Bangs John Kendrick

Over the Plum Pudding

John Bangs

Over the Plum Pudding

Bangs J.

Over the Plum Pudding / J. Bangs — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

John Kendrick Bangs
Over the Plum Pudding

TO

JOHN KENDRICK BANGS, Jr

WHOSE FONDNESS FOR PLUM PUDDINGS

SUGGESTS THE PROPRIETY OF THIS

Dedication

Thanks are due to the Publishers of *Harper's Round Table*, *Harper's Weekly*, *The Delineator*, *Life*, *Brooklyn Life*, and the New York *Mail and Express* for permission to republish these stories in collected form.

"Over the Plum-Pudding"

Why it was Never Published. An authoritative Statement by its Editor

On the eve of his departure for Manila, where he is shortly to begin the publication of a comic paper, my friend Mr. Horace Wilkinson, late literary adviser of Messrs. Hawkins, Wilkes & Speedway, the publishers, sent to me the following pages of manuscript with the request that I should have them published for the benefit of those whom the story may concern. I have cheerfully accepted the commission, desiring it to be distinctly understood, however, that I am in no sense responsible for Mr. Wilkinson's statements either of fact or of opinion. I am merely the medium through whom his explanation is brought to the public eye.

J. K. B.

"Over the Plum-Pudding"

I

I have been asked so often and by so many persons known and unknown to me why it was that a Christmas book that was to have been issued some years ago under my editorial supervision never appeared, although announced as ready for immediate publication, that I feel that I should make some statement in explanation of the seeming deception. The matter was very annoying, both to my publishers and to myself at the time it happened, and while I was anxious then to make public a full and candid statement of the facts as they occurred, Messrs. Hawkins, Wilkes & Speedway deemed it the wiser course to let the affair rest for a year or two anyhow. They failed to see my point of view, that, while they were responsible for the advertisement, I was assumed to be responsible for the book, and in the event of its failure to appear it would naturally be inferred by the public that my work had not proven sufficiently up to standard to warrant them in continuing the venture. I did not press the matter, however, being too busy on other affairs to give to it the attention it deserved, and until now no opportunity to explain my connection with the unfortunate volume has arisen. I should hesitate even at this late date to give a wide publicity to the incident were it not that my mail has lately been overburdened by rather peremptory requests from the several contributors to the volume to be informed what had become of the tales they wrote and for which they were to be paid on publication. Ordinarily, letters of this kind I should refer to my business principals, the publishers themselves, but in this emergency it happens, unfortunately for me, that the publishers have been retired from business and are now engaged in other pursuits: one of them at the Klondike, another as a veterinary surgeon-general at Santiago, on the appointment of the Secretary of War, and the third living somewhere abroad incog. as the result of his having drawn out all the capital of his partners and fled one early spring morning two years ago, leaving behind him his best wishes and about eight thousand dollars in debts for his partners to pay. It therefore devolves on me to explain to the irate authors as best I can what happened. The explanation may not be shirked, for they are wholly within their rights in demanding it. My only hope is that they will be satisfied with my statement, although I am quite conscious, sadly so, of the fact that to certain suspicious minds it may seem to lack credibility.

II

To begin, I will place the responsibility for the whole affair where it belongs. It was the fault of no less a person than Mr. Rudyard Kipling. Mr. Andrew Lang's connection with the episode, of course, involved us in the final catastrophe, but he is not to blame. Mr. Kipling started the whole affair, and if Mulvaney and Ortheris and Learoyd had behaved themselves properly the book would now be resting calmly upon many an appreciative library shelf, instead of being, as it is, but a sorrowful memory and a possible cause for a series of international lawsuits.

This fact being understood as the basis of my argument, I will proceed to prove it; and to do so properly I must give in brief outline some idea of the contents of the book. It was to be called "Over the Plum-Pudding; or, Tales Told Under the Mistletoe, by Sundry Tattlers. Edited by Horace Wilkinson" – in fact, I hold a copyright at this moment upon this alluring title. Furthermore, it was to be unique among modern publications in that, while professing to be a Christmas book, the tales were to be full of Christmas spirit. The idea struck me as a very original one. I had observed that Fourth-of-July issues of periodicals were differentiated from the Christmas numbers only in the superabundance of advertisements in the latter, and it occurred to me that a Christmas publication containing some

reference to the Christmas season would strike the public as novel – and, in spite of the unfortunate overturning of my schemes, I still think so. Messrs. Hawkins, Wilkes & Speedway thought so, too, and gave me *carte blanche* to go ahead, stipulating only that I should spare no expense, and that the stories should be paid for on publication. I was also to enlist the services of the best persons in letters only.

Taking this last stipulation as the basis of my editorial operations, it is not a far cry to the conclusion that I sought to get stories from such eminent writers as Mr. Hall Caine, Dr. Doyle, Mr. Kipling, Richard Harding Davis, Andrew Lang, George Meredith, and myself. There were a few others, but these were people whose light shone forth suddenly and brilliantly, and then went out. I shall have no occasion to mention their names. It is enough to call attention to the fact that ultimately they were all I had left.

Mr. Caine's contribution was a charming little fancy written originally for children, but sent to me because it was the only thing the author happened to have on hand at the moment he received my request. It was called, if I remember rightly, "The Inebriate Santa Claus." It was full of that spirit of life and gayety which has been such a marked feature of Mr. Caine's work in the past, and was written with all of that fine, manly vigor that Mr. Caine puts into his every word. Sunshiny, I should call it, if I were seeking for the one word which summed up the virtues of "The Inebriate Santa Claus." One glowed as one perused it with the warmth of the whole thing, especially in such passages as this, for instance:

> "His downward trip through the chimney of Marston Hall gave him confidence in himself. He had observed as he was about to leave the roof of Higginbottom Castle that his footprints in the snow were suggestive of his actual condition, and he wondered if he could possibly get through the evening's work without catastrophe. But the Marston Hall chimney flue restored his confidence. It was straight, and after his descent the soot, that clung to the inner walls like bad habits to a man, showed none of the vacillating lines which were the essential characteristic of his footprints on the roof. He was sobering up."

