

# Ghosts That Have Haunted Me

*A Few Spirit Reminiscences*

By John Kendrick Bangs

If we could only get used to the idea that ghosts are perfectly harmless creatures, who are powerless to affect our well-being unless we assist them by giving way to our fears, we should enjoy the supernatural exceedingly, it seems to me. Coleridge, I think it was, was once asked by a lady if he believed in ghosts, and he replied, "No, madame; I have seen too many of them." Which is my case exactly. I have seen so many horrid visitants from other worlds that they hardly affect me at all, so far as the mere inspiration of terror is concerned. On the other hand, they interest me hugely; and while I must admit that I do experience all the purely physical sensations that come from horrific encounters of this nature, I can truly add in my own behalf that mentally I can rise above the physical impulse to run away, and, invariably standing my ground, I have gained much useful information concerning them. I am prepared to assert that if a thing with flashing green eyes, and clammy hands, and long, dripping strips of sea-weed in place of hair, should rise up out of the floor before me at this moment, 2 A.M., and nobody in the house but myself, with a fearful, nerve-destroying storm raging outside, I should without hesitation ask it to sit down and light a cigar and state its business—or, if it were of the female persuasion, to join me in a bottle of sarsaparilla—although every physical manifestation of fear of which my poor body is capable would be present. I have had experiences in this line which, if I could get you to believe them, would convince you that I speak the truth. Knowing weak, suspicious human nature as I do, however, I do not hope ever to convince you—though it is none the less true—that on one occasion, in the spring of 1895, there was a spiritual manifestation in my library which nearly prostrated me physically, but which mentally I hugely enjoyed, because I was mentally strong enough to subdue my physical repugnance for the thing which suddenly and without any apparent reason materialized in my arm-chair.

I'm going to tell you about it briefly, though I warn you in advance that you will find it a great strain upon your confidence in my veracity. It may even shatter that confidence beyond repair; but I cannot help that. I hold that it is a man's duty in this life to give to the world the benefit of his experience. All that he sees he should set down exactly as he sees it, and so simply, withal, that to the dullest comprehension the moral involved shall be perfectly obvious. If he is a painter, and an auburn-haired maiden appears to him to have blue hair, he should paint her hair blue, and just so long as he sticks by his principles and is true to himself, he need not bother about what you may think of him. So it is with me. My scheme of living is based upon being true to myself. You may class me with Baron Munchausen if you choose; I shall not mind so long as I have the consolation of feeling, deep down in my heart, that I am a true realist, and diverge not from the paths of truth as truth manifests itself to me.

This intruder of whom I was just speaking, the one that took possession of my arm-chair in the spring of 1895, was about as horrible a spectre as I have ever had the pleasure to have haunt me. It was worse than grotesque. It grated on every nerve. Alongside of it the ordinary poster of the present day would seem to be as accurate in drawing as a bicycle map, and in its coloring it simply shrieked with discord.

If color had tones which struck the ear, instead of appealing to the eye, the thing would have deafened me. It was about midnight when the manifestation first took shape. My family had long

before retired, and I had just finished smoking a cigar—which was one of a thousand which my wife had bought for me at a Monday sale at one of the big department stores in New York. I don't remember the brand, but that is just as well—it was not a cigar to be advertised in a civilized piece of literature—but I do remember that they came in bundles of fifty, tied about with blue ribbon. The one I had been smoking tasted and burned as if it had been rolled by a Cuban insurrectionist while fleeing from a Spanish regiment through a morass, gathering its component parts as he ran. It had two distinct merits, however. No man could possibly smoke too many of them, and they were economical, which is how the ever-helpful little madame came to get them for me, and I have no doubt they will some day prove very useful in removing insects from the rose-bushes. They cost \$3.99 a thousand on five days a week, but at the Monday sale they were marked down to \$1.75, which is why my wife, to whom I had recently read a little lecture on economy, purchased them for me. Upon the evening in question I had been at work on this cigar for about two hours, and had smoked one side of it three-quarters of the way down to the end, when I concluded that I had smoked enough—for one day—so I rose up to cast the other side into the fire, which was flickering fitfully in my spacious fireplace. This done, I turned about, and there, fearful to see, sat this thing grinning at me from the depths of my chair. My hair not only stood on end, but tugged madly in an effort to get away. Four hairs—I can prove the statement if it be desired—did pull themselves loose from my scalp in their insane desire to rise above the terrors of the situation, and, flying upward, stuck like nails into the oak ceiling directly over my head, whence they had to be pulled the next morning with nippers by our hired man, who would no doubt testify to the truth of the occurrence as I have asserted it if he were still living, which, unfortunately, he is not. Like most hired men, he was subject to attacks of lethargy, from one of which he died last summer. He sank into a rest about weed-time, last June, and lingered quietly along for two months, and after several futile efforts to wake him up, we finally disposed of him to our town crematory for experimental purposes. I am told he burned very actively, and I believe it, for to my certain knowledge he was very dry, and not so green as some persons who had previously employed him affected to think. A cold chill came over me as my eye rested upon the horrid visitor and noted the greenish depths of his eyes and the claw-like formation of his fingers, and my flesh began to creep like an inch-worm. At one time I was conscious of eight separate corrugations on my back, and my arms goose-fleshed until they looked like one of those miniature plaster casts of the Alps which are so popular in Swiss summer resorts; but mentally I was not disturbed at all. My repugnance was entirely physical, and, to come to the point at once, I calmly offered the spectre a cigar, which it accepted, and demanded a light. I gave it, nonchalantly lighting the match upon the goose-fleshing of my wrist.

