

A Ghost in a State-Room

A Story Better Suited to a Christmas Number

[From *The Galaxy*]

I WAS always greatly taken by those ghost stories, which Mr. Washington Irving and Mr. Dickens relate, with an uncle as the hero. There is a certain air of mystery enveloping an elderly uncle in knee-breeches, a cocked hat and powdered hair, which gives a delightful probability to the tales of their entertaining supernatural visitors and undergoing all kinds of uncanny nocturnal experiences. I wish with all my heart that this adventure which I am about to describe had happened to my uncle, because I know the reader would have been much more entertained by it; besides, it is much pleasanter to have one's uncle see a ghost than to have such an experience one's self.

To be sure, on second thoughts, an uncle is at the bottom of this story, because I am dictating at this moment to my nephew, who scribbles a little for the magazines, and who thinks he can see in it material which can be well worked up. But the fellow is conceited, and I don't believe he will print it as I tell it, and I don't believe, moreover, that he will make out of it anything worth reading.

I like to trace the relation between cause and effect; and to begin, I think my ghost arose indirectly from a lobster salad.

"Oho!" cries out the experienced and acute reader; "I see; this fellow had a bad dream.

"I beg your pardon, but allow me to say you are in error. I think I have been enough annoyed, not to say disgusted, in my day, by ghost stories, which, after describing the most impossible apparitions, ended with—

"—when he suddenly awoke and found himself safe in his own room."

I can safely promise that my story, however stupid it may be, will not end with my waking up. I woke up before I saw the ghost. I beg to point out that my ghost rose indirectly from a lobster salad.

I saw it—I like that word *it* used for a ghost: there is something delightfully weird about it—. I saw it in state-room No. 72, on the steamer John Halifax, which runs on Long Island Sound in connection with one of the New York and Boston lines. You do not believe there ever was a Sound steamer with that name? Neither do I; if I did I should choose some other. I get passes over this same line now, in consideration of the quantity of freight shipped to our house in Boston, and, of course, I am not going to have the directors coming to me and complaining that I have given their boats the name of being haunted. The John Halifax was laid up some years ago, to be sure, but it might become necessary, for aught I know, to put her on some night, in an

emergency. The number of the state-room, however, was 72, and it was pretty well aft; there can be no manner of doubt about that.

I had been to New York on business and was returning home. The month was May, and the boat left at 5 o'clock, P. M. As I like to be punctual, I reached the pier precisely at ten minutes before five, with my bag in my hand, having walked down from the Astor House. I declined, with suavity, seven invitations to have my boots polished, and I bought only one newspaper out of the large editions offered me. I got my ticket and the key of my state-room, which had been previously engaged, without much delay. I put my small bag in my state-room, and finding a vacant seat on the after-promenade deck—if that is what they call it; I am not a nautical man—I sat down quietly to read my paper. At the same time, I kept my weather eye open, to use a seafaring term, now that we were fairly off, and I found nobody on board I knew, which was with me rather an unusual circumstance. Next me sat a man with red face and rather a stupid look, whom I took to be a bar-keeper in search of a situation. He used tobacco offensively, and when he volunteered some remark about the weather, I answered civilly indeed, but in such a way that he did not attempt to continue the conversation.

There are few more inspiring sights than the rivers and harbor of New York on a pleasant day, and I have no doubt that my nephew will insert something of his own here about “the small craft darting hither and thither,” and the “majestic steamers sailing out of their docks, freighted with the world’s merchandise,” etc. If he does, I dare say it will all be very nice; but he cannot, if he tries, describe that quiet feeling of contented interest which steals over a man when, being for the moment quite free from every duty and care, he surveys such a busy scene. All this is not much to the purpose, since this day was not at all pleasant. It was cloudy, and rain was threatened so clearly that everything looked dull and gloomy. I should hardly have returned by the boat, if I had not already engaged my state-room; and the condition of the weather was, perhaps, the reason why there were so few passengers on board.

Castle Garden, Governor’s Island, Brooklyn, Williamsburg, Green Point, Blackwell’s Island, Jones’ Wood, Ward’s Island, Hurl Gate, in sight. I went below to supper. I had dined at two o’clock—I always dine at two, in fact—and, having taken some exercise since then, I was rather hungry. All the dishes which should have been hot had been spread out on the table so long that they had grown quite cold. They manage things better now-a-days, but then there was a melancholy array of black waiters, red paper flowers, frizzled butter, and nothing good to eat. I ordered some lobster, however, and made a salad. I flatter myself I can make a good salad; this time I was particularly successful, and this led me to eat rather too much of it.

