

RIGHT HO, JOHN THE GHOST
IT'S TIME TO RETREAT

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SAYAHNA FOUNDATION, TRIVANDRUM

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(Review)

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RIGHT HO, JOHN THE GHOST, IT'S TIME TO RETREAT

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When ghosts jolt you out of a slumber, it is tough enough to slip back to sleep. And when ghosts get spooked by writers, who wants to be a big bore and snore, in any case?

I had a ringside view of the epic clash between Casper's stiff-upper-lipped clan and "post-post-modern" chroniclers, thanks to Sayahna Foundation, who sends cartoonist E. P. Unny's works without fail.

Early this morning, when the Calcutta breeze from the Ganga is at its coolest and most reassuring, Unny's graphic story, titled "Ghosts and Writers", haunted my phone first and possessed me next, so to speak. It is in English, and you can read it here.

The story takes only 12 minutes to "read". But if you read it frame by frame, it can last a lifetime—a pick-me-up comfort zone to marvel at the pleasures of wordplay and humor that says a lot without saying much.

Spoiler alert: Just to prove that I am not exaggerating, a sample of the killer (not forgetting the

utility of the after-life that gifted us the ghosts of the master and his butler John) one-liners below:

The ghost of the master: Malabar, that marshy, malarial morass?

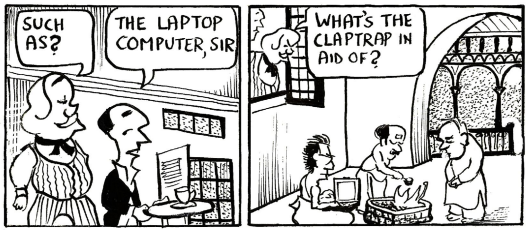
The ghost of John, the butler: But you wrote so fondly about it, Sir.

Master: I was alive and foolish then, John.



(The assertion is indisputable, I suppose, considering the way we are making a mess of the world in which we live.)

John: These wizards (*sorcerers from Malabar who have been commissioned to rid the haunted house in the north Indian hill state of the ghosts so that a heritage hotel can be opened there*) are armed with some new contraptions.



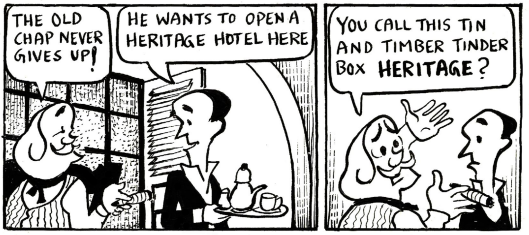
Master: Such as?

John: The laptop computer, Sir.

Master: What's the claptrap in aid of?

"Laptop" meeting "claptrap" is not merely Wodehousian but has a high visual element. When the master refers to "claptrap", he is gazing at the rituals taking place below (ghosts always have altitudinal advantage, you must have noticed). Flames and the laptop can be made out, but without the word "claptrap", the sounds and sights of the ritual would not have been so apparent or pronounced in so tight a space. That one word makes all the difference: it invokes the cacophony associated with such rituals.

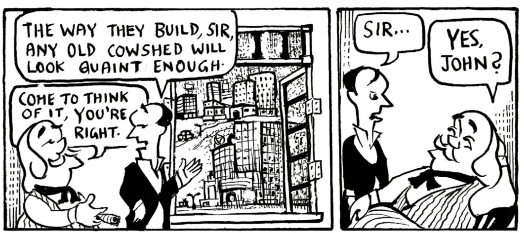
Those who have been taken for a ride at sham "heritage hotels" would empathize with the master's taste in architecture.



Master: You call this tin and timber tinderbox **HERITAGE**?

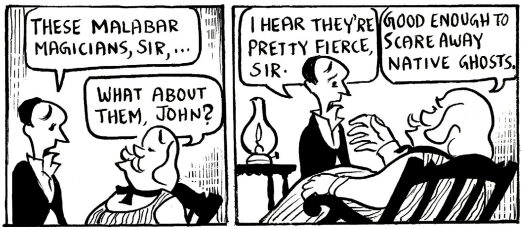
(The letters in the word, "heritage", have been made uppercase and bold by the author. A simple but effective technique to bring out the outrage, if not exasperation.)

John: The way they build, Sir, any old cowshed will look quaint enough.



When John warns the master of the potency of the

Malabar magicians, the master is not perturbed — for good reason.



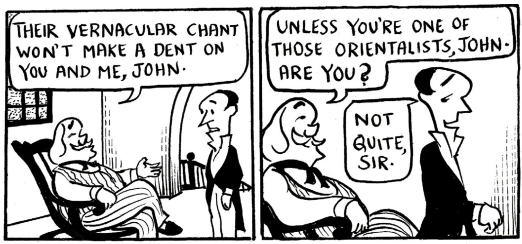
John: I hear they are pretty fierce, Sir.

Master: Good enough to scare away native ghosts.

Master: Their vernacular chant won't make a dent on you and me, John.

Master: Unless you are one of those orientalists, John, are you?

John: Not quite, Sir.



(I wonder how Kipling would have responded to the master. Mark Tully, who passed away earlier this year, would have had a hearty laugh, I suppose.)

The story says "Three months later, the ghosts have a new set of visitors". Evidently, the Malabar magicians could not make a dent — as the master had prophesied.



John: Writers from Delhi, Sir.

Master: I thought they were all in Calcutta. Whatever happened to the Writers' Building, John?

(That was when it hit me. Unfriendly neighborhood ghosts, not their cousins residing in the north Indian hill station, were the ones keeping me awake after reading Unny's graphic story. A little over a fortnight ago, on March 11, my wife and I had done the rounds of several cavernous LIC offices in central Calcutta searching for a policy

document that could not be found. Eventually, we discovered the lost parchment, solely because of the wife's dogged persistence and despite the husband's huffing and puffing, in an office not too far from Writers' Buildings, the seat of power when Jyoti Basu was chief minister for so many years. But after Mamata Banerjee became chief minister, the state secretariat was shifted to Nabanna, across the river and on the western bank of the Hooghly — more or less directly opposite Calcutta. The official reason was renovation of Writers' (short for Writers' Buildings), but even after a decade and more, the work is not over. There are whispers that Mamata is not too keen to govern from Writers'. While passing by, I pointed out the sad and deserted building, which once radiated power, to my wife, who asked me who is there now. "Ghosts," I had said, without realizing that they would haunt me on the morning of March 27 for cracking a joke at their expense. Sorry, folks.)

The battle between the Englishmen and the writers is too hilarious for my prose to capture its bite and breadth. Do read and fall of your chair — or bed as was the case with me.

But two frames I cannot avoid reproducing here.



John: This is the cultural sort, Sir.

Master: **CULTURE? FROM DELHI**?

(The all-capital letters and the bold typeface tell everything that needs to be told. For the politically correct ghosts who detest sweeping generalizations, my diagnosis: "You haven't lived in Karol Bagh, Sirji!")

John: It's a writers' retreat, Sir.

Master: I thought armies retreated, John.



What follows is pure dynamite. Enjoy the detonation.

Don't miss the background sonic arrangement that is an aural delight: BROOMmmmmm, GREEMmmmm, KROOMmmmmm … HI! HUI! HOI!

□

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