

The Mystery of My Grandmother's Hair Sofa

By John Kendrick Bangs

It happened last Christmas Eve, and precisely as I am about to set it forth. It has been said by critics that I am a romancer of the wildest sort, but that is where my critics are wrong. I grant that the experiences through which I have passed, some of which have contributed to the gray matter in my hair, however little they may have augmented that within my cranium— experiences which I have from time to time set forth to the best of my poor abilities in the columns of such periodicals as I have at my mercy—have been of an order so excessively supernatural as to give my critics a basis for their aspersions; but they do not know, as I do, that that basis is as uncertain as the shifting sands of the sea, inasmuch as in the setting forth of these episodes I have narrated them as faithfully as the most conscientious realist could wish, and am therefore myself a true and faithful follower of the realistic school. I cannot be blamed because these things happen to me. If I sat down in my study to imagine the strange incidents to which I have in the past called attention, with no other object in view than to make my readers unwilling to retire for the night; to destroy the peace of mind of those who are good enough to purchase my literary wares, or to titillate till tense the nerve tissue of the timid who come to smile and who depart unstrung, then should I deserve the severest condemnation; but these things I do not do. I have a mission in life which I hold as sacred as my good friend Mr. Howells holds his. Such phases of life as I see I put down faithfully, and if the Fates in their wisdom have chosen to make of me the Balzac of the Supernatural, the Shakespeare of the Midnight Visitation, while elevating Mr. Howells to the high office of the Fielding of Massachusetts and its adjacent States, the Smollett of Boston, and the Sterne of Altruria, I can only regret that the powers have dealt more graciously with him than with me, and walk my little way as gracefully as I know how. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune I am prepared to suffer in all meekness of spirit; I accept them because it seems to me to be nobler in the mind so to do rather than by opposing to end them. And so to my story. I have prefaced it at such length for but one reason, and that is that I am aware that there will be those who will doubt the veracity of my tale, and I am anxious at the outset to impress upon all the unquestioned fact that what I am about to tell is the plain, unvarnished truth, and, as I have already said, it happened last Christmas Eve.

I regret to have to say so, for it sounds so much like the description given to other Christmas Eves by writers with a less conscientious regard for the truth than I possess, but the facts must be told, and I must therefore state that it was a wild and stormy night. The winds howled and moaned and made all sorts of curious noises, soughing through the bare limbs of the trees, whistling through the chimneys, and, with reckless disregard of my children's need of rest, slamming doors until my house seemed to be the centre of a bombardment of no mean order. It is also necessary to state that the snow, which had been falling all day, had clothed the lawns and housetops in a dazzling drapery of white, and, not content with having done this to the satisfaction of all, was still falling, and, happily enough, as silently as usual. Were I the "wild romancer" that I have been called, I might have had the snow fall with a thunderous roar, but I cannot go to any such length. I love my fellow-beings, but there is a limit to my philanthropy, and I shall not have my snow fall noisily just to make a critic happy. I might do it to save his life, for I should hate to have a man die for the want of what I could give him with a stroke of my

pen, and without any special effort, but until that emergency arises I shall not yield a jot in the manner of the falling of my snow.