After supper, I smoked one cigar, “abaft the wheel,” as the notice read; I watched the engine while the paddle-wheels made one hundred and twenty-five revolutions. I walked twice the length of the vessel in the upper cabins; and then I went to bed. I am very moderate in my smoking. My nephew confesses to nine or ten cigars a day, but pretends that so much tobacco does not hurt him. I don’t believe it. It is just as easy to become intemperate in smoking as in drinking. I never exceed three cigars a day and make it a rule never to smoke in the morning.

I think I have hinted that I indulged too freely in lobster salad. When I reached my state-room the boat was rolling and pitching a good deal, and the door lock and the water jug were rattling like

the bones of an Ethiopian serenader. It occurred to me that I needed some corrective for the sake of digestion. Now, for the last ten years I have never traveled without a rather large flask, with leather outside and old cognac within. I know the brandy is good, because I bought it in '48, and knew where it came from, and although I never drink it at home, occasions do sometimes arise when I am away when it becomes useful for sanitary purposes. My wife jokes me about the size of the flask, but I do not mind that in the least; I always carry it, and I judged that one of the occasions had now arisen when it was proper to use it. I turned out what I considered a moderate dose—it is to be observed that I took it simply as a medicine—drank it off, speedily experienced a warming and comfortable sensation under the waistband, screwed the top on the flask, placed it on the wash-stand, and made preparations for retiring.

I do not know to this day, although I confess I am old enough, why they call these little boxes state-rooms. I think that shipbuilders' ideas of lying in state must be different from mine. This one had two berths, one above the other, and had no light except the rather dim rays which came in through scroll work at the top from the cabin, and a lamp near by outside. Opposite the berths, were the door in one corner and the immovable washstand in the other. One stool completed the furniture, and there was room enough left for me to take off my overcoat, and by due caution to avoid bruising my elbows. My preparations for retiring were simply to remove my boots and take off my coat and waist-coat, and hang them up. I also stuck my pocket-knife hard into the door, or rather between it and the post, and thereby stopped its rattling in some measure. I mentally concluded that the upper berth looked rather the lighter and less dismal of the two, and climbed into it, after I had examined the life-preservers on the shelf at the foot. They were like two long empty tin preserve-cans lashed together, and I was glad to see them there, although I had not the remotest idea of how they ought to be worn. The sheets of the berth suggested the influenza, but there were blankets enough, and I presently composed myself to sleep, although the motion of the boat set rattling everything which was loose.

I have found that I usually wake up at least once an hour on a steamer, and this is especially true when I am traveling on the Sound toward Boston, and feel that I shall be left by the train when the boat arrives if I sleep too sound. The first nap I had that night lasted about fifty minutes, as near as I could judge by consulting my watch when I awoke. I had a bad dream, and found myself lying with my arms over my head. I do not remember now what I dreamed about, but I attributed it to the salad; and turning over, with my face toward the front of the berth, I presently dropped off again into a doze. In awaking again, I became conscious of a loud crash of the panels, and lock, and whatever it was, kept up the continual rattling and banging which annoyed me. The effect was to make me quite awake in an instant, and as I lay there, looking through the lace curtain toward the wash-stand, or, rather, the jarring pitcher on it, which was all I could see from my position, the neck and upper half of my flask slowly and noiselessly rose in my line of vision. I was sufficiently awake to see the flask very clearly as it gradually appeared, but I suppose my faculties were not quite enough aroused to reason about it. Certainly I was not the least startled at the moment, and I lay there a few seconds arguing with myself as to whether the flask had actually risen into sight, or whether it was an optical delusion, caused in some way by the motion of the boat. In the process of reasoning about this phenomenon, I rose on my elbow, and leaning forward, looked about the state-room. A glance showed me that everything was as I had left it. My flask stood bolt upright on the washstand, as if it was a sentinel in guard over the pitcher, and was in exactly the same place where I had left it. My coats and waistcoat were

hanging on the hooks, my watch and money I had on my person, my knife was still sticking between the door and its post, and not even my boots—I always wear boots—had toppled over; they still leaned against the wall in an attitude suggesting mild inebriation. I even went to the length of leaning over far enough to take a good steady look into the berth underneath me, but there was nothing there, and the sheets and pillow were as near unruffled as maritime sheets and pillows ever are. I pushed back the lace curtain so as to give me an uninterrupted view of my flask, and looked at my watch. It was ten minutes past midnight. There was nobody stirring in the cabin outside, and no noise except that caused by the motion of the steamer.

