother, Edith!

**EDITH** (*Rising from her chair, angrily*): Oh, oh—dear me. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forgive you!

**NORBERT:** That’s telling her.

**EDITH** (*To NORBERT*): I’m talking to you! (*EDITH exits left.*)

**SHERIFF** (*To ROSALIND*): What are you doing back there, ma’am?

**ROSALIND** (*Weakly*): Dusting?

**NORBERT:** Arrest them, Sheriff! They’re frauds!

**MADELINE:** I am not a fraud! I have communicated with the other side.

**ROSALIND:** Oh, she has, Sheriff! She really has!

**NELL:** Prove it!

**MADELINE:** Well, I’m not sure I can prove it.

**NORBERT:** Aha!

**MADELINE:** But I’ve met a very reluctant ghost.

**ROSALIND:** A young man, right?

**MADELINE:** Yes, and he was very frightened and actually showed up here by mistake.

**NORBERT:** Hogwash!

**MADELINE:** And he couldn’t seem to remember how to get back to the other side.

**NORBERT:** Do you believe all this blarney, Sheriff?

**SHERIFF:** There’d better be more to it than that.

**MADELINE:** He tried and tried all different gestures so he could get back to the other side.

**NELL:** You said “gestures”?
MADELINE: Yes. Hands, arms, elbows. He tried every which way.

SHERIFF: That’s it! I’m placing you under arrest. *(SHERIFF pulls out handcuffs.)*

MADELINE: I’m sure he did it this way *(Demonstrates) . . .*

SHERIFF *(Taking MADELINE’s arm)*: Come along quietly, now, ma’am.

MADELINE: And that way. *(MADELINE twists out of his grip.)*

SHERIFF: Lady, I’m not going to say it again.

MADELINE: And finally he got it right! *(MADELINE reproduces the same gesture TIM had just before the blackout of Scene 2. Blackout)*

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SCENE 5

TIME: *A week later.*

SETTING: *The same as Scene 1.*

AT RISE: CARRIE and NELL are in the same spots as they were at the end of Scene 1.

CARRIE: So...so, what happened?

NELL: She vanished right before our eyes!

CARRIE: Oh, come on! Just like that? *(She snaps her fingers.)*

NELL: There’s not been a trace of her since then. Her poor sister told me everything. She has no idea what to do.

CARRIE: Probably a trick. There had to have been a trap door or something.

NELL: No! She simply disappeared. Don’t you see? She’s on the other side now. Probably with that young man, Tim. Aren’t you taking any notes?

CARRIE *(With a laugh)*: Really, Nell. I thought you had something.

NELL: What do you mean? A few minutes ago, you were begging me for the truth.


THE END

PRODUCTION NOTES

A Reluctant Ghost

CHARACTERS: 5 female; 3 male.

PLAYING TIME: 20 minutes.

COSTUMES: Turn-of-the-last-century dress for all. Long dresses for female characters. Tim wears a jacket that is shredded in the back and has narrow black tire marks. Norbert wears suit. Sheriff wears police uniform.

PROPERTIES: Small notebook and pen; money; bouquet of flowers; notebook and pen; handcuffs.

SETTING: Scenes 1, 3, and 5 take place before the curtain and need no set. Scenes 2 and 4: the Meers’s parlor with a table center set with two chairs. A long tablecloth covers table and a lighted candle sits atop it. A screen stands up right. Small desk or table at left with a newspaper (front page unseen by audience) sitting on it. A coatrack up right holds Edith’s coat or cape.

LIGHTING: Blackouts, as indicated.

SOUND: No special effects.
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