

Seven Strange and Ghostly Tales

Brian Jacques

Random House Children's Books

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About the Book

Dare you visit the **vampire's tomb** at midnight when the church bell tolls?

Or descend to the fiery pits of **hell** with a boy who has sold his soul to the **devil**?

If not, read no further. For these are strange and ghostly tales - **gruesome, pitiful, spine-chilling . . .**

But don't be surprised to find that supernatural events can also be **wickedly** funny - and even raise a **ghost** of a smile!

SEVEN STRANGE AND GHOSTLY TALES

Brian Jacques



1

*This is a cautionary tale, young folk,
and must not be treated as a joke.
Let us then draw up a treaty
against all those who like graffiti.
Each pencil mark, each can of spray,
so difficult to wipe away;
each vandal going through 'a phase'
that some poor cleaner must erase;
I beg you, shun the felt-tipped pen,
for when a wall's defaced, what then?
Do you seriously think society will say,
'How wonderful! How marvellous! Joey Rools Okay.'
Why must the scribblers leave their marks for all to see,
thinking perhaps to gain themselves fame eternally?
Put aside that marker! Start a clean new slate -
and keep it clean, or you may share
the following scribbler's fate!*

The Fate of Thomas P Kanne

IT WAS A quiet, grey Tuesday toward the end of the Christmas holidays. Turkeys had been devoured, gifts exchanged, and the festive season had tailed away into mundane January. Parents swept the last of the Christmas tree pine needles out of the carpet, whilst vowing to start dieting. As for the children, they were complaining that the batteries in their new toys had run out. Everybody was disgruntled, disillusioned and disappointed with the whole process of Yuletide. The fun, laughter and fairy lights would not return for nearly a whole long year.

None of this ever bothered Mr Bausin, going about the same daily ritual he performed in his timeless world of Middlechester Museum: unlocking the great doors, checking the central heating gauges, switching the automatic alarm system back and forth to test it, and tidying the rows of brightly coloured pamphlets and folders on the information desk. Christmases came and went, they were none of his business – the museum was his world. He lived in the flat alone and self contained on the second floor, trusted completely by the administrators and curators. Mr Bausin was totally devoted to his job as caretaker attendant of Middlechester Museum. His dark, muddy eyes smouldered with anger as he took solvent and a nylon pan-scrubber to the graffiti message sprayed on an Italian marble portal column.

‘PHANTOM SNAKE RULES!’

He had missed that one. His anger was directed not at the writer, but at himself for the oversight. Mr Bausin smiled a dark, secret smile as he scrubbed to erase the black auto enamel. Some sixth sense told him that soon,

maybe even today, on this lacklustre, humdrum Tuesday, he would finally meet his archenemy.

The Phantom Snake, always the same name. It had begun about two years back; the name began appearing all over his beloved museum. Sometimes in felt tip, other times in thick blue luggage marker, more often than not in hard-to-remove air-drying car spray paint.

Phantom Snake!

Scrawled on glass exhibit cases, pamphlets and exit signs, written on marble statues, daubed on floors, walls, doors and stairways. One time it had actually been found in the left hand corner of a priceless Renaissance screen. The Head Curator was furious. Experts were called in at great cost to remove the offending signature and restore the ancient work to its former beauty. Mr Bausin had been reprimanded by the administration for letting such a thing happen. That day he had sworn on oath to his secret and dark gods: one day he would put an end to the Phantom Snake forever.

Yet the graffiti continued to appear, Bausin keeping one step ahead of the angry administration by erasing it quickly wherever he found it. And now with the museum's Egyptian Exhibition opening Mr Bausin feared greatly lest the holy relics of that high far-gone age would be a target for the depredations of the Phantom Snake. Not if he had anything to do with it! To be guardian over the priceless artifacts of Ancient Egypt was a sacred trust.

When he had removed the graffiti Mr Bausin roamed through the Egyptian Exhibition, fondly checking each display: papyrus scrolls, reed model boats, vases and urns, sacred scarabs and decorated amulets. Treading softly, he followed the wall of bas relief hieroglyphics around to the sarcophagus of the boy king Ahminrahken. Without the protection of a glass case the figure lay in solitary splendour, its open casket decorated in now faded colours. The whole tableau represented an inner sanctum of some

pyramid tomb in the Valley of the Kings, with models of the old gods standing on the sandy floor; Set, Anubis, Horus and Osiris, guarding the resting place. Mr Bausin took it all in slowly, finally easing silently out to resume his duties. And to watch and wait for the Phantom Snake.

