

The Vanishing House

By Bernard Capes

“My grandfather,” said the banjo, “drank ‘dog’s-nose,’ my father drank ‘dog’s-nose,’ and I drink ‘dog’s-nose.’ If that ain’t heredity, there’s no virtue in the board schools.”

“Ah!” said the piccolo, “you’re always a-boasting of your science. And so, I suppose, your son’ll drink ‘dog’s-nose,’ too?”

“No,” retorted the banjo, with a rumbling laugh, like wind in the bung-hole of an empty cask; “for I ain’t got none. The family ends with me; which is a pity, for I’m a full-stop to be proud on.”

He was an enormous, tun-bellied person—a mere mound of expressionless flesh, whose size alone was an investment that paid a perpetual dividend of laughter. When, as with the rest of his company, his face was blackened, it looked like a specimen coal on a pedestal in a museum.

There was Christmas company in the Good Intent, and the sanded taproom, with its trestle tables and sprigs of holly stuck under sooty beams reeked with smoke and the steam of hot gin and water.

“How much could you put down of a night, Jack?” said a little grinning man by the door.

“Why,” said the banjo, “enough to lay the dustiest ghost as ever walked.”

“*Could* you, now?” said the little man.

“Ah!” said the banjo, chuckling. “There’s nothing like settin’ one spent to lay another; and there I could give you proof number two of heredity.”

“What! Don’t you go for to say you ever see’d a ghost!”

“Haven’t I? What are you whisperin’ about, you blushful chap there by the winder?”

“I was only remarkin’, sir, ’twere snawin’ like the devil.”

“*Is* it? Then the devil has been misjudged these eighteen hundred and ninety odd years.”

“But *did* you ever see a ghost?” said the little grinning man, pursuing his subject.

“No, I didn’t, sir,” mimicked the banjo, “saving in coffee grounds. But my grandfather in *his* cups see’d one; which brings us to number three in the matter of heredity.”

“Give us the story, Jack,” said the “bones,” whose agued shins were extemporizing a rattle on their own account before the fire.

“Well, I don’t mind,” said the fat man. “It’s seasonable; and I’m seasonable, like the blessed plum-pudden, I am; and the more burnt brandy you set about me, the richer and headier I’ll go down.”

“You’d be a jolly old pudden to digest,” said the piccolo.

“You blow your aggrawation into your pipe and sealing-wax the stops,” said his friend.

He drew critically at his “churchwarden” a moment or so, leaned forward, emptied his glass into his capacious receptacles, and, giving his stomach a shift, as if to accommodate it to its new burden, proceeded as follows

“Music and malt is my nat’ral inheritance. My grandfather blew his ‘dog’s-nose,’ and drank his clarinet like a artist; and my father—”

“What did you say your grandfather did?” asked the piccolo.

“He played the clarinet.”

“You said he blew his ‘dog’s-nose.’ ”

“Don’t be a ass, Fred!” said the banjo, aggrieved. “How the blazes could a man blow his dog’s nose, unless he muzzled it with a handkercher, and then twisted its tail? He played the clarinet, I say; and my father played the musical glasses, which was a form of harmony pertiklerly genial to him. Amongst us we’ve piped out a good long century—ah! we have, for all I look sich a babby bursting on sops and spoon meat.”

“What!” said the little man by the door. “You don’t include them cockt hatses in your expeerunce?”

“My grandfather wore ’em, sir. He wore a play-actin’ coat, too, and buckles to his shoes, when he’d got any; and he and a friend or two made a permanency of ‘waits’ (only they called ’em according to the season), and got their profit goin’ from house to house, principally in the country, and discoursin’ music at the low rate of whatever they could get for it.”

“Ain’t you comin’ to the ghost, Jack?” said the little man hungrily.

“All in course, sir. Well, gentlemen, it was hard times pretty often with my grandfather and his friends, as you may suppose; and never so much as when they had to trudge it across country, with the nor’-easter buzzin’ in their teeth and the snow piled on their cockt hats like lemon sponge on entry dishes. The rewards, I’ve heard him say—for he lived to be ninety, nevertheless—was poor compensation for the drifts, and the influenza, and the broken chilblains; but now and again they’d get a fair skinful of liquor from a jolly squire, as ’d set ’em up like boggarts mended wi’ new broomsticks.”

“Ho-haw!” broke in a hurdle-maker in a corner; and then, regretting the publicity of his merriment, put his fingers bashfully to his stubble lips.