Now I admit that this was extraordinary and hardly credible, yet it happened exactly as I have set it down, and, furthermore, I enjoyed the experience. For three hours the thing and I conversed, and not once during that time did my hair stop pulling away at my scalp, or the repugnance cease to run in great rolling waves up and down my back. If I wished to deceive you, I might add that pin-feathers began to grow from the goose-flesh, but that would be a lie, and lying and I are not friends, and, furthermore, this paper is not written to amaze, but to instruct.

Except for its personal appearance, this particular ghost was not very remarkable, and I do not at this time recall any of the details of our conversation beyond the point that my share of it was not particularly coherent, because of the discomfort attendant upon the fearful hair-pulling process I was going through. I merely cite its coming to prove that, with all the outward visible signs of fear manifesting themselves in no uncertain manner, mentally I was cool enough to cope

with the visitant, and sufficiently calm and at ease to light the match upon my wrist, perceiving for the first time, with an Edison-like ingenuity, one of the uses to which goose-flesh might be put, and knowing full well that if I tried to light it on the sole of my shoe I should have fallen to the ground, my knees being too shaky to admit of my standing on one leg even for an instant. Had I been mentally overcome, I should have tried to light the match on my foot, and fallen ignominiously to the floor then and there.

There was another ghost that I recall to prove my point, who was of very great use to me in the summer immediately following the spring of which I have just told you. You will possibly remember how that the summer of 1895 had rather more than its fair share of heat, and that the lovely New Jersey town in which I have the happiness to dwell appeared to be the headquarters of the temperature. The thermometers of the nation really seemed to take orders from Beachdale, and properly enough, for our town is a born leader in respect to heat. Having no property to sell, I candidly admit that Beachdale is not of an arctic nature in summer, except socially, perhaps. Socially, it is the coolest town in the State; but we are at this moment not discussing cordiality, fraternal love, or the question raised by the Declaration of Independence as to whether all men are born equal. The warmth we have in hand is what the old lady called "Fahrenheit," and, from a thermometric point of view, Beachdale, if I may be a trifle slangy, as I sometimes am, has heat to burn. There are mitigations of this heat, it is true, but they generally come along in winter.

I must claim, in behalf of my town, that never in all my experience have I known a summer so hot that it was not, sooner or later—by January, anyhow—followed by a cool spell. But in the summer of 1895 even the real-estate agents confessed that the cold wave announced by the weather bureau at Washington summered elsewhere—in the tropics, perhaps, but not at Beachdale. One hardly dared take a bath in the morning for fear of being scalded by the fluid that flowed from the cold-water faucet—our reservoir is entirely unprotected by shade-trees, and in summer a favorite spot for young Waltons who like to catch bass already boiled—my neighbors and myself lived on cracked ice, ice-cream, and destructive cold drinks. I do not myself mind hot weather in the daytime, but hot nights are killing. I can't sleep. I toss about for hours, and then, for the sake of variety, I flop, but sleep cometh not. My debts double, and my income seems to sizzle away under the influence of a hot, sleepless night; and it was just here that a certain awful thing saved me from the insanity which is a certain result of parboiled insomnia.