I lay down again in a state of uncertainty whether I had dreamed that I saw my flask move or was really awake, as I had supposed. I meant to keep my eyes on the flask, but I suppose I was a little restless, for when I awoke the third time, which was the next thing of which I was conscious, my face was toward the wall. I turned slowly over, speculating as to how long I had been asleep, as a man will who has only to pull out his watch to satisfy himself, and there was the flask in its place this time.

“I was asleep and dreaming,” I said to myself.

And as I thought this, there came at the instant, from somewhere beneath me, a deep, low groan.

For the first moment I was startled. Then I said to myself, “Nonsense! it’s only the boat creaking.” Then I listened for the sound again, with my sense of hearing strained to the full to catch the slightest unusual noise.

I had only to wait half a minute. The groan was repeated, only fainter, but still the noise seemed near me. You may guess that this time there was no doubt of my being wide awake. A third groan, still fainter, but yet distinct! I rolled out of my berth, and coming to my feet, rallied against the door and stood with the knob in my hand.

It lay in the lower berth. Its eyes were wide open and staring at me. Its face was livid in the dim light, and there was an ugly red gash in its cheek.

For a second we stood staring at each other. Then he—I had forgotten to mention that it was a he, and that it was dressed in the habiliments of its sex—he stretched out his arm as he lay there, and pointing his finger at me, said, three times, slowly and distinctly,

“Murdered! Murdered! Murdered!”

I do not quite know what it is proper to do when one sees a ghost of this disagreeable species. None of my friends ever confided to me that he was haunted, and although I have seen a great number of theatrical spirits, they are very different things from the reality. I know how Hamlet is exercised both in mind and body when he sees the ghost of his father, late King of Denmark. I know how Richard III. behaves when he sees the apparition of his victims as he lies asleep in his tent. I have seen the low comedian in a certain farce go into the most ridiculous contortions at the sight of a living man whom he supposes to be quite dead. Perhaps if I had had a pistol, I should have fired it at it, but I very much doubt this. What I actually did was to turn the key in the lock,

open the door, leaving my pocket-knife to lie where it fell, and all the time keeping my eyes steadily upon it, to see that it did not spring upon me, I backed quietly out of the state-room into the cabin, and closed the door after me.

When I got into the cabin, I began to feel as if I had better sit down very soon. Immediately opposite my state-room door was the colored stewardess of the boat, sitting bolt upright, but half asleep and uneasily nodding. When I sat down close by her, she woke up with a great start. Her astonishment was not altogether unreasonable. I suppose that the sight of a middle-aged gentleman, rather bald, without either his boots, his collar, his coat, or his waistcoat, meandering about the cabin at that hour of the night was rather unusual.

“Lor’ bless you, how you scared me!” she cried out. “Why, what on airth’s de matter. You look as pale as ef you’d seen a ghost.”

“Well, I have seen something a good deal like one,” I answered.

“When?”

“In my state-room—72, there.”

Some persons will laugh when I say that the colored stewardess turned very pale at the avowal, which the next moment I felt rather ashamed at having [made]. Those who are familiar with colored people, however, understand very well that pallor is quite as conspicuous on their faces as on those of the white races.

“Guess you’re mistaken, sir,” she returned. “I’ve been runnin’ on this boat ever since she was built, and I never seed no ghost.”

“And never knew of any murder?”

“Never heered of no murder neither.”

“Well, I just saw a man there, lying in a berth, with a gash in his face, who said he had been murdered. He may be a ghost and he may not, but I know he was not there when I went to sleep.”

“Guess you’ve been dreamin’, sir,” said the stewardess; but she grew visibly paler.

“Do you think I’m a fool, woman? I tell you I [saw] this just as plain as I see you. I don’t believe in ghosts, myself. I don’t know what it was, but I saw it.”

“Well! well!” said the stewardess; “I declare!” Then, after a moment—“Well, any way, de boat’ll be in now in a few minutes, so you needn’t go back.”

“Yes; but I cant go ashore in my shirt-sleeves.”

“I’ll go and get yer things fur yer.”

To my utter surprise, the stewardess rose, and without hesitation, walked to the state-room door, opened it and disappeared inside, closing it after her. I watched her with some satisfaction, I confess. It seemed to me that it must be there, and I was very willing another person should bear witness to its appearance. I waited anxiously for a scream. Some moments elapsed, and I mechanically felt for my watch and money. They were safe, and it was no robber at all events.

The door opened again and the stewardess appeared, calmly bearing my clothes, my bag, my boots, and my flask. I found my hands shaking a little as I drew on my boots; but I do not think I had been more frightened than any other man would have been under the circumstances.

