

The Mystery of Barney O'Rourke

By John Kendrick Bangs

A very irritating thing has happened. My hired man, a certain Barney O'Rourke, an American citizen of much political influence, a good gardener, and, according to his lights, a gentleman, has got very much the best of me, and all because of certain effusions which from time to time have emanated from my pen. It is not often that one's literary chickens come home to roost in such a vengeful fashion as some of mine have recently done, and I have no doubt that as this story progresses he who reads will find much sympathy for me rising up in his breast. As the matter stands, I am torn with conflicting emotions. I am very fond of Barney, and I have always found him truthful hitherto, but exactly what to believe now I hardly know.

The main thing to bring my present trouble upon me, I am forced to believe, is the fact that my house has been in the past, and may possibly still be, haunted. Why my house should be haunted at all I do not know, for it has never been the scene of any tragedy that I am aware of. I built it myself, and it is paid for. So far as I am aware, nothing awful of a material nature has ever happened within its walls, and yet it appears to be, for the present at any rate, a sort of clubhouse for inconsiderate if not strictly horrid things, which is a most unfair dispensation of the fates, for I have not deserved it. If I were in any sense a Bluebeard, and spent my days cutting ladies' throats as a pastime; if I had a pleasing habit of inviting friends up from town over Sunday, and dropping them into oubliettes connecting my library with dark, dank, and snaky subterranean dungeons; if guests who dine at my house came with a feeling that the chances were, they would never return to their families alive—it might be different. I shouldn't and couldn't blame a house for being haunted if it were the dwelling-place of a bloodthirsty ruffian such as I have indicated, but that is just what it is not. It is not the home of a lover of fearful crimes. I would not walk ten feet for the pleasure of killing any man, no matter who he is. On the contrary, I would walk twenty feet to avoid doing it, if the emergency should ever arise, aye, even if it were that fiend who sits next me at the opera and hums the opera through from beginning to end. There have been times, I must confess, when I have wished I might have had the oubliettes to which I have referred constructed beneath my library and leading to the coal-bins or to some long-forgotten well, but that was two or three years ago, when I was in politics for a brief period, and delegations of willing and thirsty voters were daily and nightly swarming in through every one of the sixteen doors on the ground-floor of my house, which my architect, in a riotous moment, smuggled into the plans in the guise of "French windows." I shouldn't have minded then if the earth had opened up and swallowed my whole party, so long as I did not have to go with them, but under such provocation as I had I do not feel that my residence is justified in being haunted after its present fashion because such a notion entered my mind. We cannot help our thoughts, much less our notions, and punishment for that which we cannot help is not in strict accord with latter-day ideas of justice. It may occur to some hypercritical person to suggest that the English language has frequently been murdered in my den, and that it is its horrid corpse which is playing havoc at my home, crying out to heaven and flaunting its bloody wounds in the face of my conscience, but I can pass such an aspersion as that by with contemptuous silence, for even if it were true it could not be set down as wilful assassination on my part, since no sane person who needs a language as much as I do would ever in cold blood kill any one of the many that lie about us. Furthermore, the English language is not dead. It may not be met with often in

these days, but it is still encountered with sufficient frequency in the works of Henry James and Miss Libby to prove that it still lives; and I am told that one or two members of our consular service abroad can speak it—though as for this I cannot write with certainty, for I have never encountered one of these exceptions to the general rule.

The episode with which this narrative has to deal is interesting in some ways, though I doubt not some readers will prove sceptical as to its realism. There are suspicious minds in the world, and with these every man who writes of truth must reckon. To such I have only to say that it is my desire and intention to tell the truth as simply as it can be told by James, and as truthfully as Sylvanus Cobb ever wrote!

Now, then, the facts of my story are these:

In the latter part of last July, expecting a meeting of friends at my house in connection with a question of the good government of the city in which I honestly try to pay my taxes, I ordered one hundred cigars to be delivered at my residence. I ordered several other things at the same time, but they have nothing whatever to do with this story, because they were all—every single bottle of them—consumed at the meeting; but of the cigars, about which the strange facts of my story cluster, at the close of the meeting a goodly two dozen remained. This is surprising, considering that there were quite six of us present, but it is true. Twenty-four by actual count remained when the last guest left me. The next morning I and my family took our departure for a month's rest in the mountains. In the hurry of leaving home, and the worry of looking after three children and four times as many trunks, I neglected to include the cigars in my impedimenta, leaving them in the opened box upon my library table. It was careless of me, no doubt, but it was an important incident, as the sequel shows. The incidents of the stay in the hills were commonplace, but during my absence from home strange things were going on there, as I learned upon my return.