I wish I could remember the story as a whole. It would be unjust, however, to the author to try to reproduce it from memory, and I shall not make the effort. It went on to tell, however, how the good old Saint, in his unfortunate condition of inebriacy, overturned the Christmas tree at Marston Hall and set fire to the house, resulting in a slight singeing of his own person and the destruction of the Hall, together with all the inmates, a fact that so distressed the unhappy Santa Claus that at the next nursery he visited he resolved to reform and indulge no more in strong drink, although the nurse, on putting the children to bed, had departed, leaving a bottle of whiskey upon the mantel-piece – this showing Santa Claus's powers of self-control in the face of temptation.

Altogether, as I have already said, the story was full of import and sunshine, and, as may be seen from my brief and inadequate description, was possibly more fitted for children than for the adult mind.

III

Mr. Meredith's story came next, and it had all of that charm which goes with the average Meredithian production. To call it dictionaryesque is not too high praise to bestow upon it. What it was about I never really gathered, although I of course read it through several times before accepting it, and perused the proofs carefully some eight or nine times. There were allusions to Santa Claus in it, however, and I therefore let it pass, feeling that to the admirers of the master's genius its message would ring out clear and crisp like the glad chimes of the Christmas morn; and it was my desire to be the bearer of glad things to all people, whether I was myself in sympathy with their literary tastes or not. I recall one page in the story – the last of all, however, which struck me as a marvel. Fotherington,

whom I guessed to be the hero, is standing on top of a shot-tower in London, about to commit suicide by jumping down, when all of a sudden Santa Claus appears beside him and inquires if the tower is a chimney or not. Fotherington gives a "throat-gasping laugh" and invites Santa Claus to join him in the jump and find out for himself. The author writes:

> "At this, the spirit of the Hourgod, the multitudinous larvæ of his emotions, intensified by the nose-whirling impertinence of the other, gazed, eyes tear-surging, towards the reddish northern cheek of the piping East, human in its bulk, the wharf cranes rising superabundant from the umbrageous onflowing of the commerce-ridden stream, piercing the middle distance like a mine-hid vein of purest gold in the mellowing amber of approaching dawn, flying seaward, curdling in its mad pressure ever onward, soon to be lost in the vaguely infinite, beyond which, unconscious of the perils of the inspired home-coming, lies that of which homogeneous man may speculate, but never, by reason of his inflated limitations, approximate without expletion.
>
> "'Beg pardon!' said he, with an interrogation in his inflection. 'I was not aware of the facts.' Fotherington was silent for a moment, and then, recognizing Santa Claus, a shame-surge encarnadined his cheek, and he answered, strenuously apologetic: 'This is the shot-tower. The sight of you restores me to life. I shall not again dwell upon self-destruction. Heaven bless the spirit of the hour.'
>
> "He buried his face in the Saint's pack, and hot tears sprang forth from his vision.
>
> "'Beg pardon again,' observed Santa Claus, drawing himself away. 'If you must weep, weep on my shoulder, not on my pack. The toys are not painted in fast colors.'
>
> "And the two went down together."

IV

The contribution of Mr. Davis was a most excellent sketch of the inimitable Van Bibber, and told how on his way to a dance late one evening during Christmas week he encountered, snuggled in a doorway near the North River, a poor little street gamin nearly frozen to death. Van Bibber saves the child's life by removing his dress-coat and wrapping it up in it, the result being that he has to lead the cotillon at Mrs. Winchley's clad in a fur-lined overcoat. It was a tender and touching little literary gem, and was full of the fine sentiment and lofty moralizing for which this author has always been noted. Its humor may well be imagined. The little talk between Van Bibber and Travers in the dressing-room as to Van Bibber's dilemma when he realized how his impetuosity had led him into giving the boy his coat was a characteristic bit, and ran somewhat like this:

> "'What the deuce shall I do?" he said, fanning his somewhat flushed face with the silver-backed hand-mirror. 'I can't lead the cotillon in my shirt-sleeves.'
>
> "'No, you can't,' assented Travers with a droll smile. 'What an ass you were not to give him your fur-lined overcoat instead.'
>
> "'It wouldn't have fitted him,' said Van Bibber, absently. 'Poor little devil.'
>
> "'There's only one thing you can do, Van,' said Travers after a moment's pause. 'Either don't stay, or dance in your overcoat.'
>
> "'That's two things,' retorted Van Bibber. 'Of course I've got to stay. I told Mrs. Winchley I'd lead her cotillon, and I've got to do it. Do you suppose people would say anything if I did appear in my overcoat?'
>
> "'Not if they had any manners they wouldn't,' said Travers. 'Of course, it will be observed, but if they know anything about good form they'll keep quiet about it.'

"'Then it's settled,' Van Bibber said quietly. 'I'll wear the fur overcoat, and to disarm all criticism I'll simply tell everybody I have a fearful cold and don't dare take it off. Come on – let's go down. It's half past one now, and Mrs. Winchley told me she wanted to begin early, so as to have it over with before breakfast.'"

