

*(We received this intriguing tale as part of the Bish Bishop Tall Tales Contest, but it was too good to wait to publish it after Halloween. Its author is Bill Bussineau, Newport, and Bill spins quite a scary tale. Next year, we'll let you all have a crack at Halloween yarns. Meanwhile, read this one — preferably with the lights low, late at night, with no one around — except for a few ghosts, perhaps.)*

By BILL BUSSINEAU

The following story takes place in a small, rural town in northeastern Vermont. The name of the town and its people have been changed, so as not to attract unwanted publicity.

It was early fall, and most of the trees had shed their summer leaves to warn of the cold winter ahead. Under an old maple tree, leaves danced clumsily around the bared roots, as the cool, night breeze lifted them from the ground. A full, silvery moon shined ominously over the decaying tombstones in the nearby cemetery. The sound of crickets filled the air, adding greatly to the already eerie feeling of the night. Had this been any other night, it would not have been the same — for tonight was a very special night. Tonight was . . . Halloween.

I was 12 years old at the time, and so was my constant companion, Joey Williams. We grew up together and went to school together. The whole town called us the most mischievous boys around. Every young schoolboy has once put a frog or snake into his teacher's desk; we decided to be a little more original. We filled our teacher's desk with frogs and snakes. It took two days to get all the creatures out of the school. My parents tanned my hide when they found out. I imagine Joey's parents gave him the same treatment, although he never told me whether they had.

Oct. 31, otherwise known as Halloween, Joey and I told our parents we were going to the Halloween party at Hawthorne's barn. But unknown to them, we had other plans. We were going to visit the old graveyard at the end of Simmons Lane. The dirt road had been closed off years ago, even before I was born. Nobody ever went down the old road, because, according to local legend, everything along the way was haunted. It was said that even the trees grew from the blood-soaked soil where Thomas Simmons had killed his wife in a fit of jealousy. The old mansion still stood, and the family graveyard was also on the road. My father had told me many a time to stay clear of Simmons Lane, but curiosity overrode his orders. Joey's curious nature equalled, if not surpassed, mine. The townspeople thought it an evil place and declared that it belonged to the Devil himself.

Halloween meant more to me than a silly old party. I liked it even better than Christmas.

Tonight Joey and I will celebrate Halloween the

way it is supposed to be recognized, complete in all its glory — hopefully, with real ghosts. And, I don't mean little kids in white sheets, running around with pumpkin candy stuffed in their mouths. No, none of that. Tonight Joey and I, Simmon's Lane and the darkness of the night would play major parts in a real Halloween tale. These were the thoughts that entered my head as we neared Simmons Lane.

We long since had passed Hawthorne's barn and the childish party, looking forward only to what mysteries may lie ahead on the abandoned dirt road. I let the darkness and cool feeling of the night air enter my lungs and mind as Joey told me what we might find. My mind was preoccupied with other thoughts as Joey anxiously spoke of "things that drink your blood," and "ghosts that try to steal your body!" He stopped talking when we reached the metal gate.

The entrance to the road was just past the huge gate. It was locked securely, but Joey and I found no problem in climbing it, except for acquiring some rust on our clothing. Once over, we stared at the road before us. Weeds and grass had grown over where there had once been a dirt road. Despite the growth, however, the road was still distinguishable, although obscure.

Joey had his lantern turned on, and it was then that I realized that Joey had stopped talking about creatures of the night. The enormous trees hung drearily over the road, as if they were reaching out to take us. I also had noticed that there were no animals around, except for the crickets in the woods — and even they were very few. Neither of us said a word until we spotted the Simmons Mansion. Joey said that coming down the road was maybe not such a great idea. I agreed, but we had to keep going.

The Simmons Mansion was a decaying old building with overgrown grass and two large hedges in front of it. Some of the windows were broken, and part of the chimney had fallen down. Although the place was depressing to the spirit, it still had a dignified appearance, like that of an old soldier. The stone walkway had been fragmented by years of wear. Hesitantly, we both walked up to the front door. At the first attempt to enter, the door knob broke off. The door swung open easily, and doubting momentarily whether we should or not, we walked inside.

Pushing away spider webs, we stopped in the middle of what appeared to be the living room. There was furniture everywhere, covered by canvas, which in turn was blanketed by dust. As I wiped my finger over a dusty chair, a loud noise diverted my attention. Joey said it sounded like someone fighting. As he finished talking, we both heard what sounded like a muffled scream. Then there was silence.

Joey was thrilled with excitement and anxious at the prospect of finding ghosts, and he ran up the stairs. I yelled in vain for him to wait, but he did not stop for even a second. My heart was pounding at my

rib cage, but I finally found the courage to go up after him. I yelled his name every time I took a breath until my throat was dry. As I reached the top stair, a board broke, inhaling my foot, and I pulled my foot out and ran as fast as I could.

My face brushed away cobwebs as I looked in every room and yelled for Joey. When I reached the end of the long hallway, I stopped to catch my breath. I heard another scream, one that sounded very much like Joey's voice. I yelled to him and ran in the direction of the scream.

I saw a dark figure move toward the stairs. Thinking it to be Joey, I followed the figure down the stairs, avoiding the broken stair. I chased the dark shadow out the door and into the graveyard. I yelled out and told Joey I wasn't going along with his joke. I looked all over the graveyard for what I thought had been Joey — it was then that I saw what filled me with terror beyond belief.

I saw two dark figures now, one like a man and the other looked like Joey. I yelled to him and, as I ran towards him, I saw his dark shadow sink into a grave with outstretched arms, as if he were pleading to God. The tall figure disappeared into the grave next to the one I had seen Joey go into. With tears streaming down my face, I ran to the grave and pounded at the ground, yelling at the top of my voice to Joey. I glanced up at the tombstone and was shocked further to read the following inscription:

Joseph L. Williams

Born — 1959. Died — Oct. 31, 1971 A.D.

There was more writing, but I was so scared and confused that all I could do was run and not stop until I reached town. I told everyone about it, and they said I was just playing tricks.

Joey never came home, and finally the townspeople began to take me seriously. The next morning, everybody I knew in the town went out to Simmons Lane to look for him. There was no trace of him. Even the gravestone showed nothing. Unlike the night before, the writing, all of it, was eroded beyond readability.

We never found Joey, and now I'm 17, five years older. I never will forget what happened as long as I live. Nobody believes my story about Joey sinking into the grave. They think he ran away or drowned in the lake.

But I know the truth. I never have gone near the road since that happened, and I never will.

Sometimes on a windy, fall evening, I can see Joey standing in my backyard pleading for me to take him in out of the cold. Whenever I open the door, he's gone. Soon, I feel, he will be gone forever. Don't ask me why because I don't know.

Tonight will be Halloween again. For you, it will be parties and fun — for me it will be living hell.