It was about the 16th of July, which, as I remember reading in an extra edition of the *Evening Bun*, got out to mention the fact, was the hottest 16th of July known in thirty-eight years. I had retired at half-past seven, after dining lightly upon a cold salmon and a gallon of iced tea—not because I was tired, but because I wanted to get down to first principles at once, and remove my clothing, and sort of spread myself over all the territory I could, which is a thing you can't do in a library, or even in a white-and-gold parlor. If man were constructed like a machine, as he really ought to be, to be strictly comfortable—a machine that could be taken apart like an eight-day clock—I should have taken myself apart, putting one section of myself on the roof, another part in the spare room, hanging a third on the clothes-line in the yard, and so on, leaving my head in the ice-box; but unfortunately we have to keep ourselves together in this life, hence I did the only thing one can do, and retired, and incidentally spread myself over some freshly baked bedclothing. There was some relief from the heat, but not much. I had been roasting, and while my sensations were somewhat like those which I imagine come to a planked shad when he first finds himself spread out over the plank, there was a mitigation. My temperature fell off from 167 to about 163, which is not quite enough to make a man absolutely content. Suddenly, however, I began to shiver. There was no breeze, but I began to shiver.

“It is getting cooler,” I thought, as the chill came on, and I rose and looked at the thermometer. It still registered the highest possible point, and the mercury was rebelliously trying to break through the top of the glass tube and take a stroll on the roof.

“That’s queer,” I said to myself. “It’s as hot as ever, and yet I’m shivering. I wonder if my goose is cooked? I’ve certainly got a chill.”

I jumped back into bed and pulled the sheet up over me; but still I shivered. Then I pulled the blanket up, but the chill continued. I couldn’t seem to get warm again. Then came the counterpane, and finally I had to put on my bath-robe—a fuzzy woollen affair, which in midwinter I had sometimes found too warm for comfort. Even then I was not sufficiently bundled up, so I called for an extra blanket, two afghans, and the hot-water bag.

Everybody in the house thought I had gone mad, and I wondered myself if perhaps I hadn’t, when all of a sudden I perceived, off in the corner, the Awful Thing, and perceiving it, I knew all.

I was being haunted, and the physical repugnance of which I have spoken was on. The cold shiver, the invariable accompaniment of the ghostly visitant, had come, and I assure you I never was so glad of anything in my life. It has always been said of me by my critics that I am raw; I was afraid that after that night they would say I was half baked, and I would far rather be the one than the other; and it was the Awful Thing that saved me. Realizing this, I spoke to it gratefully.

“You are a heaven-born gift on a night like this,” said I, rising up and walking to its side.

“I am glad to be of service to you,” the Awful Thing replied, smiling at me so yellowly that I almost wished the author of the *Blue-Button of Cowardice* could have seen it.

“It’s very good of you,” I put in.

“Not at all,” replied the Thing; “you are the only man I know who doesn’t think it necessary to prevaricate about ghosts every time he gets an order for a Christmas story. There have been more lies told about us than about any other class of things in existence, and we are getting a trifle tired of it. We may have lost our corporeal existence, but some of our sensitiveness still remains.”

“Well,” said I, rising and lighting the gas-logs—for I was on the very verge of congealment—“I am sure I am pleased if you like my stories.”

“Oh, as for that, I don’t think much of them,” said the Awful Thing, with a purple display of candor which amused me, although I cannot say that I relished it; “but you never lie about us. You are not at all interesting, but you are truthful, and we spooks hate libellers. Just because one happens to be a thing is no reason why writers should libel it, and that’s why I have always respected you. We regard you as a sort of spook Boswell. You may be dull and stupid, but you tell the truth, and when I saw you in imminent danger of becoming a mere grease spot, owing to the fearful heat, I decided to help you through. That’s why I’m here. Go to sleep now. I’ll stay here and keep you shivering until daylight anyhow. I’d stay longer, but we are always laid at sunrise.”

“Like an egg,” I said, sleepily.

“Tutt!” said the ghost. “Go to sleep, If you talk I’ll have to go.”

