

A Midnight Visitor

By John Kendrick Bangs

I do not assert that what I am about to relate is in all its particulars absolutely true. Not, understand me, that it is not true, but I do not feel that I care to make an assertion that is more than likely to be received by a sceptical age with sneers of incredulity. I will content myself with a simple narration of the events of that evening, the memory of which is so indelibly impressed upon my mind, and which, were I able to do so, I should forget without any sentiments of regret whatsoever.

The affair happened on the night before I fell ill of typhoid fever, and is about the sole remaining remembrance of that immediate period left to me. Briefly the story is as follows:

Notwithstanding the fact that I was overworked in the practice of my profession—it was early in March, and I was preparing my contributions for the coming Christmas issues of the periodicals for which I write—I had accepted the highly honorable position of Entertainment Committeeman at one of the small clubs to which I belonged. I accepted the office, supposing that the duties connected with it were easy of performance, and with absolutely no notion that the faith of my fellow-committeemen in my judgment was so strong that they would ultimately manifest a desire to leave the whole programme for the club's diversion in my hands. This, however, they did; and when the month of March assumed command of the calendar I found myself utterly fagged out and at my wits' end to know what style of entertainment to provide for the club meeting to be held on the evening of the 15th of that month. I had provided already an unusually taking variety of evenings, of which one in particular, called the "Martyrs' Night," in which living authors writhed through selections from their own works, while an inhuman audience, every man of whom had suffered even as the victims then suffered, sat on tenscore of camp-stools puffing the smoke of twenty-five score of free cigars into their faces, and gloating over their misery, was extremely successful, and had gained for me among my professional brethren the enviable title of "Machiavelli Junior." This performance, in fact, was the one now uppermost in the minds of the club members, having been the most recent of the series; and it had been prophesied by many men whose judgment was unassailable that no man, not even I, could ever conceive of anything that could surpass it. Disposed at first to question the accuracy of a prophecy to the effect that I was, like most others of my kind, possessed of limitations, I came finally to believe that perhaps, after all, these male Cassandras with whom I was thrown were right. Indeed, the more I racked my brains to think of something better than the "Martyrs' Night," the more I became convinced that in that achievement I had reached the zenith of my powers. The thing for me to do now was to hook myself securely on to the zenith and stay there. But how to do it? That was the question which drove sleep from my eyes, and deprived me for a period of six weeks of my reason, my hair departing immediately upon the restoration thereof—a not uncommon after-symptom of typhoid.

It was a typical March night, this one upon which the extraordinary incident about to be related took place. It was the kind of night that novelists use when they are handling a mystery that in the abstract would amount to nothing, but which in the concrete of a bit of wild, weird, and windy nocturnalism sends the reader into hysterics. It may be—I shall not attempt to deny it—that had it happened upon another kind of an evening—a soft, mild, balmy June evening, for instance—my own experience would have seemed less worthy of preservation in the amber of

publicity, but of that the reader must judge for himself. The fact alone remains that upon the night when my uncanny visitor appeared, the weather department was apparently engaged in getting rid of its remnants. There was a large percentage of withering blast in the general makeup of the evening; there were rain and snow, which alternated in pattering upon my window-pane and whitening the apology for a world that stands three blocks from my flat on Madison Square; the wind whistled as it always does upon occasions of this sort, and from all corners of my apartment, after the usual fashion, there seemed to come sounds of a supernatural order, the effect of which was to send cold chills off on their regular trips up and down the spine of their victim—in this instance myself. I wish that at the time the hackneyed quality of these sensations had appealed to me. That it did not do so was shown by the highly nervous state in which I found myself as my clock struck eleven. If I could only have realized at that hour that these symptoms were the same old threadbare premonitions of the appearance of a supernatural being, I should have left the house and gone to the club, and so have avoided the visitation then imminent. Had I done this, I should doubtless also have escaped the typhoid, since the doctors attributed that misfortune to the shock of my experience, which, in my then wearied state, I was unable to sustain—and what the escape of typhoid would have meant to me only those who have seen the bills of my physician and druggist for services rendered and prescriptions compounded are aware. That my mind unconsciously took thought of spirits was shown by the fact that when the first chill came upon me I arose and poured out for myself a stiff bumper of old Reserve Rye, which I immediately swallowed; but beyond this I did not go. I simply sat there before my fire and cudgelled my brains for an idea whereby my fellow-members at the Gutenberg Club might be amused. How long I sat there I do not know. It may have been ten minutes; it may have been an hour—I was barely conscious of the passing of time—but I do know that the clock in the Dutch Reformed Church steeple at Twenty-ninth Street and Fifth Avenue was clanging out the first stroke of the hour of midnight when my door-bell rang.

