

Jerry Bundler

By W. W. Jacobs

It wanted a few nights to Christmas, a festival for which the small market-town of Torchester was making extensive preparations. The narrow streets which had been thronged with people were now almost deserted; the cheap-jack from London, with the remnant of breath left him after his evening's exertions, was making feeble attempts to blow out his naphtha lamp, and the last shops open were rapidly closing for the night.

In the comfortable coffee-room of the old "Boar's Head", half a dozen guests, principally commercial travellers, sat talking by the light of the fire. The talk had drifted from trade to politics, from politics to religion and so by easy stages to the supernatural. Three ghost stories, never known to fail before, had fallen flat; there was too much noise outside, too much light within. The fourth story was told by an old hand with more success; the streets were quiet, and he had turned the gas out. In the flickering light of the fire, as it shone on the glasses and danced with the shadows on the walls, the story proved so enthralling that George, the waiter, whose presence had been forgotten, created a very disagreeable sensation by suddenly starting up from a dark corner and gliding silently from the room.

"That's what I call a good story," said one of the men, sipping his hot whisky. "Of course it's an old idea that spirits like to get into the company of human beings. A man told me once that he travelled down the Great Western with a ghost, and hadn't the slightest suspicion of it until the inspector came for tickets. My friend said the way that ghost tried to keep up appearances by feeling for it in all its pockets and looking on the floor was quite touching. Ultimately it gave it up and with a faint groan vanished through the ventilator."

"That'll do, Hirst," said another man.

"It's not a subject for jesting," said a little old gentleman who had been an attentive listener. "I've never seen an apparition myself, but I know people who have, and I consider that they form a very interesting link between us and the after-life. There's a ghost story connected with this house, you know."

"Never heard of it," said another speaker, "and I've been here some years now."

"It dates back a long time now," said the old gentleman. "You've heard about Jerry Bundler, George?"

"Well, I've just 'eard odds and ends, sir," said the old waiter, "but I never put much count to 'em. There was one chap 'ere what said 'e saw it, and the gov'ner sacked 'im prompt."

"My father was a native of this town," said the old gentleman, "and knew the story well. He was a truthful man and a steady churchgoer, but I've heard him declare that once in his life he saw the appearance of Jerry Bundler in this house."

"And who was this Bundler?" inquired a voice.

"A London thief; pickpocket, highwayman—anything he could turn his dishonest hand to," replied the old gentleman; "and he was run to earth in this house one Christmas week some eighty years ago. He took his last supper in this very room, and after he had gone up to bed a couple of Bow Street runners, who had followed him from London but lost the scent a bit, went upstairs with the landlord and tried the door. It was stout oak, and fast, so one went into the yard, and by means of a short ladder got on to the window-sill, while the other stayed outside the door. Those below in the yard saw the man crouching on the sill, and then there was a sudden smash of

glass, and with a cry he fell in a heap on the stones at their feet. Then in the moonlight they saw the white face of the pickpocket peeping over the sill, and while some stayed in the yard, others ran into the house and helped the other man to break the door in. It was difficult to obtain an entrance even then, for it was barred with heavy furniture, but they got in at last, and the first thing that met their eyes was the body of Jerry dangling from the top of the bed by his own handkerchief."

"Which bedroom was it?" asked two or three voices together.

The narrator shook his head. "That I can't tell you; but the story goes that Jerry still haunts this house, and my father used to declare positively that the last time he slept here the ghost of Jerry Bundler lowered itself from the top of his bed and tried to strangle him."

"That'll do," said an uneasy voice. "I wish you'd thought to ask your father which bedroom it was."

"What for?" inquired the old gentleman.

"Well, I should take care not to sleep in it, that's all," said the voice, shortly.

"There's nothing to fear," said the other. "I don't believe for a moment that ghosts could really hurt one. In fact my father used to confess that it was only the unpleasantness of the thing that upset him, and that for all practical purposes, Jerry's fingers might have been made of cotton-wool for all the harm they could do."

"That's all very fine," said the last speaker again; "a ghost story is a ghost story, sir; but when a gentleman tells a tale of a ghost in the house in which one is going to sleep, I call it most ungentlemanly!"

"Pooh! nonsense!" said the old gentleman, rising; "ghosts can't hurt you. For my own part, I should rather like to see one. Good night, gentlemen."

"Good night," said the others. "And I only hope Jerry'll pay you a visit," added the nervous man as the door closed.

"Bring some more whisky, George," said a stout commercial; "I want keeping up when the talk turns this way."

"Shall I light the gas, Mr. Malcolm?" said George.

"No; the fire's very comfortable," said the traveller. "Now, gentlemen, any of you know any more?"

"I think we've had enough," said the other man; "we shall be thinking we see spirits next, and we're not all like the old gentleman who's just gone."