Occasionally a belated home-corner would pass my house, the sleighbells strung about the ample proportions of his steed jingling loud above the roaring of the winds. My family retired, and I sat alone in the glow of the blazing log—a very satisfactory gas affair—on the hearth. The flashing jet flames cast the usual grotesque shadows about the room, and my mind had thereby been reduced to that sensitive state which had hitherto betokened the coming of a visitor from other realms—a fact which I greatly regretted, for I was in no mood to be haunted. My first impulse, when I recognized the oncoming of that mental state which is evidenced by the goosing of one's flesh, if I may be allowed the expression, was to turn out the fire and go to bed. I have always found this the easiest method of ridding myself of unwelcome ghosts, and, conversely, I have observed that others who have been haunted unpleasantly have suffered in proportion to their failure to take what has always seemed to me to be the most natural course in the world—to hide their heads beneath the bed-covering. Brutus, when Caesar's ghost appeared beside his couch, before the battle of Philippi, sat up and stared upon the horrid apparition, and suffered correspondingly, when it would have been much easier and more natural to put his head under his pillow, and so shut out the unpleasant spectacle. That is the course I have invariably pursued, and it has never failed me. The most luminous ghost man ever saw is utterly powerless to shine through a comfortably stuffed pillow, or the usual Christmas-time quota of woollen blankets. But upon this occasion I preferred to await developments. The real truth is that I was about written out in the matter of visitations, and needed a reinforcement of my uncanny vein, which, far from being varicose, had become sclerotic, so dry had it been pumped by the demands to which it had been subjected by a clamorous, mystery-loving public. I had, I may as well confess it, run out of ghosts, and had come down to the writing of tales full of the horror of suggestion, leaving my readers unsatisfied through my failure to describe in detail just what kind of looking thing it was that had so aroused their apprehension; and one editor had gone so far as to reject my last ghost-story because I had worked him up to a fearful pitch of excitement, and left him there without any reasonable way out. I was face to face with a condition—which, briefly, was that hereafter that desirable market was closed to the products of my pen unless my contributions were accompanied by a diagram which should make my mysteries so plain that a little child could understand how it all came to pass. Hence it was that, instead of following my own convenience and taking refuge in my spectre-proof couch, I stayed where I was. I had not long to wait. The dial in my fuel-meter below-stairs had hardly had time to register the consumption of three thousand feet of gas before the faint sound of a bell reached my straining ears—which, by the way, is an expression I profoundly hate, but must introduce because the public demands it, and a ghost-story without straining ears having therefore no chance of acceptance by a discriminating editor. I started from my chair and listened intently, but the ringing had stopped, and I settled back to the delights of a nervous chill, when again the deathly silence of the night—the wind had quieted in time to allow me the use of this faithful, overworked phrase—was broken by the tintinnabulation of the bell. This time I recognized it as the electric bell operated by a push-button upon the right side of my front door. To rise and rush to the door was the work of a moment. It always is. In another instant I had flung it wide. This operation was singularly easy, considering that it was but a narrow door, and width was the last thing it could ever be suspected of, however forcible the fling. However, I did as I have said, and gazed out into the inky blackness of the night. As I had suspected, there was no one there, and I was at once convinced that the dreaded moment had come. I was certain that at the instant of my turning to re-enter my

library I should see something which would make my brain throb madly and my pulses start. I did not therefore instantly turn, but let the wind blow the door to with a loud clatter, while I walked quickly into my dining-room and drained a glass of cooking-sherry to the dregs. I do not introduce the cooking-sherry here for the purpose of eliciting a laugh from the reader, but in order to be faithful to life as we live it. All our other sherry had been used by the queen of the kitchen for cooking purposes, and this was all we had left for the table. It is always so in real life, let critics say what they will.

This done, I returned to the library, and sustained my first shock. The unexpected had happened. There was still no one there. Surely this ghost was an original, and I began to be interested.

“Perhaps he is a modest ghost,” I thought, “and is a little shy about manifesting his presence. That, indeed, would be original, seeing how bold the spectres of commerce usually are, intruding themselves always upon the privacy of those who are not at all minded to receive them.”

Confident that something would happen, and speedily at that, I sat down to wait, lighting a cigar for company; for burning gas-logs are not as sociable as their hissing, spluttering originals, the genuine logs, in a state of ignition. Several times I started up nervously, feeling as if there was something standing behind me about to place a clammy hand upon my shoulder, and as many times did I resume my attitude of comfort, disappointed. Once I seemed to see a minute spirit floating in the air before me, but investigation showed that it was nothing more than the fanciful curling of the clouds of smoke I had blown from my lips. An hour passed and nothing occurred, save that my heart from throbbing took to leaping in a fashion which filled me with concern. A few minutes later, however, I heard a strange sound at the window, and my leaping heart stood still. The strain upon my tense nerves was becoming unbearable.

“At last!” I whispered to myself, hoarsely, drawing a deep breath, and pushing with all my force into the soft upholstered back of my chair. Then I leaned forward and watched the window, momentarily expecting to see it raised by unseen hands; but it never budged. Then I watched the glass anxiously, half hoping, half fearing to see something pass through it; but nothing came, and I began to get irritable.

I looked at my watch, and saw that it was half-past one o’clock. “Hang you!” I cried, “whatever you are, why don’t you appear, and be done with it? The idea of keeping a man up until this hour of the night!”

Then I listened for a reply; but there was none.

“What do you take me for?” I continued, querulously. “Do you suppose I have nothing else to do but to wait upon your majesty’s pleasure? Surely, with all the time you’ve taken to make your debut, you must be something of unusual horror.”

Again there was no answer, and I decided that petulance was of no avail. Some other tack was necessary, and I decided to appeal to his sympathies—granting that ghosts have sympathies to appeal to, and I have met some who were so human in this respect that I have found it hard to believe that they were truly ghosts.