Theretofore—if I may be allowed the word—the tintinnabulation of my door-bell had been invariably pleasing unto me. I am fond of company, and company alone was betokened by its ringing, since my creditors gratify their passion for interviews at my office, if perchance they happen to find me there. But on this occasion—I could not at the moment tell why—its clanging seemed the very essence of discord. It jangled with my nervous system, and as it ceased I was conscious of a feeling of irritability which is utterly at variance with my nature outside of business hours. In the office, for the sake of discipline, I frequently adopt a querulous manner, finding it necessary in dealing with office-boys, but the moment I leave shop behind me I become a different individual entirely, and have been called a moteless sunbeam by those who have seen only that side of my character. This, by-the-way, must be regarded as a confidential communication, since I am at present engaged in preparing a vest-pocket edition of the philosophical works of Schopenhauer in words of one syllable, and were it known that the publisher had intrusted the magnificent pessimism of that illustrious juggler of words and theories to a “moteless sunbeam” it might seriously interfere with the sale of the work; and I may say, too, that this request that my confidence be respected is entirely disinterested, inasmuch as I declined to do the work on the royalty plan, insisting upon the payment of a lump sum, considerably in advance.

But to return. I heard the bell ring with a sense of profound disgust. I did not wish to see anybody. My whiskey was low, my quinine pills few in number; my chills alone were present in a profusion bordering upon ostentation.

“I’ll pretend not to hear it,” I said to myself, resuming my work of gazing at the flickering

light of my fire—which, by-the-way, was the only light in the room.

“Ting-a-ling-a-ling” went the bell, as if in answer to my resolve.

“Confound the luck!” I cried, jumping from my chair and going to the door with the intention of opening it, an intention however which was speedily abandoned, for as I approached it a sickly fear came over me—a sensation I had never before known seemed to take hold of my being, and instead of opening the door, I pushed the bolt to make it more secure.

“There’s a hint for you, whoever you are!” I cried. “Do you hear that bolt slide, you?” I added, tremulously, for from the other side there came no reply—only a more violent ringing of the bell.

“See here!” I called out, as loudly as I could, “who are you, anyhow? What do you want?”

There was no answer, except from the bell, which began again.

“Bell-wire’s too cheap to steal!” I called again. “If you want wire, go buy it; don’t try to pull mine out. It isn’t mine, anyhow. It belongs to the house.”

Still there was no reply, only the clanging of the bell; and then my curiosity overcame my fear, and with a quick movement I threw open the door.

“Are you satisfied now?” I said, angrily. But I addressed an empty vestibule. There was absolutely no one there, and then I sat down on the mat and laughed. I never was so glad to see no one in my life. But my laugh was short-lived.

“What made that bell ring?” I suddenly asked myself, and then the feeling of fear came upon me again. I gathered my somewhat shattered self together, sprang to my feet, slammed the door with such force that the corridors echoed to the sound, slid the bolt once more, turned the key, moved a heavy chair in front of it, and then fled like a frightened hare to the sideboard in my dining-room. There I grasped the decanter holding my whiskey, seized a glass from the shelf, and started to pour out the usual dram, when the glass fell from my hand, and was shattered into a thousand pieces on the hardwood floor; for, as I poured, I glanced through the open door, and there in my sanctum the flicker of a random flame divulged the form of a being, the eyes of whom seemed fixed on mine, piercing me through and through. To say that I was petrified but dimly expresses the situation. I was granitized, and so I remained, until by a more luminous flicker from the burning wood I perceived that the being wore a flaring red necktie.

“He is human,” I thought; and with the thought the tension on my nervous system relaxed, and I was able to feel a sufficiently well-developed sense of indignation to demand an explanation. “This is a mighty cool proceeding on your part,” I said, leaving the sideboard and walking into the sanctum.

“Yes,” he replied, in a tone that made me jump, it was so extremely sepulchral—a tone that seemed as if it might have been acquired in a damp corner of some cave off the earth. “But it’s a cool evening.”

“I wonder that a man of your coolness doesn’t hire himself out to some refrigerating company,” I remarked, with a sneer which would have delighted the soul of Cassius himself.