V

It was my pleasure next to have a Sherlock Holmes story from Dr. Doyle, wherein the great detective is once more restored to life, and through an ingenious complication discovers himself. His sudden disappearance, which was never fully explained, did not really result in his death, but in a concussion of the brain in his fall over the precipice which drove all consciousness of his real self from his mind. Found in an unconscious condition by a band of yodelers, he is carried by them into the Tyrolese Alps, where, after a prolonged illness, he regains his health, but all his past life is a blank to him. How he sets about ferreting out the mystery of his identity is the burden of the story, and how he ultimately discovers that he is none other than Sherlock Holmes by finding a diamond brooch in the gizzard of a Christmas turkey at Nice, where he is stopping under the name of Higgins, is vividly set forth:

"'And you have never really ascertained, Mr. Higgins, who you are?' asked Lady Blenkinsop, as they sat down at Mrs. Wilbraham's gorgeous table on Christmas night.

"'No, madame,' he replied, sadly, 'but I shall ultimately triumph. My taste in cigars is a peculiar one, and no one else that I have ever met can smoke with real enjoyment the kind of a cigar that I like. I am searching, step by step, in every city for a cigar dealer who makes a specialty of that brand who has recently lost a customer. Ultimately I shall find one, and then the chain of evidence will be near to its ultimate link, for it may be that I shall turn out to be that man.'"

Thus the story runs on, and the pseudo-Higgins delights his fellow-guests with the brilliance of his conversation. He eats lightly, when suddenly a flash of triumph comes into his deep-set eyes, for on cutting open the turkey gizzard the diamond brooch is disclosed. He seems about to faint, but with a strong effort of the will he regains his strength and arises.

"Mrs. Wilbraham,' he said, quietly and simply – 'ladies and gentlemen, I must leave you. I take the 9.10 train for London. May I be excused?'

"The eyes of the company opened wide.

"'Why – must you really go, Mr Higgins?' Mrs. Wilbraham queried

"'It is imperative,' said he. 'I am going to have myself identified. The finding of this diamond brooch in a turkey gizzard convinces me that I am Sherlock Holmes. Such a thing could happen to no other, yet I may be mistaken. I shall call at once upon a certain Dr. Watson, of London, a friend of Holmes's, who will answer the question definitely.'

"And with a courteous bow to the company he left the room, his usually pale features aglow with unwonted color."

Of course, the surmise proves to be correct, and the great detective once more rejoins his former companions, restored not only to them, but to himself. It was one of the most keenly interesting studies of detective life that Dr. Doyle or any one else has ever given us, and my regret that the story is lost to the world amounts almost to a positive grief.

VI

The only other notable efforts in the book were, as I have already indicated, from the pens of Andrew Lang and Rudyard Kipling, and as the preceding stories were characteristic of their authors, so were these equally so. I have not the time to more than suggest their tenor briefly. Mr. Lang's story was one of his charming made-over fairy tales, and he unfortunately introduced that most fearsome of dragons Fafner into it. He was held, however, in captivity, and had the situation in which Mr. Lang left him been allowed to remain undisturbed, all would have been well, and "Over the Plum-Pudding" would not have met with disaster. Mr. Kipling, however, chose to contribute a Mulvaney story, and herein lay the whole trouble. Mulvaney and his two roystering companions, Ortheris and Learoyd, start in on a Christmas spree, and they do it in their own complete fashion, and Mr. Kipling never in his life drew his characters more vividly and vigorously; but this time he did it too vigorously. The three musketeers of the British army got beyond his control, and it is the fact that when "Over the Plum-Pudding" was ready for presentation to the public they broke loose from the story in which they were supposed to be confined; went rushing and roaring, regardless of the etiquette of the situation, through every other tale in the book, found the bottle of whiskey which the nurse-maid in Mr. Caine's story had left on the mantel-piece, drained it to the dregs, and then, under the mad influence of the alcohol, *let Fafner loose*.

Their fate may easily be imagined. They were at once destroyed by the angry beast, who, after making a meal upon them, rushed like a steam-engine through the Sherlock Holmes story, swallowing its characters one and all as though they were naught but salted almonds; breathed fire upon Meredith's shot-tower until it tottered and fell, a smoking ruin; chewed up the frozen little gamin in the Van Bibber sketch; withered Van Bibber and his overcoat and his friends by one snorting blast of steam from his left nostril; and, in fact, to make a long story shorter than it might be, strewed blue ruin from title-page to finis of "Over the Plum-Pudding." It is the fact that on the morning set for the presentation of the edition to the public, on opening my own copy of the book there was not a character in it left alive; not a house that had not been reduced to charred timbers and ashes; not a scene that was not withered as by the flames of perdition, and where once had been a strong portrayal of a scene of happy social revels, the ballroom of Mrs. Winchley, where Van Bibber was to lead the cotillon, lay Fafner – dead. Kipling's characters were too much for his digestion.

VII

That is the story of "Over the Plum-Pudding." That is why it never appeared. That is the explanation of the editor. I admit that in some ways the explanation seems scarcely credible, but it is in every respect truthful, and on my return from Manila I will prove it to all suspicious-minded persons who may choose to doubt it, for I can show them the copyright papers of the book, the advertisement of its approaching publication, my contract with Messrs. Hawkins, Wilkes and Speedway, and a few press notices I had myself prepared for its exploitation.

I can also prove that Mr. Kipling draws his characters so vividly and vigorously that they stand out like real people before us, and certainly if they can do that, there is no reason why they should not be able to do all that I have claimed they did do.

Horace Wilkinson.