“I say, old chap,” I said, as genially as I could, considering the situation—I was nervous, and the amount of gas consumed by the logs was beginning to bring up visions of bankruptcy before my eyes—“hurry up and begin your haunting—there’s a good fellow. I’m a father—please remember that—and this is Christmas Eve. The children will be up in about three hours, and if you’ve ever been a parent yourself you know what that means. I must have some rest, so come along and show yourself, like the good spectre you are, and let me go to bed.”

I think myself it was a very moving address, but it helped me not a jot. The thing must have had a heart of stone, for it never made answer.

“What?” said I, pretending to think it had spoken and I had not heard distinctly: but the visitant was not to be caught napping, even though I had good reason to believe that he had fallen asleep. He, she, or it, whatever it was, maintained a silence as deep as it was aggravating. I smoked furiously on to restrain my growing wrath. Then it occurred to me that the thing might have some pride, and I resolved to work on that.

“Of course I should like to write you up,” I said, with a sly wink at myself. “I imagine you’d attract a good deal of attention in the literary world. Judging from the time it takes you to get ready, you ought to make a good magazine story—not one of those comic ghost-tales that can be dashed off in a minute, and ultimately get published in a book at the author’s expense. You stir so little that, as things go by contraries, you’ll make a stirring tale. You’re long enough, I might say, for a three-volume novel—but—ah—I can’t do you unless I see you. You must be seen to be appreciated. I can’t imagine you, you know. Let’s see, now, if I can guess what kind of a ghost you are. Um! You must be terrifying in the extreme—you’d make a man shiver in mid-August in mid-Africa. Your eyes are unfathomably green. Your smile would drive the sanest mad. Your hands are cold and clammy as a—ah—as a hot-water bag four hours after.”

And so I went on for ten minutes, praising him up to the skies, and ending up with a pathetic appeal that he should manifest his presence. It may be that I puffed him up so that he burst, but, however that may be, he would not condescend to reply, and I grew angry in earnest.

“Very well,” I said, savagely, jumping up from my chair and turning off the gas-log. “Don’t! Nobody asked you to come in the first place, and nobody’s going to complain if you sulk in your tent like Achilles. I don’t want to see you. I could fake up a better ghost than you are anyhow—in fact, I fancy that’s what’s the matter with you. You know what a miserable specimen you are—couldn’t frighten a mouse if you were ten times as horrible. You’re ashamed to show yourself—and I don’t blame you. I’d be that way too if I were you.”

I walked half-way to the door, momentarily expecting to have him call me back; but he didn’t. I had to give him a parting shot.

“You probably belong to a ghost union—don’t you? That’s your secret? Ordered out on strike, and won’t do any haunting after sundown unless some other employer of unskilled ghosts pays his spooks skilled wages.”

I had half a notion that the word “spook” would draw him out, for I have noticed that ghosts do not like to be called spooks. They consider it vulgar. He never yielded in his reserve, however, and after locking up I went to bed.

For a time I could not sleep, and I began to wonder if I had been just, after all. Possibly there was no spirit within miles of me. They symptoms were all there, but might not that have been due to my depressed condition—for it does depress a writer to have one of his best veins become sclerotic—I asked myself, and finally, as I went off to sleep, I concluded that I had been in the wrong all through, and had imagined there was something there when there really was not.

“Very likely the ringing of the bell was due to the wind,” I said, as I dozed off. “Of course it would take a very heavy wind to blow the button in, but then—” and then I fell asleep, convinced that no ghost had ventured within a mile of me that night. But when morning came I was undeceived. Something must have visited us that Christmas Eve, and something very terrible; for while I was dressing for breakfast I heard my wife calling loudly from below.

“Henry!” she cried. “Please come down here at once.”

“I can’t. I’m only half shaved,” I answered.

“Never mind that,” she returned. “Come at once.”

So, with the lather on one cheek and a cut on the other, I went below.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Look at that!” she said, pointing to my grandmother’s hair sofa, which stood in the hall just outside of my library door.

It had been black when we last saw it, but as I looked I saw that a great change had come over it.

It had turned white in a single night!

Now, I can’t account for this strange incident, nor can any one else, and I do not intend to try. It is too awful a mystery for me to attempt to penetrate, but the sofa is there in proof of all that I have said concerning it, and any one who desires can call and see it at any time. It is not necessary for them to see me; they need only ask to see the sofa, and it will be shown.

We have had it removed from the hall to the white-and-gold parlor, for we cannot bear to have it stand in any of the rooms we use.