“I have thought of it,” returned the being, calmly. “But never went any further. Summer-hotel proprietors have always outbid the refrigerating people, and they in turn have been laid low by millionaires, who have hired me on occasion to freeze out people they didn’t like, but who have persisted in calling. I must confess, though, my dear Hiram, that you are not much warmer yourself—this greeting is hardly what I expected.”

“Well, if you want to make me warmer,” I retorted, hotly, “just keep on calling me Hiram. How the deuce did you know of that blot on my escutcheon, anyhow?” I added, for Hiram was one of the crimes of my family that I had tried to conceal, my parents having fastened the name of Hiram Spencer Carrington upon me at baptism for no reason other than that my rich bachelor

uncle, who subsequently failed and became a charge upon me, was so named.

“I was standing at the door of the church when you were baptized,” returned the visitor, “and as you were an interesting baby, I have kept an eye on you ever since. Of course I knew that you discarded Hiram as soon as you got old enough to put away childish things, and since the failure of your uncle I have been aware that you desire to be known as Spencer Carrington, but to me you are, always have been, and always will be, Hiram.”

“Well, don’t give it away,” I pleaded. “I hope to be famous some day, and if the American newspaper paragrapher ever got hold of the fact that once in my life I was Hiram, I’d have to Hiram to let me alone.”

“That’s a bad joke, Hiram,” said the visitor, “and for that reason I like it, though I don’t laugh. There is no danger of your becoming famous if you stick to humor of that sort.”

“Well, I’d like to know,” I put in, my anger returned— “I’d like to know who in Brindisi you are, what in Cairo you want, and what in the name of the seventeen hinges of the gates of Singapore you are doing here at this time of night?”

“When you were a baby, Hiram, you had blue eyes,” said my visitor. “Bonny blue eyes, as the poet says.”

“What of it?” I asked.

“This,” replied my visitor. “If you have them now, you can very easily see what I am doing here. *I am sitting down and talking to you.*”

“Oh, are you?” I said, with fine scorn. “I had not observed that. The fact is, my eyes were so weakened by the brilliance of that necktie of yours that I doubt I could see anything—not even one of my own jokes. It’s a scorcher, that tie of yours. In fact, I never saw anything so red in my life.”

“I do not see why you complain of my tie,” said the visitor. “Your own is just as bad.”

“Blue is never so withering as red,” I retorted, at the same time caressing the scarf I wore.

“Perhaps not—but—ah—if you will look in the glass, Hiram, you will observe that your point is not well taken,” said my vis-à-vis, calmly.

I acted upon the suggestion, and looked upon my reflection in the glass, lighting a match to facilitate the operation. I was horrified to observe that my beautiful blue tie, of which I was so proud, had in some manner changed, and was now of the same aggressive hue as was that of my visitor, red even as a brick is red. To grasp it firmly in my hands and tear it from my neck was the work of the moment, and then in a spirit of rage I turned upon my companion.

“See here,” I cried, “I’ve had quite enough of you. I can’t make you out, and I can’t say that I want to. You know where the door is—you will oblige me by putting it to its proper use.”

“Sit down, Hiram,” said he, “and don’t be foolish and ungrateful. You are behaving in a most extraordinary fashion, destroying your clothing and acting like a madman generally. What was the use of ripping up a handsome tie like that?”

“I despise loud hues. Red is a jockey’s color,” I answered.

“But you did not destroy the red tie,” said he, with a smile. “You tore up your blue one—look. There it is on the floor. The red one you still have on.”

Investigation showed the truth of my visitor’s assertion. That flaunting streamer of anarchy still made my neck infamous, and before me on the floor, an almost unrecognizable mass of shreds, lay my cherished cerulean tie. The revelation stunned me; tears came into my eyes, and trickling down over my cheeks, fairly hissed with the feverish heat of my flesh. My muscles relaxed, and I fell limp into my chair.

“You need stimulant,” said my visitor, kindly. “Go take a drop of your Old Reserve, and then

come back here to me. I've something to say to you."

"Will you join me?" I asked, faintly.

"No," returned the visitor. "I am so fond of whiskey that I never molest it. That act which is your stimulant is death to the rye. Never realized that, did you?"

"No, I never did," I said, meekly.

"And yet you claim to love it. Bah!" he said.

And then I obeyed his command, drained my glass to the dregs, and returned. "What is your mission?" I asked, when I had made myself as comfortable as was possible under the circumstances.

"To relieve you of your woes," he said.

"You are a homoeopath, I observe," said I, with a sneer. "You are a homoeopath in theory and an allopath in practice."