Bills, M.D

A CHRISTMAS GHOST I HAVE MET

It was the usual kind of a Christmas Eve. The snow was falling with its customary noiselessness, and the world was gradually taking on a mantle of white which made it look like a very attractive wedding-cake. It was upon this occasion that Old Bills materialized in my down-town study and got me out of a very unpleasant hole. The year had not been a very profitable one for me. My last book had been a comparative failure, having sold only 118,000 copies in the first six months, so that instead of receiving $60,000 in royalties on the first of November, as I had expected, I had fallen down to something like $47,000. There was a fraction of seven or eight hundred dollars – just what it was I cannot recall. Then my securities had, for one reason or another, failed to yield the customary revenue; some thirty or forty of my houses had not rented; taxes had increased – in short, I found myself at Christmas-time, with my wife and eight children expecting to be remembered, with less than $80,000 that I could spare in the bank.

To be sure, we had all agreed that this year we should avoid extravagance, and the little madame had informed me that she would be very unhappy if I expended more than $40,000 upon her present from myself. My daughter, too, like the sweet girl that she is, said, with a considerable degree of firmness, that she would rather have a check for $10,000 than the diamond necklace I had contemplated giving her; and my eldest son had sent word from college, in definite terms, that he didn't think, in view of the hard times, he would ask for anything more than a new pair of wheelers for his drag, three hunters, a T cart, a silver chafing-dish set, and a Corot for his smoking-room.

This spirit, as I say, permeated the household – even the baby babbled of economy, and thought he could get along with ruby jackstones and a bag of cats'-eyes to play marbles with. But even thus, as the reader can see for himself, $80,000 would not go far, and I was in despair. There is no greater trial in the world than that confronting a generously disposed father who suddenly finds himself at Christmas time without the means to carry out his wishes and to provide his little ones with the gifts which their training has justified them in expecting.

I was seated alone in my office, not having the courage to go home and tell my family of the horrid state of affairs, or, rather, putting off the evil hour, for ultimately the truth would have to be told. It was growing dark. Outside I could hear the joyous hum of the busy streets; the clanging of the crowded cable-cars, going to and fro, bearing their holiday burden of bundle-laden shoppers, seemed to sound musically and to tell of peace and good-will. Even the cold, godless world of commerce seemed to warm up with the spirit of the hour. I alone was in misery, at a moment when peace and happiness and good-will were the watchwords of humanity. My distress increased every moment as I conjured up before my mind's eye the picture of the coming morn, when my children and their mother, in serene confidence that I would do the right thing by them, should find the tree bare of presents, and discover, instead of the usual array of bonds and jewels, and silver services, and horses and carriages, and rich furs, and priceless books (the baby had cut his teeth the year before on the cover of the Grolier edition of Omar Khayyam, which, at a cost of $600, I had given him, bound in ivory and gold, with carbuncles adorning the back and the title set in brilliants) – discover, instead of these, I say, mere commonplace presents possessing no intrinsic worth – why, it was appalling to think of their disappointment! To be sure, I had purchased a suit of Russian sables for madam, and had concealed a certified check for $25,000 in the pocket of the dolman, but what was that in such times, hard as they were!

And you may imagine it was all exquisitely painful to me. Then, on a sudden, I seemed not to be alone. Something appeared to materialize off in the darker corner of the study. At first I thought it was merely the filming over of my eyes with the moisture of an incipient and unshed tear, but I was soon undeceived, for the thing speedily took shape, and a rather unpleasant shape at that, although there was a radiant kindliness in its green eyes.

"Who are you?" I demanded, jumping up and staring intently at the apparition, my hair meanwhile rising slightly.

"I'm Dr. Bills," was the response, in a deep, malarial voice, as the phantom, for that is all it was, approached me. "I've come to help you out of your troubles," it added, rather genially.

"Ah? Indeed!" said I. "And may I ask how you know I am in trouble?"

"Certainly you may," said the old fellow. "We ghosts know everything."

"Then you are a ghost, eh?" I queried, although I knew mighty well at the moment I first saw him that he was nothing more, he was so transparent and misty.

"At your service," was the reply, as my unexpected visitor handed me a gelatinous-looking card, upon which was engraved the following legend:

U. P. BILLS, M.D.,

"The Spook Philanthropist."

Troubles Cured While You Wait

"Ah!" said I, as I read it. "You'll find me a troublesome patient, I am afraid. Do you know what my trouble is?"

"Certainly I do," said Bills. "You're a little short and your wife and children have expectations."

"Precisely," said I. "And here is Christmas on top of us and nothing for the tree except a few trifling gems and other things."

"Well, my dear fellow," said the kindly visitant, "if you'll intrust yourself to my care I'll cure you in a jiffy. There never was a case of immediate woe that I couldn't cure, but you've got to have confidence in me.

"Sort of faith cure, eh?" I smiled.

"Exactly," he replied. "If you don't believe in Old Bills, Old Bills cannot relieve your distress."

"But what do you propose to do, Doctor?" I asked. "What is your course of treatment?"

"That's my business," he retorted. "You don't ask your family physician to outline his general plan to you when you summon him to treat you for gout, do you?"

"Well, I generally like to know more of him than I know of you," said I, apologetically, for I had no wish to offend him. "For instance, are you allopath, or a homœopath, or some hitherto untrodden path?"

"Something of a homœopath," he admitted.

"Then you cure trouble with trouble?" I asked, rather more pertinently, as the event showed, than I imagined.

"I cure trouble with ease," he replied glibly. "You may accept or reject my services. It's immaterial to me."

"I don't wish to seem ungrateful, Doctor," said I, seeing that the old spook was growing a trifle irritated. "I certainly most gratefully accept. What do you want me to do?"

"Go home," he said, laconically.