Thomas P Kanne noisily sucked the last of his milkshake through a straw as he sat watching the citizens of Middlechester going about their daily business. Through the plate glass café window he could see policemen, housewives, bus drivers and road sweepers, a fair cross-section of the community, carrying out their allotted chores. Blissfully unaware that they were being watched by the Phantom Snake.

He chuckled inwardly. Thomas P Kanne, Phantom Snake, he was writing his own name rearranged into an anagram for them all to see, yet they could not solve it. Sheer brilliance on his part. He had known other graffiti writers, idiots, two of them from the same form as him at school, who had gone about spraying their names all over town. It amazed him how they could reach the ripe old age of thirteen and still remain such fools. They had been caught easily, and now they were feeling the wrath of parents, teachers, social workers and even the police. But still nobody knew who the Phantom Snake was. None of them were clever enough to realize that it was an anagram of his own name.

Thomas secretly wrote the signature on the plastic counter in Biro before climbing down from the tall stool to venture out into the drab, chilly Tuesday afternoon. He wandered about the town centre, marking each of his triumphs. His signature was on the bronze buttock of a water-nymph in the precinct fountain. There was another one right across the centre of a cough syrup advertisement, complete with a snaky moustache on the little girl whose mummy was administering the soothing dose. Then there was the one that adorned the Town Hall steps, a letter upon

each stair. They had removed it twice, but he had resprayed it each time. Nobody could catch the Phantom Snake. Thomas had thought of cryptically changing his logo to the drawing of a snake with the letter P at its head and an S at its tail. He rejected the idea – it would be lost on the stolid, unimaginative adults of Middlechester. Quietly, unobtrusively, he was sidling toward a large limousine parked outside the King's Head Hotel. It was white. Pure white!

Thomas looked like any enthusiastic schoolboy admiring a new Rolls Royce. He peered in the tinted windows at the walnut dashboard and morocco upholstery, before sidling round to the offside of the bonnet. Nobody was watching. He leaned over, as if inspecting the flying lady symbol on top of the radiator grille. Popping off the top of his broad red luggage marker, he executed a swift Phantom Snake signature on the gleaming white bodywork. The deed was done!

He slipped quickly away and sat on a bench outside the library, from where he could review the results of his handiwork. A man emerged from the hotel and, without noticing the signature, got straight into the Rolls and drove off. Thomas laughed inwardly. Short-sighted idiot! He'd soon realize that the Phantom Snake had struck again.

The library bench was no fun, his signature had long ago been carved deeply into its woodwork with a sharp craft knife. Thomas strolled about feeling slightly ill at ease. It was getting all too easy, and he had covered the most prominent and important sites in town. Riding up the escalator in the shopping mall, he listened to the conversation of two women in front of him.

'Just look at this, Lil, "Phantom Snake" done in white all the way round the banister rail. It's disgraceful, if you ask me.'

'Right, you'd wonder what his parents are thinking about. I'd Phantom Snake him. I'd tan his hide if he were

one of mine!’

‘Me too. Mark it and destroy it, the young hooligan. It was never like that in our day, we were well behaved. Of course it was different then.’

Thomas followed them, licking one of his readymade stickers. As soon as the chance presented itself he bumped cleverly into the back of the one called Lil.

‘Oops! Sorry. Excuse me.’

They hustled awkwardly around each other, Lil smiling indulgently at the polite young man as he extricated himself and walked off. Lil and her friend carried on, still gossiping, unaware that one of them had a Phantom Snake sticker prominently displayed on her back.

Thomas turned to watch them, shaking his head knowingly. It was indeed all becoming too easy, the number of signatures dotted about the mall was clear evidence of this.

Thomas was halfway through completing a large and elaborate signature on a *January Sale* sign posted on a boutique window, when the assistant’s hand descended upon his shoulder.

‘Gotcha, young fell—!’

Instinctively he relaxed and fell to the floor before the woman’s hand could find a firm grip. Wriggling free, he scrambled away into the crowds of shoppers, the woman running behind him shouting, ‘You’ll clean that off! Come back here!’

She was yelling and pointing at Thomas; a security man ran towards him from another direction; people were turning to stare at him. With his heart pounding wildly Thomas dashed on to an escalator – it was coming up, not going down! Disregarding the astonished folk on the moving staircase he battled his way down, leaping clumsily against the rising stairs. The security man pulled out a two-way intercom; pushing buttons, he began speaking instructions to his colleagues.