"Old humbug!" said Hirst. "I should like to put him to the test. Suppose I dress up as Jerry Bundler and go and give him a chance of displaying his courage?"

"Bravo!" said Malcolm, huskily; drowning one or two faint "Noes." "Just for the joke, gentlemen."

"No, no! Drop it, Hirst," said another man.

"Only for the joke," said Hirst, somewhat eagerly. "I've got some things upstairs in which I am going to play in *The Rivals*—knee-breeches, buckles, and all that sort of thing. It's a rare chance. If you'll wait a bit I'll give you a full dress rehearsal, entitled 'Jerry Bundler; or The Nocturnal Strangler'."

"You won't frighten us," said the commercial, with a husky laugh.

"I don't know that," said Hirst sharply; "it's a question of acting, that's all. I'm pretty good, ain't I, Somers?"

"Oh, you're alright—for an amateur," said his friend, with a laugh.

"I'll bet a level sov, you don't frighten me," said the stout traveller.

“Done!” said Hirst. “I’ll take the bet to frighten you first and the old gentleman afterwards. These gentlemen shall be the judges.”

“You won’t frighten us, sir,” said another man, “because we’re prepared for you; but you’d better leave the old man alone. It’s dangerous play.”

“Well, I’ll try you first,” said Hirst, springing up. “No gas, mind.”

He ran lightly upstairs to his room, leaving the others, most of whom had been drinking somewhat freely, to wrangle about his proceedings. It ended in two of them going to bed.

“He’s crazy on acting,” said Somers, lighting his pipe. “Thinks he’s the equal of anybody almost. It doesn’t matter with us, but I won’t let him go to the old man. And he won’t mind so long as he gets an opportunity of acting to us.”

“Well, I hope he’ll hurry up” said Malcolm yawning; “it’s nearly twelve now.”

Nearly half an hour passed. Malcolm drew his watch from his pocket and was busy winding it, when George the waiter, who had been sent on an errand to the bar, burst suddenly into the room and rushed towards them.

“’E’s comin’, gentlemen,” he said breathlessly.

“Why, you’re frightened, George,” said the stout commercial, with a chuckle.

“It was the suddenness of it,” said George, sheepishly; “and besides, I didn’t look for seein’ ’im in the bar. There’s only a glimmer of light there, and ’e was sitting on the floor behind the bar. I nearly trod on ’im.”

“Oh, you’ll never make a man, George,” said Malcolm.

“Well, it took me unawares,” said the waiter. “Not that I’d have gone to the bar by myself if I’d known ’e was there, and I don’t believe you would, either, sir.”

“Nonsense,” said Malcolm. “I’ll go and fetch him in.”

“You don’t know what it’s like, sir,” said George, catching him by the sleeve. “It ain’t fit to look at by yourself; it ain’t, indeed. It’s got the—*What’s that?*”

They all started at the sound of a smothered cry from the staircase and the sound of somebody running hurriedly along the passage. Before anybody could speak, the door flew open and a figure bursting into the room flung itself gasping and shivering upon them.

“What is it? What’s the matter?” demanded Malcolm. “Why, it’s Mr. Hirst.” He shook him roughly and then held some spirit to his lips. Hirst drank it greedily and with a sharp intake of his breath gripped him by the arm.

“Light the gas, George,” said Malcolm.

The waiter obeyed hastily. Hirst, a ludicrous but pitiable figure in knee-breeches and coat, a large wig all awry, and his face a mess of grease paint, clung to him, trembling.

“Now, what’s the matter?” asked Malcolm.

“I’ve seen it,” said Hirst, with a hysterical sob. “O Lord, I’ll never play the fool again, never!”

“Seen what?” said the others.

“Him—it—the ghost—anything!” said Hirst, wildly.

“Rot!” said Malcolm, uneasily.

“I was coming down the stairs,” said Hirst, “just capering down—as I thought—it ought to do. I felt a tap—”

He broke off suddenly and peered nervously through the open door into the passage.

“I thought I saw it again,” he whispered. “Look—at the foot of the stairs. Can you see anything?”

“No, there’s nothing there,” said Malcolm, whose own voice shook a little. “Go on. You felt a tap on your shoulder—”

“I turned round and saw it—a little wicked head and a white dead face. Pah!”

“That’s what I saw in the bar,” said George. “’Orrid it was— devilish!”

Hirst shuddered, and, still retaining his nervous grip of Malcolm’s sleeve, dropped into a chair.

“Well, it’s a most unaccountable thing,” said the dumbfounded Malcolm, turning to the others. “It’s the last time I come to this house.”

“I leave tomorrow,” said George. “I wouldn’t go down to that bar again by myself; no, not for fifty pounds!”

“It’s talking about the thing that’s caused it, I expect,” said one of the men; “we’ve all been talking about this and having it in our minds. Practically we’ve been forming a spiritualistic circle without knowing it.”

