

Hallowe'en Past and Present –

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The dark foggy evenings were a stark reminder to Jack that Hallowe'en, his most dreaded time of year, wasn't far off. There was a time when he would have eagerly looked forward to the innocent fun of the season - ducking for a thrupenny piece in the big white enamel basin full of cold water from the barrel outside or competing with his friends to get a bite of the big juicy yellow apple that dangled on a string from the half loft. But that was long ago and times are different now. Fireworks and bangers frighten old people and animals and Jack will never forgive whoever was responsible for the loss of his beloved dog, Prince. Frightened by bangers, Prince ran away last Halloween and was never found despite many days spent searching. Jack feels his loss keenly because he was not only a great guard dog he was Jack's best friend as well.

So this year Jack has made up his



mind to dress up and frighten the daylighters of the people he suspects of persecuting him at Halloween – mostly because he knows they are not all children. He knows that everything he will need is in the big American trunk beside his bed but he also dreads opening the trunk because he knows it will bring back many memories – not all of them pleasant. Generally the only time there is cause to open the trunk is if someone has died or there is to be a 'station' in the locality. As Jack surveyed the trunk he could see that it would be a job in itself to get at it to open it owing to the paraphernalia housed on top of it! There was his grandmother's old

gramophone and a dusty pile of records long unplayed, there was the smoothin' iron, a churn dash, his bicycle clips and a carbide lamp as well as the stout ash plant that he always kept beside him. A bag of 'Hearts Delight' flour bags that his mother saved for making sheets sat beside a box full of back issues of "Ireland's Own", "Old Moors Almanac" and "The Sacred Heart Messenger". There was an array of statues, bottles of holy water from various holy wells, old photographs and most importantly a worn yellow jotter with the 'cows times' and other important dates carefully noted.

Finally the moment came and Jack steeled himself to open the trunk. He lifted the lid and there staring at him was his mother's red and black plaid shawl and beside it, carefully wrapped in white tissue paper, her red flannel petticoat with its long white flounce. Jack

had a moments doubt when he thought: 'Oh God am I doing the right thing here?' Then, suddenly, the doubts left him, he felt as if something supernatural had taken over his mind and he was totally focussed on what he had to do. He calmly scanned the miscellaneous contents of the trunk – crochet bedspreads, linen tablecloths, sheets, pillow cases, towels, crucifixes and blessed candles. The he spotted the box containing his mothers good black hat with its long veil and shiny peacock feather and he knew he need look no further. He took the shawl, the petticoat, the hat and a blessed candle from the trunk and carefully closed it again. He was worried that the petticoat mightn't fit but, to his delight, when he stepped into it it slid nicely up to his waist. He donned the shawl and the hat with its veil well down over his face and took a look in the mirror. What he saw nearly frightened himself so he lit the blessed candle – who knew what spirits could be roaming around on a night like this. He took his stick and the hurricane lamp and left the house. Just as he made his way down the gravel path to the lane a couple of his

pals arrived. To his delight they didn't recognise him and ran screaming to the nearest neighbours house – "there's a ghost in Jack's, there's a ghost in Jack's!" "Don't be silly" said Kate, the woman of the house, "there's no ghost, sit down there and I'll make a nice mug of cocoa". As she put the kettle on there was a loud knock at the door. Kate made for the door, fumbling in her apron pocket to see if she had anything to give to the children she thought were at the door. As she reached the door it opened and she screamed as she saw who was there "God protect us, it's Jack's mother, Maggie Jane" she ran to the holy water font, doused herself and the kitchen in holy water and collapsed into the old armchair that sat beside the fireplace.

Jack peeled off the disguise and Kate, fortified by a mug of cocoa with a dash of something stronger thrown in 'to settle her nerves', eventually recovered and they had a good evening of chat and reminiscing. Jack went home a happy man knowing his scheme had worked and vowing to have his costume at the ready again for

next year if God spared him.

The above story is true, more or less. Jack is long since dead and while he was no doubt frightened by people coming around the house on Halloween night, looking back now it was all pretty harmless. If he was around today Jack would have a great deal more to worry about with gangs of thugs roaming the countryside robbing and terrorising old people, aided and abetted by our government closing down rural Garda stations and outdated laws that give criminals as much rights as the innocent victims of their crimes. In the recent past we have seen, not just old people, but families with young children being robbed and terrified by these gangs, we have seen homeowners sent to prison for defending themselves and their property. Rural Ireland is living in fear – if Halloween night means being nervous of what might happen then every night is Halloween for families, elderly people and people living alone in the countryside. It's time for our Government to take action before more people are forced to take the law into their own hands.