"I am not usually unintelligent," said he. "I fail to comprehend your meaning. Perhaps you express yourself badly."

"I wish you'd express yourself for Zululand," I retorted, hotly. "What I mean is, you believe in the *similia similibus* business, but you prescribe large doses. I don't believe troubles like mine can be cured on your plan. A man can't get rid of his stock by adding to it."

"Ah, I see. You think I have added to your troubles?"

"I don't think so," I answered, with a fond glance at my ruined tie. "I know so."

"Well, wait until I have laid my plan before you, and see if you won't change your mind," said my visitor, significantly.

"All right," I said. "Proceed. Only hurry. I go to bed early, as a rule, and it's getting quite early now."

"It's only one o'clock," said the visitor, ignoring the sarcasm. "But I will hasten, as I've several other calls to make before breakfast."

"Are you a milkman?" I asked.

"You are flippant," he replied. "But, Hiram," he added, "I have come here to aid you in spite of your unworthiness. You want to know what to provide for your club night on the 15th. You want something that will knock the 'Martyrs' Night' silly."

"Not exactly that," I replied. "I don't want anything so abominably good as to make all the other things I have done seem failures. That is not good business."

"Would you like to be hailed as the discoverer of genius? Would you like to be the responsible agent for the greatest exhibition of skill in a certain direction ever seen? Would you like to become the most famous *impresario* the world has ever known?"

"Now," I said, forgetting my dignity under the enthusiasm with which I was inspired by my visitor's words, and infected more or less with his undoubtedly magnetic spirit—"now you're shouting."

"I thought so, Hiram. I thought so, and that's why I am here. I saw you on Wall Street to-day, and read your difficulty at once in your eyes, and I resolved to help you. I am a magician, and one or two little things have happened of late to make me wish to prestidigitate in public. I knew you were after a show of some kind, and I've come to offer you my services."

"Oh, pshaw!" I said. "The members of the Gutenberg Club are men of brains—not children. Card tricks are hackneyed, and sleight-of-hand shows pall."

"Do they, indeed?" said the visitor. "Well, mine won't. If you don't believe it, I'll prove to you what I can do."

"I have no paraphernalia," I said.

“Well, I have,” said he, and as he spoke, a pack of cards seemed to grow out of my hands. I must have turned pale at this unexpected happening, for my visitor smiled, and said:

“Don’t be frightened. That’s only one of my tricks. Now choose a card,” he added, “and when you have done so, toss the pack in the air. Don’t tell me what the card is; it alone will fall to the floor.”

“Nonsense!” said I. “It’s impossible.”

“Do as I tell you.”

I did as he told me, to a degree only. I tossed the cards in the air without choosing one, although I made a feint of doing so.

Not a card fell back on the floor. They every one disappeared from view in the ceiling. If it had not been for the heavy chair I had rolled in front of the door, I think I should have fled.

“How’s that for a trick?” asked my visitor.

I said nothing, for the very good reason that my words stuck in my throat.

“Give me a little *crème de menthe*, will you, please?” said he, after a moment’s pause.

“I haven’t a drop in the house,” I said, relieved to think that this wonderful being could come down to anything so earthly.

“Pshaw, Hiram!” he ejaculated, apparently in disgust. “Don’t be mean, and, above all, don’t lie. Why, man, you’ve got a bottle full of it in your hand! Do you want it all?”

He was right. Where it came from I do not know; but, beyond question, the graceful, slim-necked bottle was in my right hand, and my left held a liqueur-glass of exquisite form.

“Say,” I gasped, as soon as I was able to collect my thoughts, “what are your terms?”

“Wait a moment,” he answered. “Let me do a little mind-reading before we arrange preliminaries.”

“I haven’t much of a mind to read tonight,” I answered, wildly.

“You’re right there,” said he. “It’s like a dime novel, that mind of yours to-night. But I’ll do the best I can with it. Suppose you think of your favorite poem, and after turning it over in your mind carefully for a few minutes, select two lines from it, concealing them, of course, from me, and I will tell you what they are.”

Now my favorite poem, I regret to say, is Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwock,” a fact I was ashamed to confess to an utter stranger, so I tried to deceive him by thinking of some other lines. The effort was hardly successful, for the only other lines I could call to mind at the moment were from Rudyard Kipling’s rhyme, “The Post that Fitted,” and which ran,

“Year by year, in pious patience, vengeful Mrs. Boffin sits
Waiting for the Sleary babies to develop Sleary’s fits.”