And so I dropped off to sleep as softly and as sweetly as a tired child. In the morning I awoke refreshed. The rest of my family were prostrated, but I was fresh. The Awful Thing was gone, and the room was warming up again; and if it had not been for the tinkling ice in my water-pitcher, I should have suspected it was all a dream. And so throughout the whole sizzling summer the friendly spectre stood by me and kept me cool, and I haven’t a doubt that it was because of his good offices in keeping me shivering on those fearful August nights that I

survived the season, and came to my work in the autumn as fit as a fiddle—so fit, indeed, that I have not written a poem since that has not struck me as being the very best of its kind, and if I can find a publisher who will take the risk of putting those poems out, I shall unequivocally and without hesitation acknowledge, as I do here, my debt of gratitude to my friends in the spirit world.

Manifestations of this nature, then, are harmful, as I have already observed, only when the person who is haunted yields to his physical impulses. Fought stubbornly inch by inch with the will, they can be subdued, and often they are a boon. I think I have proved both these points. It took me a long time to discover the facts, however, and my discovery came about in this way. It may perhaps interest you to know how I made it. I encountered at the English home of a wealthy friend at one time a “presence” of an insulting turn of mind. It was at my friend Jarley’s little baronial hall, which he had rented from the Earl of Brokedale the year Mrs. Jarley was presented at court. The Countess of Brokedale’s social influence went with the chateau for a slightly increased rental, which was why the Jarleys took it. I was invited to spend a month with them, not so much because Jarley is fond of me as because Mrs. Jarley had a sort of an idea that, as a writer, I might say something about their newly acquired glory in some American Sunday newspaper; and Jarley laughingly assigned to me the “haunted chamber,” without at least one of which no baronial hall in the old country is considered worthy of the name.

“It will interest you more than any other,” Jarley said; “and if it has a ghost, I imagine you will be able to subdue him.”

I gladly accepted the hospitality of my friend, and was delighted at his consideration in giving me the haunted chamber, where I might pursue my investigations into the subject of phantoms undisturbed. Deserting London, then, for a time, I ran down to Brokedale Hall, and took up my abode there with a half-dozen other guests. Jarley, as usual since his sudden “gold-fall,” as Wilkins called it, did everything with a lavish hand. I believe a man could have got diamonds on toast if he had chosen to ask for them. However, this is apart from my story.

I had occupied the haunted chamber about two weeks before anything of importance occurred, and then it came—and a more unpleasant, ill-mannered spook never floated in the ether. He materialized about 3 A.M. and was unpleasantly sulphurous to one’s perceptions. He sat upon the divan in my room, holding his knees in his hands, leering and scowling upon me as though I were the intruder, and not he.

“Who are you?” I asked, excitedly, as in the dying light of the log fire he loomed grimly up before me.

“None of your business,” he replied, insolently, showing his teeth as he spoke. “On the other hand, who are you? This is my room, and not yours, and it is I who have the right to question. If you have any business here, well and good. If not, you will oblige me by removing yourself, for your presence is offensive to me.”

“I am a guest in the house,” I answered, restraining my impulse to throw the inkstand at him for his impudence. “And this room has been set apart for my use by my host.”

“One of the servant’s guests, I presume?” he said, insultingly, his lividly lavender-like lip upcurling into a haughty sneer, which was maddening to a self-respecting worm like myself.

I rose up from my bed, and picked up the poker to bat him over the head, but again I restrained myself. It will not do to quarrel, I thought. I will be courteous if he is not, thus giving a dead Englishman a lesson which wouldn’t hurt some of the living.

“No,” I said, my voice tremulous with wrath—“no; I am the guest of my friend Mr. Jarley, an American, who—”

“Same thing,” observed the intruder, with a yellow sneer. “Race of low-class animals, those Americans—only fit for gentlemen’s stables, you know.”

This was too much. A ghost may insult me with impunity, but when he tackles my people he must look out for himself. I sprang forward with an ejaculation of wrath, and with all my strength struck at him with the poker, which I still held in my hand. If he had been anything but a ghost, he would have been split vertically from top to toe; but as it was, the poker passed harmlessly through his misty make-up, and rent a great gash two feet long in Jarley’s divan. The yellow sneer faded from his lips, and a maddening blue smile took its place.

“Humph!” he observed, nonchalantly. “What a useless ebullition, and what a vulgar display of temper! Really you are the most humorous insect I have yet encountered. From what part of the States do you come? I am truly interested to know in what kind of soil exotics of your peculiar kind are cultivated. Are you part of the fauna or the flora of your tropical States—or what?”