“Well!” said I to the stewardess. I began to feel as if I had made a great fool of myself.

“Well,” said she, “I didn’t see no ghost. Guess you must have been dreamin’, sir, sartin, sure.”

I knew that I had not been dreaming; but what could I say? I did not wish to be laughed at, and when I had dressed myself, I put five \$5 readily assented.

Then I went to the [state-room] door and looked in, the stewardess following me, as if anxious I should show her the apparition. She was quite right. The berths and the room were empty; a glance around showed that very plainly. The stewardess offered to take my key; but I showed her by my watch that the boat would not be in for an hour yet, and, although I did not choose to go to bed again, I preferred to leave my bag in the [state-room] until we landed. The stewardess went back to her old place, and appeared to drop off to sleep at once, while I walked up and down the cabin, taking its whole length. I was puzzled, annoyed, mortified and angry, by turns.

When I reached the forward end of the cabin, for the third time, there was a man there peering out of the window into the darkness. When I approached quite near him he turned; it was the barkeeper, whom I had met the evening before. I returned his salutation rather gruffly, for I was not pleased with his looks, and I was in no mood for conversation. I was turning away, when he said:

“So you saw a ghost last night.”

“How do you know?” I asked, turning back rather angrily.

“Why, I heard you say so just now. I was on the other side, right behind you, when you were talking about it. You did not see me, because I was in the shadow. I slept there all night. I can sleep just as well in a chair as in a berth. It don’t make no difference to me.”

I was forced, in defense of my sanity to stop in my walk and explain the circumstances at some length. When I had finished, he said:

“Let’s see your flask.”

I was disgusted, although I was not surprised. I had related to him my adventure, and without a word of sympathy he asked for a drink—and at that time in the morning, too! However, I found the flask in an inner pocket of my overcoat, where I had seen the stewardess place it, and as I had the coat on my arm and the flask was rather large for the pocket, I held the coat while he pulled out the bottle.

“You’ll find that very good liquor,” said I, complacently. “Don’t shake it!”

“How much was there here when you went to bed last night?” he asked, without paying much attention to what I had said.

“I suppose it was at least half full.”

He unscrewed the top, and turned the mouth down. It was empty.

“A very dry ghost,” he said, with a grin. “I tell you what, sir; if you can wait over one train, when the boat gets in, I guess I can show you your ghost. You will? All right. Just you go and sit down opposite your state-room, and see that nobody goes out nor in. If the stewardess tells you the train is starting, just say to her you are waiting to take your ghost along with you.”

“Why not look for him now?”

“Because I had rather wait, if it’s all the same to you. Just you keep a sharp look out, that’s all, and I shall be around.”

I went and sat down opposite No. 72 and waited for the boat to arrive at the town where passengers take the cars for Boston. Presently certain restless people began to come out of their rooms, and bustle about, and compare notes, and wonder when we should get in. Then a colored man went about waking up the sleepers, and by-and-by they appeared, one after the other, half awake and very cross with having to rise at such an unseemly hour. Then there was a great ringing of bells below, a great bumping of the boat against the wharf, and a great trampling of feet. The passengers took up their bags and band-boxes, their umbrellas and canes, and went off downstairs in a procession, as melancholy as if Charon had just ferried them across the Styx, and they were about to disembark in Hades.

I noticed the barkeeper loitering on the other side of the cabin, and he did not go down until the occupants of the [state-rooms] on both sides of No. 72 had come out and departed. Then he followed, and the cabin was presently very quiet. The black stewardess had, apparently, been called away by her duties; at any rate, she was not to be seen. I shall not attempt to describe my reflections at this time, because, as it afterward turned out, they were worth very little. I may say, however, that I began to have some new ideas about *it*.

When the barkeeper came back, he was accompanied by a man in plain clothes and a policeman. He placed one in each of the state-rooms adjoining mine, and then I unlocked mine, and we entered No. 72. Just over the threshold, I trod on my knife, which I had before forgotten. I pointed out the position of things at the time of the appearance of the spectre, and showed my

companion where my flask had stood. He took from his pocket a box of wax tapers, and lighting one, got down on his hands and knees and looked under the lower berth.

I suppose some wiseacres will ask why I had not done this myself, earlier in the night. In fact, my nephew goes to the length of asserting that my neglect to do this gives my story an air of improbability. But I beg to ask if a person always does in moments of excitement what he himself, looking back upon the circumstances afterward, would say ought obviously to be done. I think not. At all events, when I examined the state-room, with the stewardess looking over my shoulder, it did not occur to me to do what my companion was now doing. One reason for this, doubtless—and this seems to me important—was that the frame work of the berth appeared to one looking at it from above to come within two or three inches of the floor.