“Hang the old gentleman!” said Malcolm, heartily. “Upon my soul, I’m half afraid to go to bed. It’s odd they should both think they saw something.”

“I saw it as plain as I see you, sir,” said George, solemnly. “P’raps if you keep your eyes turned up the passage you’ll see it for yourself.”

They followed the direction of his finger, but saw nothing, although one of them fancied that a head peeped round the corner of the wall.

“Who’ll come down to the bar?” said Malcolm, looking round.

“You can go, if you like,” said one of the others, with a faint laugh; “we’ll wait here for you.”

The stout traveller walked towards the door and took a few steps up the passage. Then he stopped. All was quite silent, and he walked slowly to the end and looked down fearfully towards the glass partition which shut off the bar. Three times he made as though to go to it; then he turned back, and, glancing over his shoulder, came hurriedly back to the room.

“Did you see it, sir?” whispered George.

“Don’t know,” said Malcolm softly. “I fancied I saw something, but it might have been fancy. I’m in the mood to see anything just now. How are you feeling now, sir?”

“Oh, I feel a bit better now,” said Hirst, somewhat brusquely, as all eyes were turned upon him. “I dare say you think I’m easily scared, but you didn’t see it.”

“Not at all,” said Malcolm, smiling faintly despite himself.

“I’m going to bed,” said Hirst, noticing the smile and resenting it. “Will you share my room with me, Somers?”

“I will with pleasure,” said his friend, “provided you don’t mind sleeping with the gas on full all night.”

He rose from his seat, and bidding the company a friendly good-night, left the room with his crestfallen friend. The others saw them to the foot of the stairs, and having heard their door close, returned to the coffee-room.

“Well, I suppose the bet’s off?” said the stout commercial, poking the fire and then standing with his legs apart on the hearthrug: “though, as far as I can see, I won it. I never saw a man so scared in all my life. Sort of poetic justice about it, isn’t there?”

“Never mind about poetry or justice,” said one of his listeners; “who’s going to sleep with me?”

“I will,” said Malcolm affably.

“And I suppose we share a room together, Mr. Leek?” said the third man, turning to the fourth.

“No, thank you,” said the other, briskly; “I don’t believe in ghosts. If anything comes into my room I shall shoot it.”

“That won’t hurt a spirit, Leek,” said Malcolm, decisively.

“Well, the noise’ll be like company to me,” said Leek, “and it’ll wake the house too. But if you’re nervous, sir,” he added, with a grin, to the man who had suggested sharing his room, “George’ll be only too pleased to sleep on the doormat inside your room, I know.”

“That I will, sir,” said George fervently; “and if you gentlemen would only come down with me to the bar to put the gas out, I could never be sufficiently grateful.”

They went out in a body, with the exception of Leek, peering carefully before them as they went. George turned the light out in the bar and they returned unmolested to the coffee-room, and, avoiding the sardonic smile of Leek, prepared to separate for the night.

“Give me the candle while you put the gas out, George,” said the traveller.

The waiter handed it to him and extinguished the gas, and at the same moment all distinctly heard a step in the passage outside. It stopped at the door, and as they watched with bated breath, the door creaked and slowly opened. Malcolm fell back, open-mouthed, as a white, leering face, with sunken eyeballs and close-cropped bullet head, appeared at the opening.

For a few seconds the creature stood regarding them, blinking in a strange fashion at the candle. Then, with a sidling movement, it came a little way into the room and stood there as if bewildered.

Not a man spoke or moved, but all watched with a horrible fascination as the creature removed its dirty neckcloth and its head rolled on its shoulder. For a minute it paused, and then, holding the rag before it, moved towards Malcolm.

The candle went out suddenly with a flash and a bang. There was a smell of powder, and something writhing in the darkness on the floor. A faint, choking cough, and then silence. Malcolm was the first to speak. “Matches,” he said, in a strange voice. George struck one. Then he leapt at the gas and a burner flamed from the match. Malcolm touched the thing on the floor with his foot and found it soft. He looked at his companions. They mouthed inquiries at him, but he shook his head. He lit the candle, and, kneeling down, examined the silent thing on the floor. Then he rose swiftly, and dipping his handkerchief in the water-jug, bent down again and grimly wiped the white face. Then he sprang back with a cry of incredulous horror, pointing at it. Leek’s pistol fell to the floor and he shut out the sight with his hands, but the others crowding forward, gazed spellbound at the dead face of Hirst.

Before a word was spoken the door opened and Somers hastily entered the room. His eyes fell on the floor. “Good God!” he cried. “You didn’t—”

Nobody spoke.

“I told him not to,” he said, in a suffocating voice. “I told him not to. I told him—”

He leaned against the wall, deathly sick, put his arms out feebly, and fell fainting into the traveller’s arms.