And then I realized the truth. There is no physical method of combating a ghost which can result in his discomfiture, so I resolved to try the intellectual. It was a mind-to-mind contest, and he was easy prey after I got going. I joined him in his blue smile, and began to talk about the English aristocracy; for I doubted not, from the spectre’s manner, that he was or had been one of that class. He had about him that haughty lack of manners which bespoke the aristocrat. I waxed very eloquent when, as I say, I got my mind really going. I spoke of kings and queens and their uses in no uncertain phrases, of divine right, of dukes, earls, marquises—of all the pompous establishments of British royalty and nobility—with that contemptuously humorous tolerance of a necessary and somewhat amusing evil which we find in American comic papers. We had a battle royal for about one hour, and I must confess he was a foeman worthy of any man’s steel, so long as I was reasonable in my arguments; but when I finally observed that it wouldn’t be ten years before Barnum and Bailey’s Greatest Show on Earth had the whole lot engaged for the New York circus season, stalling about the Madison Square Garden arena, with the Prince of Wales at the head beating a tomtom, he grew iridescent with wrath, and fled madly through the wainscoting of the room. It was purely a mental victory. All the physical possibilities of my being would have exhausted themselves futilely before him; but when I turned upon him the resources of my fancy, my imagination unrestrained, and held back by no sense of responsibility, he was as a child in my hands, obstreperous but certain to be subdued. If it were not for Mrs. Jarley’s wrath—which, I admit, she tried to conceal—over the damage to her divan, I should now look back upon that visitation as the most agreeable haunting experience of my life; at any rate, it was at that time that I first learned how to handle ghosts, and since that time I have been able to overcome them without trouble—save in one instance, with which I shall close this chapter of my reminiscences, and which I give only to prove the necessity of observing strictly one point in dealing with spectres.

It happened last Christmas, in my own home. I had provided as a little surprise for my wife a complete new solid silver service marked with her initials. The tree had been prepared for the children, and all had retired save myself. I had lingered later than the others to put the silver service under the tree, where its happy recipient would find it when she went to the tree with the little ones the next morning. It made a magnificent display: the two dozen of each kind of spoon, the forks, the knives, the coffee-pot, water -urn, and all; the salvers, the vegetable-dishes, olive-forks, cheese-scoops, and other dazzling attributes of a complete service, not to go into details, presented a fairly scintillating picture which would have made me gasp if I had not, at the moment when my own breath began to catch, heard another gasp in the corner immediately

behind me. Turning about quickly to see whence it came, I observed a dark figure in the pale light of the moon which streamed in through the window.

“Who are you?” I cried, starting back, the physical symptoms of a ghostly presence manifesting themselves as usual.

“I am the ghost of one long gone before,” was the reply, in sepulchral tones.

I breathed a sigh of relief, for I had for a moment feared it was a burglar.

“Oh!” I said. “You gave me a start at first. I was afraid you were a material thing come to rob me.” Then turning towards the tree, I observed, with a wave of the hand, “Fine lay out, eh?”

“Beautiful,” he said, hollowly. “Yet not so beautiful as things I’ve seen in realms beyond your ken.”

And then he set about telling me of the beautiful gold and silver ware they used in the Elysian Fields, and I must confess Monte Cristo would have had a hard time, with Sindbad the Sailor to help, to surpass the picture of royal magnificence the spectre drew. I stood enthralled until, even as he was talking, the clock struck three, when he rose up, and moving slowly across the floor, barely visible, murmured regretfully that he must be off, with which he faded away down the back stairs. I pulled my nerves, which were getting rather strained, together again, and went to bed.

*Next morning every bit of that silver-ware was gone;* and, what is more, three weeks later I found the ghost’s picture in the Rogues’ Gallery in New York as that of the cleverest sneak-thief in the country.

All of which, let me say to you, dear reader, in conclusion, proves that when you are dealing with ghosts you mustn’t give up all your physical resources until you have definitely ascertained that the thing by which you are confronted, horrid or otherwise, is a ghost, and not an all too material rogue with a light step, and a commodious jute bag for plunder concealed beneath his coat.

“How to tell a ghost?” you ask.

Well, as an eminent master of fiction frequently observes in his writings, “that is another story,” which I shall hope some day to tell for your instruction and my own aggrandizement.