My companion's first match went out and he lighted the second one. By this time I was not much surprised to hear him exclaim: "I see you, my friend! I'll trouble you just to come out of that!"

The lower portion of the board immediately above the space I have mentioned was lifted up, and it now appeared that the board was cracked its whole length and was held together only by certain strong fibres, which acted as hinges. Through the aperture thus left and which was still very narrow, there wriggled the slender form of a young man, who on turning over to the light and rising, showed me the features of it.

We came out into the cabin, and my companion called out exultingly.

"Here you are, Brown! I've got him."

So the other two men came out, and Brown, who proved to be a detective in plain clothes, slipped a pair of handcuffs on the prisoner, who looked very unhappy.

"I suppose," said Brown, "you know what you are wanted for. I've got the warrant here all right."

"I suppose I do," said the prisoner, "but I can prove that I did it in self defense. Look here," and he pointed to the scar on his face. "He gave me this."

"If you can prove that you did it in self-defense," said Brown, "so much the better for you. But that is as it may be."

With this sententious remark, Mr. Brown and his prisoner were about to take up their line of march, when the black stewardess appeared in a state of tears and perturbation. My former companion took her by the arm and drew her aside.

"See here, ma'am," said he, "we don't want anything of you, now, but if you want to keep safe, you had better be uncommon quiet; do you understand?"

This advice was accepted, and the stewardess went off, swallowing her emotions as best she could.

“What has she to do with it?” asked I. “But no, first of all, be good enough to tell me who you are.” And as we went along, he gave me his name, and explained to me all the facts of the case, which was really very simple, when I came to understand it.

He was not a barkeeper at all, as I had hastily concluded, but was a New York detective officer, on his way to Boston on quite different business from that which he had just transacted. He was, however, in possession of most of the facts of this case, which had been telegraphed on to the New York police headquarters before he started. Charles Hardy, the prisoner, was a young man of respectable family, living in this town where we now were. He had, however, “gone to the bad,” as my nephew would express it, and two evenings before, in a disgraceful brawl in a low public house, he had shot and fatally wounded a young man whose connections were still richer, and so no time had been lost in setting on foot the hue and cry. The affair took place in the evening, before the arrival of the Boston train and the departure of the boat. Favored by the darkness young Hardy had managed, either by the aid of a skiff or from the wharf, to get on board the steamer unobserved. Here he found the stewardess, who had in former years been a servant in his father’s family, and, telling her only a part of the truth, he easily persuaded her to let him conceal himself. When the boat reached New York, the stewardess made some guarded inquiries and observations which led them to believe that it would not be safe for him to venture out, so that when I went to bed in No. 72, he had remained cramped up in his place of concealment for the greater part of the time for nearly twenty-four hours, with very little food and with no stimulants, which he was accustomed to use in large quantities, and which he, of course, needed just then more than ever. It may be guessed that my flask proved too great a temptation to him, and that he returned to it again and again until he reached such a pitch of indifference to his situation that he concluded to take the lower berth, in preference to his narrow quarters underneath. He had partly slept off the effects of his potations, when I woke him by getting out of my berth in the hasty manner which I have described, and he was quick-witted enough to turn my astonishment to account. Now this seems to me, I may add, the most improbable part of the story, but I can only say that it happened. My nephew insists that it is easily explained, and that the young man, having nothing else to think of in his confinement, had very carefully planned, the day before, a way of frightening the occupants of the state-room, if by accident he should be discovered. This may be so, but it seems to me very remarkable that on waking out of a heavy sleep, under such circumstances, he should have had the presence of mind to act as he did. The most surprising thing to me, however, is, after all, that he could carry off so much liquor. I am confident there was enough in that flask to have kept me intoxicated for a week.

A good deal to my disgust and somewhat to my pecuniary loss, I was compelled to be present both at the preliminary examination and at the trial, although what I knew about the alleged murder seemed to me of very little importance. The upshot of it all was that the young man was convicted of manslaughter.

It has seemed to me, since then, that his detection was entirely owing to that lobster salad, for if I had not eaten it, my flask would have remained all night in my bag, and I should probably have left my state-room in the morning without having seen any ghost. I got no sympathy from my

wife, who indeed reaped a slight advantage from my adventure, for I have never since laughed at her for her habit of always looking under the bed for burglars before she retires.

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