“Now,” said the banjo, “it’s of a pertikler night and a pertikler skinful that I’m a-going to tell you; and that night fell dark, and that skinful were took a hundred years ago this December, as I’m a Jack-pudden!”

He paused a moment for effect, before he went on:—

“They were down in the sou’-west country, which they little knew; and were anighing Winchester city, or should ’a’ been. But they got muzzed on the ungodly downs, and before they guessed, they was off the track. My good hat! there they was, as lost in the snow as three nutshells a-sinkin’ into a hasty pudden. Well, they wandered round; pretty confident at first, but getting madder and madder as every sense of their bearings slipped from them. And the bitter cold took their vitals, so as they saw nothing but a great winding sheet stretched abroad for to wrap their dead carcasses in.

“At last my grandfather he stopt and pulled hissself together with an awful face, and says he:

‘We’re Christmas pie for the carrying-on crows if we don’t prove ourselves human. Let’s fetch out our pipes and blow our trouble into ’em.’ So they stood together, like as if they was before a house and they played ‘Kate of Aberdare’ mighty dismal and flat, for their fingers froze to the keys.

“Now, I tell you, they hadn’t climbed over the first stave, when there come a skin of wind and spindrift of snow as almost took them off of their feet; and, on the going down of it, Jem Sloke, as played the hautboy, dropped the reed from his mouth, and called out, ‘Sakes alive! if we fools ain’t been standin’ outside a gentleman’s gate all the time, and not knowin’ it!’

“You might ’a’ knocked the three of ’em down wi’ a barley straw, as they stared and stared, and then fell into a low, enjoyin’ laugh. For they was standin’ not six fut from a tall iron gate in a stone wall, and behind these was a great house showin’ out dim, with the winders all lighted up.

“ ‘Lord!’ chuckled my grandfather, ‘to think o’ the tricks o’ this vaganiumous country! But, as we’re here, we’ll go on and give ’em a taste of our quality.’

“They put new heart into the next movement, as you may guess; and they hadn’t fair started on it, when the door of the house swung open, and down the shaft of light that shot out as far as the gate there come a smiling young gal, with a tray of glasses in her hands.

“Now she come to the bars; and she took and put a glass through, not sayin’ nothin’, but invitin’ some one to drink with a silent laugh.

“Did any one take that glass? Of course he did, you’ll be thinkin’; and you’ll be thinkin’ wrong. Not a man of the three moved. They was struck like as stone, and their lips was gone the colour of sloe berries. Not a man took the glass. For why? The moment the gal presented it, each saw the face of a thing lookin’ out of the winder over the porch, and the face was hidjus beyond words, and the shadder of it, with the light behind, stretched out and reached to the gal, and made her hidjus, too.

“At last my grandfather give a groan and put out his hand; and, as he did it, the face went, and the gal was beautiful to see agen.

“ ‘Death and the devil!’ said he. ‘It’s one or both, either way; and I prefer ’em hot to cold!’

“He drank off half the glass, smacked his lips, and stood staring a moment.

“ ‘Dear, dear!’ said the gal, in a voice like falling water, ‘you’ve drunk blood, sir!’

“My grandfather gave a yell, slapped the rest of the liquor in the faces of his friends, and threw the cup agen the bars. It broke with a noise like thunder, and at that he up’d with his hands and fell full length into the snow.”

There was a pause. The little man by the door was twisting nervously in his chair.

“He came to—of course, he came to?” said he at length.

“He come to,” said the banjo solemnly, “in the bitter break of dawn; that is, he come to as much of hisself as he ever was after. He give a squiggle and lifted his head; and there was he and his friends a-lyin’ on the snow of the high downs.”

“And the house and the gal?”

“Nanny a sign of either, sir, but just the sky and the white stretch; and one other thing.”

“And what was that?”

“A stain of red sunk in where the cup had spilt.” There was a second pause, and the banjo blew into the bowl of his pipe.

“They cleared out of that neighbourhood double quick, you’ll bet,” said he. “But my grandfather was never the same man agen. His face took purple, while his friends’ only remained splashed with red, same as birth marks; and, I tell you, if he ever ventur’d upon ‘Kate of Aberdare,’ his cheeks swelled up to the reed of his clarinet, like as a blue plum on a stalk. And forty year after, he died of what they call solution of blood to the brain.”

“And you can’t have better proof than that,” said the little man.

“That’s what *I* say,” said the banjo. “Next player, gentlemen, please.”