Thomas made it to the ground floor level, where he stumbled and fell. Adults stood open mouthed as he sprang to his feet, twisting and weaving among the bargain hunters through the brightly lit welter of arcades and shops. He took a right, then a quick left and another right turn, suddenly diving into a self-service cafeteria. Immediately slowing his breakneck pace he casually picked up a tray and joined the line of customers, regulating his breathing so that it sounded normal, though his chest still heaved and his hands trembled. Choosing a cream doughnut and a glass of orange juice, Thomas seated himself at a table with a family group. All the tables were fairly crowded, so he went unnoticed.

Licking cream from his fingers, Thomas watched the security guard outside the window. He was joined by another one. They looked this way and that, conversed with each other, pressed more buttons on their intercoms, then went off in opposite directions.

The moment of danger had passed; Thomas relaxed. Finishing his orange juice he got up and carried two grocery bags for a young mother who was encumbered by an infant in a push-chair. Together they walked out to the car park, and he helped her to fold up the push-chair, stowing it with the groceries on the back seat of her car, a small continental hatchback. Thomas walked off in complete safety, her thank yous ringing in his ears. Nobody could catch the Phantom Snake!

A strange excitement began tingling through Thomas. Instead of discouraging him, his narrow escape had had the opposite effect. He felt reckless and daring, ready for more adventure. But where, and how? A nearby billboard with posters of local events provided the answer.

MIDDLECHESTER MUSEUM EGYPTIAN EXHIBITION.

9.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m.

Mon to Fri throughout January. Admission free.

Of course! Thomas hurried to meet the new challenge. Many times he had dashed off his logo only seconds ahead of his favourite adversary, the watchful old attendant.

From the edge of the lawn in front of the museum Thomas watched a group being shepherded inside by the grey-haired, swarthy complexioned Bausin. Then he began his own preparations. Like a bullfighter before the corrida Thomas went through the ritual of readying himself. Giving his spray can a good shake he stowed it in the inside pocket of his baggy zip jacket. Next he undid the red and blue luggage markers. Working swiftly, he rolled back his jacket sleeves, wedging each marker up into the elasticated wristbands, taking care to roll the sleeves slightly downwards to disguise them. Two felt-tip pens, one green, the other black, went with the Biro into his back jeans pockets, together with his signed adhesive stickers. Thomas P Kanne was ready. Things were certainly hotting up for a dull post-Christmas Tuesday!

Mr Bausin noticed the youth who tacked on to the back of the group he was conducting into the Egyptian Exhibition. Their eyes met briefly; each looked away with a secret smile. The attendant coughed importantly and began his commentary, 'Many reliable experts say that life began in the East, and certainly there is ample documented evidence that for thousands of years before the birth of Christ, a large civilization flourished in Egypt, land of the Kings....'

The voice droned on as people consulted their pamphlets at the appropriate points. Thomas sized up the passage leading to the burial chamber, his fertile mind racing ahead. There was an unprotected terra cotta vase – the black felt-tip would do for that. And what about a sticker for the centre of the glass case top, where it would be flanked by four sacred scarabs? Thomas stood at the back of the group, close to the raised images on a wall of reproduction figures, fashioned in resin, forming the

entrance to the burial chamber. He worked swiftly with the black felt-tip as the attendant's drone washed over the attentive party. 'Ra, giver of life, the sun god; Horus the hawk-headed figure; Set the cat, a popular creature in Egyptian religion and mythology - all of these had their parts to play in the temples of Karnak. However, to my mind the most potent of the Egyptian deities is Anubis, the jackal-headed man....'

The Phantom Snake had already struck!

The signature had been swiftly scrawled along the back of a snake which featured on the resin wall. Thomas looked up to see Mr Bausin looking directly at him, and stared insolently back. The attendant could not possibly have seen him writing, shielded as he was by the backs of an elderly couple. The party moved on.

Thomas felt slightly mystified, Bausin had looked right at him. That one look had said it all: he knew Thomas was the Phantom Snake. Yet it was not uneasiness that possessed Thomas, it was defiance, a feeling that his skills as a secret graffiti artist had been noted, but not acknowledged. This was altogether different from some boutique lady who had nearly got lucky in the mall. This was a real contest of wit and cunning.

Thomas decided to keep his opponent on tenterhooks. He stayed with the group, noting opportunities, though not doing anything as of yet. He felt increasingly irritated that the attendant sensed this and had begun ignoring him.

The Phantom Snake was not to be disregarded!

Casually Thomas detached himself from the group and strolled back into the main museum. He was determined that his enemy would long remember a dull Tuesday in January when his sanctum had been invaded by an expert. Thomas sprayed part of the rib bone of a dinosaur black, leaving his signature in red marker upon the air-drying enamel where it could not be missed. Taking the stairs two at a time, he bounded to the upper floor. He signed again,