The place had been left in charge of Barney O'Rourke, who, upon my arrival, assured me that everything was all right, and I thanked and paid him.

"Wait a minute, Barney," I said, as he turned to leave me; "I've got a cigar for you." I may mention incidentally that in the past I had kept Barney on very good terms with his work by treating him in a friendly, sociable way, but, to my great surprise, upon this occasion he declined advances.

His face flushed very red as he observed that he had given up smoking.

"Well, wait a minute, anyhow," said I. "There are one or two things I want to speak to you about." And I went to the table to get a cigar for myself.

The box was empty!

Instantly the suspicion which has doubtless flashed through the mind of the reader flashed through my own—Barney had been tempted, and had fallen. I recalled his blush, and on the moment realized that in all my vast experience with hired men in the past I had never seen one blush before. The case was clear. My cigars had gone to help Barney through the hot summer.

"Well, I declare!" I cried, turning suddenly upon him. "I left a lot of cigars here when I went away, Barney."

"I know ye did, sorr," said Barney, who had now grown white and rigid. "I saw them meself, sorr. There was twinty-foor of 'em."

"You counted them, eh?" I asked, with an elevation of my eyebrows which to those who know me conveys the idea of suspicion.

"I did, sorr. In your absence I was responsible for everyt'ing here, and the mornin' ye wint awaa I took a quick invintery, sorr, of the removables," he answered, fingering his cap nervously.

“That’s how it was, sorr, and thim twinty-four segyars was lyn’ there in the box forninst me eyes.”

“And how do you account for the removal of these removables, as you call them, Barney?” I asked, looking coldly at him. He saw he was under suspicion, and he winced, but pulled himself together in an instant.

“I expected the question, sorr,” he said, calmly, “and I have me answer ready. Thim segyars was shmoked, sorr.”

“Doubtless,” said I, with an ill-suppressed sneer. “And by whom? Cats?” I added, with a contemptuous shrug of my shoulders.

His answer overpowered me, it was so simple, direct, and unexpected.

“Shpooks,” he replied, laconically.

I gasped in astonishment, and sat down. My knees simply collapsed under me, and I could no more have continued to stand up than fly.

“What?” I cried, as soon as I had recovered sufficiently to gasp out the word.

“Shpooks,” replied Barney. “Ut came about like this, sorr. It was the Froiday two wakes afther you left, I became un’asy loike along about nine o’clock in the avenin’, and I fought I’d come around here and see if everything was sstraight. Me wife sez ut’s foolish of me, sorr, and I sez maybe so, but I can’t get ut out o’ me head thot somet’ing’s wrong.

“ ‘Ye locked everything up safe whin ye left?’ sez she.

“ ‘I always does,’ sez I.

“ ‘Thin ut’s a phwhim,’ sez she.

“ ‘No,’ sez I. ‘Ut’s a sinsation. If ut was a phwim, ut’d be youse as would hov’ it’; that’s what I sez, seavely loike, sorr, and out I shtarts. It was tin o’clock whin I got here. The noight was dark and blow-in’ loike March, rainin’ and t’underin’ till ye couldn’t hear yourself t’ink.

“I walked down the walk, sorr, an’ barrin’ the t’under everyt’ing was quiet. I troid the duers. All toight as a politician. Shtill, t’inks I, I’ll go insoide. Quiet as a lamb ut was, sorr; but on a suddent, as I was about to go back home again, I shmelt shmoke!”

“Fire?” I cried, excitedly.

“I said shmoke, sorr,” said Barney, whose calmness was now beautiful to look upon, he was so serenely confident of his position.

“Doesn’t smoke involve a fire?” I demanded.