“Humph!” ejaculated my visitor. “You’re a great Hiram, you are.”

And then rising from his chair and walking to my “poet’s corner,” the magician selected two volumes.

“There,” said he, handing me the *Departmental Ditties*. “You’ll find the lines you tried to fool me with at the foot of page thirteen. Look.”

I looked, and there lay that vile Sleary sentiment, in all the majesty of type, staring me in the eyes.

“And here,” added my visitor, opening *Through the Looking-Glass*—“here is the poem that to your mind holds all the philosophy of life:

“Come to my arms, my Beamish boy,
He chortled in his joy.”

I blushed and trembled. Blushed that he should discover the weakness of my taste, trembled at his power.

“I don’t blame you for coloring,” said the magician. “But I thought you said the Gutenberg was made up of men of brains? Do you think you could stay on the rolls a month if they were aware that your poetic ideals are summed up in the ‘Jabberwock’ and ‘Sleary’s Fits’?”

“My taste might be far worse,” I answered.

“Yes, it might. You might have stooped to liking some of your own verses. I ought really to congratulate you, I suppose,” retorted the visitor, with a sneering laugh.

This roused my ire again.

“Who are you, anyhow, that you come here and take me to task?” I demanded, angrily. “I’ll like anything I please, and without asking your permission. If I cared more for the *Peterkin Papers* than I do for Shakespeare, I wouldn’t be accountable to you, and that’s all there is about it.”

“Never mind who I am,” said the visitor. “Suffice to say that I am myself. You’ll know my name soon enough. In fact, you will pronounce it involuntarily the first thing when you wake in the morning, and then—” Here he shook his head ominously, and I felt myself grow rigid with fright in my chair. “Now for the final trick,” he said, after a moment’s pause. “Think of where you would most like to be at this moment, and I’ll exert my power to put you there. Only close your eyes first.”

I closed my eyes and wished. When I opened them I was in the billiard-room of the Gutenberg Club with Perkins and Tompson.

“For Heaven’s sake, Spencer,” they said, in surprise, “where did you drop in from? Why, man, you are as white as a sheet. And what a necktie! Take it off!”

“Grab hold of me, boys, and hold me fast,” I pleaded, falling on my knees in terror. “If you don’t, I believe I’ll die.”

The idea of returning to my sanctum was intolerably dreadful to me.

“Ha! ha!” laughed the magician, for even as I spoke to Perkins and Tompson I found myself seated opposite my infernal visitor in my room once more. “They couldn’t keep you an instant with me summoning you back.”

His laughter was terrible; his frown was pleasanter; and I felt myself gradually losing control of my senses.

“Go,” I cried. “Leave me, or you will have the crime of murder on your conscience.”

“I have no con—” he began; but I heard no more.

That is the last I remember of that fearful night. I must have fainted, and then have fallen into a deep slumber.

When I waked it was morning, and I was alone, but undressed and in bed, unconscionably weak, and surrounded by medicine bottles of many kinds. The clock on the mantle on the other side of the room indicated that it was after ten o’clock.

“*Great Beelzebub!*” I cried, taking note of the hour. “I’ve an engagement with Barlow at nine.”

And then a sweet-faced woman, who, I afterwards learned, was a professional nurse, entered the room, and within an hour I realized two facts. One was that I had lain ill for many days, and that my engagement with Barlow was now for six weeks unfulfilled; the other, that my midnight

visitor was none other than—

And yet I don't know. His tricks certainly were worthy of that individual; but Perkins and Tompson assert that I never entered the club that night, and surely if my visitor was Beelzebub himself he would not have omitted so important a factor of success as my actual presence in the billiard-room on that occasion would have been; and, besides, he was altogether too cool to have come from his reputed residence.

Altogether I think the episode most unaccountable, particularly when I reflect that while no trace of my visitor was discoverable in my room the next morning, as my nurse tells me, my blue necktie was in reality found upon the floor, crushed and torn into a shapeless bundle of frayed rags.

As for the club entertainment, I am told that, despite my absence, it was a wonderful success, redeemed from failure, the treasurer of the club said, by the voluntary services of a guest, who secured admittance on one of my cards, and who executed some sleight-of-hand tricks that made the members tremble, and whose mind-reading feats performed on the club's butler not only made it necessary for him to resign his office, but disclosed to the House Committee the whereabouts of several cases or rare wines that had mysteriously disappeared.