"But the empty tree?" I demanded.

"Will not be empty to-morrow morning," said he, and he vanished.

I locked my study door and started to walk home, first stopping at the café down-stairs and cashing a check for $60,000. I had confidence in Old Bills, but I thought I would provide against possible failure; and I had an idea that on the way uptown I might perhaps find certain little things to please, if not satisfy, the children, which could be purchased for that sum. My surmise was correct, for, while Old Bills did his work, as will soon be shown, most admirably, I had no difficulty in expending the $60,000 on simple little things really worth having, between Pine Street and Forty-second. For instance, as I passed along Union Square I discovered a superb pair of pearl hat-pins which I knew would please my second daughter, Jenny, because they were just suited to the immediate needs of the talking doll she had received from her aunt on her birthday. They were cheap little pins, but as I paid down the $1,800 they cost in crisp hundred dollar bills they looked so stunningly beautiful that I wondered if, after all, they mightn't prove sufficient for little Jenny's whole Christmas, if Bills should fail. Then I met poor old Hobson, who has recently met reverses. He had an opera-box for sale for $2,500, and I bought it for Martha, my third daughter, who, though only seven years old, frequently entertains her little school friends with all the manner of a woman of fashion. I felt that the opera-box would please the child, although it was not on the grand tier. I also killed two birds with one stone by taking a mortgage for $10,000 on Hobson's house, by which I not only relieved poor old Hobson's immediate necessities, but, by putting the mortgage in my son Jimmy's stocking, enriched the boy as well. So it went. By the time I reached home the $60,000 was spent, but I felt that, brought up as they had been, the children would accept the simple little things I had brought home to them in the proper spirit. They were, of course, cheap, but my little ones do not look at the material value of their presents. It is the spirit which prompts the gift that appeals to them – Heaven bless 'em! I may add here, too, that my little ones did not even by their manner seem to grudge that portion of the $60,000 spent which their daddy squandered on his immediate impulses, consisting of a nickel extra to a lad who blacked his boots, thirty cents for a cocktail at the club, and a dime to a beggar who insisted on walking up Fifth Avenue with him until he was bought off with the coin mentioned – a species of blackmail which is as intolerable as it is inevitable on all fashionable thoroughfares.

But their delight as well as my own on the following morning, when the doctor's fine work made itself manifest, was glorious to look upon. I frankly never in my life saw so magnificent a display of gifts, and I have been to a number of recent millionaire weddings, too. To begin with, the most conspicuous thing in the room was the model of a steam yacht which Old Bills had provided as the family gift to myself. It was manifest that the yacht could not be got into the house, so Bills had had the model sent, and with it the information that the yacht itself was ready at Cramp's yard to go into commission whenever I might wish to have it. It fairly took my breath away. Then for my wife was a rope of pearls as thick as a cable, and long enough to accommodate the entire week's wash should the laundress venture to borrow it for any such purpose. All the children were fitted out in furs; there were four gold watches for the boys, diamond tiaras and necklaces of pearls and brilliant rings for the girls. My eldest son received not only the horses and carriages and the Corot he wanted, but a superb gold mounted toilet set, and a complete set of golf clubs, the irons being made of solid silver, the shafts of ebony, with a great glittering diamond set in the handle of each, these all in a caddy bag of seal-skin, the fur shaved off. There was a charming little naphtha launch and a horseless carriage for Jimmy, and, as for the baby, it was very evident that Old Bills had a peculiarly tender spot in his ghostly make-up for children. I doubt if the finest toy-shops of Paris ever held toys in greater variety or more ingenious in design. There were two armies of soldiers made of aluminum which marched and fought like real little men, a band of music at the head of each that discoursed the most stirring music, cannons that fired real shot – indeed, all the glorious panoply of war was there in miniature, lacking only blood, and I have since discovered that even this was possible, since every one of the little soldiers was so made that his head could be pulled off and his body filled with red ink. Then there was

a miniature office building of superb architectural design, with little steam elevators running up and down, and throngs of busy little creatures, manipulated by some ingenious automatic arrangement, rushing hither and thither like mad, one and all seemingly engaged upon some errand of prodigious commercial import. Another delightful gift for the baby was a small opera-house, and a complete troupe of little wax prime donne, and zinc tenors, and brass barytones, with patent removable chests, within which small phonographs worked so that the little things sang like so many music – boxes, while in the chairs and boxes and galleries were matinée girls and their escorts and their bonnets and their enthusiastic applause – truly I never dreamed of such magnificent things as Old Bills provided for the occasion. He had indeed got me out of my immediate difficulty, and when I went to bed that night, after the happiest Christmas I had ever known, I called down the richest blessings upon his head; and why, indeed, should I not? We had between $400,000 and $500,000 worth of presents in the house, and they had not cost me a penny, outside of the $60,000 I had spent on the way uptown, and what could be more conducive to one's happiness than such a Yuletide Klondike as that?

This was many years ago, dear reader, before the extravagant methods of the present day crept into and somewhat poisoned the Christmas spirit, but from that day to this Old Bills has never ceased to haunt me. He has been my constant companion from that glorious morning until to-day, when I find myself telling you of him, and, save at the beginning of every recurring month, when I am always very busy and somewhat anxious about making ends meet, his society is never irksome. Once you get used to Bills he becomes a passion, and were it not for his singular name I think I should find him a constant source of joy.

It rather dampened my ardor, I must confess, when I found that the initials of the good old doctor, U. P., stood for Un Paid, but if you can escape the chill and irksomeness of that there is no reason why the poorest of us all may not derive much real joy in life from the good things we can get through Bills.