“Sometimes,” said Barney. “I t’ought ye meant a conflagrashun, sorr. The shmoke I shmelt was segyars.”

“Ah,” I observed. “I am glad you are coming to the point. Go on. There *is* a difference.”

“There is thot,” said Barney, pleasantly, he was getting along so swimmingly. “This shmoke, as I say, was segyar shmoke, so I gropes me way cautious loike up the back sthairs and listens by the library dure. All quiet as a lamb. Thin, bold loike, I shteps into the room, and nearly drops wid the shcare I have on me in a minute. The room was dark as a b’aver hat, sorr, but in different shpots ranged round in the chairs was six little red balls of foire!”

“Barney!” I cried.

“Thru, sorr,” said he. “And tobacky shmoke rollin’ out till you’d ‘a’ t’ought there was a foire in a segyar-store! Ut queered me, sorr, for a minute, and me impulse is to run; but I gets me courage up, springs across the room, touches the electhric button, an’ bzt! every gas-jet on the flure loights up!”

“That was rash, Barney,” I put in, sarcastically.

“It was in your intherest, sorr,” said he, impressively.

“And you saw what?” I queried, growing very impatient.

“What I hope niver to see again, sorr,” said Barney, compressing his lips solemnly. “*Six impty chairs*, sorr, wid six segyars as hoigh up from the flure as a man’s mout’, puffin’ and a-blowin’ out shmoke loike a chimbley! An’ ivery oncet in a whoile the segyars would go down kind of an’ be tapped loike as if wid a finger of a shmoker, and the ashes would fall off onto the flure!”

“Well?” said I. “Go on. What next?”

“I wanted to run awaa, sorr, but I shtood rutted to the shpot wid th’ surproise I had on me, until foinally ivery segyar was burnt to a shtub and trun into the foireplace, where I found ’em the nixt mornin’ when I came to clane up, provin’ ut wasn’t ony dhrame I’d been havin’.”

I arose from my chair and paced the room for two or three minutes, wondering what I could say. Of course the man was lying, I thought. Then I pulled myself together.

“Barney,” I said, severely, “what’s the use? Do you expect me to believe any such cock-and-bull story as that?”

“No, sorr,” said he. “But thim’s the facts.”

“Do you mean to say that this house of mine is haunted?” I cried.

“I don’t know,” said Barney, quietly. “I didn’t t’ink so before.”

“Before? Before what? When?” I asked.

“Whin you was writin’ shtories about ut, sorr,” said Barney, respectfully. “You’ve had a black horse-hair sofy turn white in a single noight, sorr, for the soight of horror ut’s witnessed. You’ve had the hair of your own head shtand on ind loike tinpenny nails at what you’ve seen here in this very room, yourself, sorr. You’ve had ghosts doin’ all sorts of t’ings in the shtories you’ve been writin’ for years, and *you’ve always swore they was throe, sorr*. I didn’t believe ’em when I read ’em, but whin I see thim segyars bein’ shmoked up before me eyes by invishible t’ings, I sez to meself, sez I, the boss ain’t such a dommed loiar afther all. I’ve follyd your writin’, sorr, very careful and close loike; an I don’t see how, afther the tales you’ve told about your own experiences right here, you can say consishtently that this wan o’ mine ain’t so!”

“But why, Barney,” I asked, to confuse him, “when a thing like this happened, didn’t you write and tell me?”

Barney chuckled as only one of his species can chuckle.

“Wroite an’ tell ye?” he cried. “Be gorry, sorr, if I could wroite at all at all, ut’s not you oi’d be wroitin’ that tale to, but to the edithor of the paper that you wroite for. A tale loike that is wort’ tin dollars to any man, eshpecially if ut’s throe. But I niver learned the art!”

And with that Barney left me overwhelmed. Subsequently I gave him the ten dollars which I think his story is worth, but I must confess that I am in a dilemma. After what I have said about my supernatural guests, I cannot discharge Barney for lying, but I’ll be blest if I can quite believe that his story is accurate in every respect.

If there should happen to be among the readers of this tale any who have made a sufficiently close study of the habits of hired men and ghosts to be able to shed any light upon the situation, nothing would please me more than to hear from them.

I may add, in closing, that Barney has resumed smoking.