In justice to the readers of this little tale, I should perhaps say, in conclusion, that I read it to my wife before sending it out, and she asserts that it was all a dream, because she says she never received that rope of pearls. To which I retorted that she deserved to, anyhow – but, dream or otherwise, the visitation has truly been with me for many years, and I fear the criticism of my spouse is somewhat prompted by jealousy, for she has stated in plain terms that she would rather go without Christmas than see me constantly haunted by Bills: but, after all, it is a common condition, and it does help one at Christmas time in an era when the simple observance of the season, so characteristic of the olden time, has been superceded by a lavish expenditure which would bring ruin to the richest of us were it not for the benign influence of Bills, M.D.

The Flunking of Watkins's Ghost

Parley was a Freshman at Blue Haven University, and, like many other Freshmen, had a wholesome fear of examinations. In the football field he was courageous to the verge of foolhardiness, but when he sat in his chair in the examination-room, with a paper covered with questions before him, he was as timid as a fawn. There was no patent flying or revolving wedge method of getting him through the rush-line of Greek, nor by any known tackle could he down the half-backs of mathematics and kick the ball of his intellect through the goal-posts, on the other side of which lay the coveted land of Sophomoredom. Hence Parley, who had spent most of his time practicing for his class eleven, found himself at the end of his first term in a state of worry like unto nothing he had ever known before.

"It would be tough to fail at this stage of the game," he thought, as he reflected upon what his father would say in the event of his failure. "It wouldn't be so bad to flunk later on, but for a chap to fall down at the very beginning of his race wouldn't reflect much credit on his trainer, and I think it very likely the governor would be mad about it."

"Of course he would!" said a voice at his side. "Who wouldn't?"

Parley jumped, he was so startled. Nor was it surprising that even so cool and physically strong a person as he should for an instant know the sensation of fear. If you or I should happen to be lying off in our room before a flickering log-fire, which furnished the only illumination, smoking a pipe, reflecting, and all alone, I think we would ourselves, superior beings as we are, be startled to hear a strange voice beside us answering our unspoken thoughts. This was exactly what had happened in Parley's case. Now that the football season was over, he realized that too much time had been spent on that and too little upon his studies, and conditions were all he could see in the future. This naturally made Parley very unhappy, and upon this particular night he had retired to his room to be alone until his blue spell should wear off. Several of his classmates had knocked at his door, but he had made no response, and in order further to give the impression that he was not within he had turned out his gas and table lamp, and sat pulling viciously away at his pipe, watching the flames on the hearth as they danced to and fro upon the logs, which last hissed and spluttered away as if they approved neither of the dancing flames nor of Parley himself.

Straining his eyes in the direction whence the voice had seemed to come, Parley endeavored to ascertain who had spoken, but all was as it had been before. There was no one in sight, and the freshman settled back again in his chair.

"Humph!" he ejaculated. "Guess I must have fallen asleep and dreamed it."

"Not a bit of it," interposed the voice again. "I'm over here in the arm-chair."

Parley sprang to his feet and grabbed up his "banger," as the big cane he had managed to hold to the bitter end in the rush of cherished memory was called.

"Oh, you are, are you?" he cried, controlling his fear with great difficulty; and his voice would hardly come, his throat and lips had become so dry from nervousness. "And, pray, how the deuce did you get in?" he demanded, peering over into the arm-chair's capacious depths – still seeing nothing, however.

"Oh, the usual way," replied the voice – "through the door."

"That's not so," retorted Parley. "Both doors are locked, so you couldn't. Why don't you come out like a man where I can see you, and tell the truth, if you know how?"

"Can't," said the other – "that is, I *can't* come out like a *man*."

"Ah!" sneered Parley. "What are you then – a purple cow?"

"I don't know what a purple cow is," replied the voice, in sepulchral tones. "I never saw one. They didn't have 'em in my day, only plain brown ones – cows of the primary colors."

"Ah?" said Parley, smartly. The invisible thing was speaking so meekly that his momentary terror was passing away. "You had blue cows in your day, eh?"

"Oh, my, yes!" replied the strange visitor; "lots of 'em. Take any old cow and deprive her of her calf, and she becomes as blue as indigo."

Here the voice laughed, and Parley joined.

"You're a clever – ah – what? – A clever It," he said.

"You might call me an It if you wanted to," said the stranger. "Possibly that's my general classification. To be more specific, however, I'm a ghost."

"Ho! Nonsense'" retorted Parley. "I don't believe in ghosts."

"That may be," said the other, calmly. "I didn't when I was here, a living human being with two legs and a taste for smoke, like you. But I found out afterwards that I was all wrong. When you get to be a ghost, if you have any self-respect you'll believe in 'em. Furthermore, if I wasn't a ghost I couldn't have got in here through two closed doors to speak to you."

"That's so," replied Parley. "I didn't think of that. Still, you can't expect me to believe you without some proof. Suppose you let me whack you over the head with this stick? If it goes through you without hurting you, all well and good. If it doesn't, and knocks you out, I sha'n't be any the worse off. What do you say?"

"I'm perfectly willing," said the voice; "only look out for your chair. You might spoil it."

"Afraid, eh?" said Parley.

"For the chair, yes," replied the spirit. "Still it isn't my chair, and if you want to take the risk, I'm willing. You can kick a football through my ribs if you wish. It's all the same to me."

"I'll try the banger," said Parley, dryly. "Then if you are a sneak-thief, as I half suspect, you'll get what you deserve. If you're what you claim to be, all's well for both of us. Shall I?"

"Go ahead," replied the ghost, nonchalantly.

Parley was more surprised than ever, and was beginning to believe that It was a ghost, after all. No sneak-thief would willingly permit himself to be whacked on the head with any such adamantine weapon as that which Parley held in his hand.

"Never mind," said he, relenting. "I won't."

"Yon *must*, now," said the other. "If you don't, I can't help you at all. I can't be of service to a person who either can't or won't believe in me. If you want to pass your examinations, whack."

"Bah! What idiocy!" cried Parley. "I – "

"Go ahead and whack," persisted the voice. "As hard as you know how, too, if you want to. Pretend you are cornered by a wild beast, and have only one chance to escape, and whack for dear life. I'm ready. My arms are folded, and I'm sitting right here over the embroidered cushion that serves as the seat of your chair."

"I've caught you, there," said Parley. "You aren't sitting there at all. I can see the embroidered cushion."

"Which simply proves what I say," retorted the ghost. "If I were not a ghost, but a material thing like a sneak-thief, you couldn't see through me. Whack away."

And Parley did so. He raised the banger aloft, and brought it down on the spot where the invisible creature was sitting with all the force at his command.

"There," said the ghost, calmly, from the chair. "Are you satisfied? It didn't do me any damage; though I must say you've knocked the embroidery into smithereens."

It was even as he said. The force with which Parley had brought the heavy stick down had made a great rent in the soft cushion, and he had had his trouble for his pains.

"Well, do you believe in me now?" the ghost demanded, Parley, in his surprise and wrath, having found no words suited to the occasion.

"I suppose I've got to," he replied, ruefully gazing upon the ruined cushion. "That's what I get for being an idiot. I don't know – "

"It's what you get for pretending that you can't believe all that you can't see," put in the ghost, "which is a very grave error for a young man – or an old one, either, for that matter – to make."

Parley sat down, and was silent for a moment.

"Well," he said at length, "granting that there are such things as ghosts, and that you are one, what the deuce do you come bothering me for? Just wanted to plague me, I suppose, and get me to smash my furniture."

"Not at all," retorted the ghost. "I didn't ask you to smash your furniture. On the contrary, I warned you that that was what you were going to do. You suggested smashing me, and I told you to go ahead."

Parley couldn't deny it, but he could not quite conceal his resentment.

"Don't you think I'm bothered enough by the prospect of a beautiful flunk at my exams, without your trickling in through the doorway to exasperate me?" he demanded.

"Who has come to exasperate you, Parley?" said the ghost, a trifle irritably. "I haven't. I came to help you, but, by Jingo! I've half a mind to leave you to get out of your troubles the best way you can. Do you know what's the matter with you? You are too impetuous. You are the kind of chap who strikes first and thinks afterwards. So far your experiments on me have kept me from telling you who I am and what I've come for. If you don't want help, say so. There are others who do, and I'll be jiggered if I wouldn't rather help them than you, now that I know what a fly-away Jack you are."

The spirit with which the visitor uttered these words made Parley somewhat ashamed of his behavior, and yet no one could really blame him, under the circumstances, for doing what he did.

"I'm sorry," he said, in a moment, "but you must remember, sir, that at Blue Haven there is no chair in manners, and the etiquette of a meeting of this sort is a closed book to me."

"That's all right," returned the ghost, kindly. "I don't blame you, on the whole. The trouble lies just where you say. In college people study geology and physiology and all the other 'ologies, save spectrology. Most college trustees disbelieve in ghosts, just as you do, and the consequence is you only touch upon the relations of man with the spirit world in your studies of psychology, and then only in a very incomplete fashion. Any gentleman knows how to behave to another gentleman, but when he comes into contact with a spook he's all at sea. If somebody would only write a ghost-etiquette book, or a 'Spectral Don't,' people who suffer from what you are pleased to call hallucinations would have an easier time of it. If I had been a book-agent, or a sneak-thief, or a lady selling patent egg-beaters which no home should be without, you would have received me with greater courtesy than you did."

"Still," said Parley, anxious to make out a good case for himself, "most of 'em wouldn't walk right into a fellow's room and scare him to death, you know."

"Nor would I," said the ghost. "You are still living, Parley, as you wouldn't have been if I'd scared you to death."

"Specious, but granted," returned Parley. "And now, Mr. Spook, let's exchange cards."

"I left my card-case at home," laughed the spirit. "But I'll tell you who I am and it will suffice. I'm old Billie Watkins, of the class of ninety-nine."

"There is no Watkins in ninety-nine," said Parley, suspiciously.

"Well, there *was*," retorted the spirit. "I ought to know, because I was old Billie myself. Valedictorian, too."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Parley. "Ninety-nine hasn't graduated yet!"

"Yes, it has," returned the ghost. "Seventeen ninety-nine, I mean."

Parley whistled. "Oh, I see! You're a relic of the last century!"

"That's it; and I can tell you, Parley, we eighteenth-century boys made Blue Haven a very different sort of a place from what you make it," said Billie. "We didn't mind being young, you know. When we had an eight-oared race, we rowed only four men, and each man managed two oars. And there wasn't any fighting over strokes, either; and we'd row anybody that chose to try us. The main principle was to have a race, and the only thing we thought about was getting in first."

"In any old way, I suppose?" sneered Parley.

"You bet!" cried the spirit, with enthusiasm. "We'd have put our eight-oared crew up against twenty Indians in a canoe, if they'd asked us; and when it came to rounders, we could bat balls a mile in those days. A fellow didn't have to make a science out of his fun when I was at Blue Haven."

"And what good did it do you?" cried Parley.

"We held every belt and every mug and every medal in the thirteen States, that's what. We laid out Cambridge at one-old-cat eight times in two months, and as for those New York boys, we beat 'em at marbles on their own campus," returned the ghost.

Parley was beginning to be interested.

"I'd like to see the records of those times," he said.

"Records? Bosh!" said old Billie Watkins. "You don't for a moment believe that every time we played a game of marbles or peg-top, or rowed against a lot of the town boys, we sat down and wrote up a history of it, do you? We were too busy having fun for that. Oh, those days! those days!" the ghost added, with a sigh. "College wasn't filled with politicians and scientific fun-seekers and grandfathers then."

"Grandfathers? More likely you were forefathers," suggested Parley.

"We've become both since," said Watkins. "But we were boys then, and glad of it."

"Aren't we boys now?" queried Parley.

"Yes, you are," replied the ghost. "But you seem to be doing your best to conceal the fact. As soon as a lad gets into college now he puts on all the airs of a man. Walks, talks like a grave man. Eats and drinks like a grave man. Why, I don't believe you ever robbed the president's hen-coop in your life!"

"No," laughed Parley, "never. For two reasons: it's easier to get our chickens cooked at the dining-hall, and Prex hasn't got a hen-coop."

"Exactly. Even our college presidents aren't what they were. Never hooked a ham out of his smoke-house, either, I'll wager, and for the same reason – Prex hasn't a smoke-house. All the smoking he does is in the line of cigars. But all this hasn't got anything to do with what I came here for. I came to help you, and I've seen enough of the way things are done in colleges these days to know that in the other respects of which I have spoken you are beyond help. Besides, this help is personal. You are worried about your examinations, aren't you?"

"Well, rather," said Parley. "You see, I've been playing football."

"Precisely," said Watkins. "And you've put so much time into learning to do it scientifically and without using your feet, as we did, that you've let everything else go."

"I suppose so," said Parley, sullenly.

"That's it," said old Billie Watkins. "Now that everything's science, there isn't time for a boy to do more than one thing at a time, and he's got to choose between his degree and seeing his picture in the papers as an athlete. Well, it's not your fault, maybe. It's the times, and I'm going to help you out. I always try to help somebody once a year. It's my Christmas gift to mankind, and this year I've decided to help you out of your fix. Last year I helped Blue Haven win the debating championship as against our traditional rivals. This year I should have tried to get Blue Haven to the fore in the boat-race, but everybody about here was so cocksure of winning it didn't seem to be necessary. I'm sorry now I didn't know it was all men's bluff and not boys' confidence. I might have helped the little men out. Still, that's over, and you are to be the gainer. *I'll pass your examinations for you.*"

"What?" cried Parley, scarcely able to believe his ears.

"I'll pass your examinations for you," repeated the ghost. "It won't be hard. As I told you, I was valedictorian of my class."

"But how?" asked Parley. "You couldn't pass yourself off for me, you know."

"Never said I could," returned Billie Watkins. "Never wanted to. I'd rather be me, floating around in space, than you. What I propose to do is to stand alongside of you, and tell you the answers to your questions."

"But what will the professors say?" demanded Parley.

"How will they know? They won't be able to see me any more than you can," said the ghost. "It's easy as shooting."

"Well, I don't know if it's square," said Parley. "In fact, I do know that it isn't; but if I get through this time I won't get into the same fix again."

"That's just the point," returned the ghost. "You're young, in spite of your trying not to be, and you've got into trouble. I'll help you out once, but after that you'll have to paddle your own steam-yacht. I suppose you scientific watermen wouldn't demean yourselves by paddling a canoe, the way we used to."

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged, Mr. Watkins," said Parley.

"Oh, botheration!" cried the ghost. "*Mister Watkins!* Look here, Parley, we're both Blue Haven boys – somewhat far apart in time, it's true, but none the less Blue-Havenites. Don't 'mister' me. Call me Billie."

"All right, Billie," said Parley. "I'll go you, and after it's all over I'll be as much of a boy as I can."

"That's right," said the ghost of old Billie Watkins, and then he departed. At least I presume he departed, for from that time on to the day of the examinations Parley did not hear his voice again.

What happened then can best be explained by the narration of an interview between Parley and the ghost of old Billie Watkins on the night of the concluding examination-day. Sick, tired, and flunked, poor Parley went to his room to bemoan his unhappy fate. In no single branch had he been successful. Apparently his reliance upon the assistance of Watkins's ghost had proved a mistake – as, in fact, it was, although poor old Watkins was, as it turned out, no more to blame than if he had never volunteered his services.

Flinging himself down in despair, Parley gave way to his feelings.

"That's what I get for being an ass and believing in ghosts. I might have known it was all a dream," he groaned.

"It wasn't," said the unmistakable voice of Watkins, from the chair, which had been repaired.

Parley jumped as if stung.

"You're a gay old valedictorian, you are!" he cried, glowering at the chair. "Next time you have a Christmas gift for mankind, take it and burn it, will you? A pretty fix you've got me into."

"I'm sorry, Parley," began the ghost. "I – "

"Sorry be hanged!" cried Parley. "If you hadn't made me believe in you, I might have crammed up on my Greek and Latin anyhow. As it is, it's a Waterloo all around."

"If you won't listen – " the ghost began again.

"I've listened enough!" roared Parley, thoroughly enraged. "And if there was any way in which I could get at you, I'd make you smart for your low-down trick!"

"To think," moaned the ghost, "that I should see the day when old Billie Watkins was accused of a low-down trick – and I tried to help him, too."

"Tried to help me?" sneered Parley. "How the deuce do you make that out? You didn't come within a mile of me, and I've not only flunked, but I've lost a half-dozen bets on my ability to pass, just because I believed in you."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.