

[Written for The Flag of our Union.]
Branch Bridge's Ghost

by Arthur L. Meserve

“THERE, Uncle Ben, how are you going to get round that?” I said, in a half-joking, half-triumphant tone, as I laid down a paper in which I had been reading aloud a well-authenticated ghost story. What the paper stated could be vouched for by a half score of respectable citizens, who the editor declared were ready and eager to give their oaths to what they had seen with their eyes and heard with their ears.

Uncle Ben, to whom I had addressed the question, was an old man, one of the first settlers of our part of the country; and, unlike a great many other old men, he took a great interest in what was going on in the world; and now that his eyesight had in a measure failed him, he was dependent upon others to read to him the news, and for his edification I had read the current ghost story that was then going the rounds of newspaperdom, and then demanded his opinion on the subject, as I have already chronicled.

“There is a way to get round everything of that sort, if you only go the right way to work, and aint afraid of seeing anything, be it in the flesh or not. A man sometimes sees that which he is afraid he shall, even with his eyes shut. I don't believe that there was ever one of these stories but what could be sifted to the bottom and found that natural causes had to do with it. In my young days, just after I settled here, we had a ghost that frightened half of the people out of their wits; but I unraveled the mystery after awhile, when it had got so that nobody dared to cross the bridge after dark, for fear of seeing or hearing something from the other world.”

“Was the bridge thought to be haunted?”

“Yes. Branch Bridge; and people had seen and heard things that they could not account for, and it was not to be wondered at. Strange sounds were heard at night, and several times a tall figure wrapped in a sheet, with eyes that seemed to burn like fire, had been seen walking to and fro, while groans would be heard, as if the object was in deep distress; and things came to such a pass at last that those who had to cross the stream after dark went down below, and forded it; and even in the broad daylight there were those who would not trust themselves upon the bridge; but gave it a wide berth, as an uncanny thing. The good Parson Brown tried what preaching would do towards laying the disturbed spirit; but that seemed to do no good; and it looked as though he hardly felt himself a match for the strange mystery. For one night, when he had valiantly determined to keep watch and ward over the bridge, he deserted his post, and came running in to the neighbor's nearest the bridge, minus his hat, and with his hair standing upright on his head, and almost breathless from his half mile of running. And when at last he was so far recovered that he was able to speak, he declared that he had seen the gentleman with horns, that he had been battling with all his days; and, as on other occasions, he was fearful that he was more than his match; and a good many believed that the parson spoke the truth.

“After the scare of their shepherd, whose version of what he had seen agreed with the statements of others who had witnessed it, the rest of the flock gave up all hopes of solving the mystery. And thus matters stood on my return home, after a six months’ absence, and for the first time learned that the bridge was haunted, but by the spirit of whom it passed the wisdom of them all to determine.

“I was a young man then, and made my home at father’s, though I worked out a good deal of the time. It was the summer before I was married, and it chanced that she who was to be your aunt lived some two miles distant, and to reach her home I must cross the bridge, or else ford the stream. As I had not been at home for six months, and had not seen her during that time, I felt called upon to pay her a visit that night, even if I were to meet a ghost wrapped in a sheet at every turn of the road. Mother mistrusted my intentions as it grew towards sunset, from divers preparations I was making, and she tried to prevail upon me to start before it should become dark, or I should be sure to see the ghost. I had taken but little stock in the story, as I was not a believer in such things; and I laughingly told her that I had never seen a ghost, and if there were any such things I wanted to get a glimpse of them. Father also put in a word, saying that I had better take an early start; but to convince them that I was not in the least afraid, I did not leave the house until it was fairly dark.

“The land immediately about Branch Bridge does not look much now as it did then. At that time it was covered with a thick forest on either side for nearly a quarter of a mile, so that it was as lonely a place as woods could make it, either in summer or winter. The high banks on either side of the stream are much the same now as they were then, though perhaps they have been dug down somewhat at each new construction of the bridge, and up and down the stream the huge trees, that used to lean over the water as it dashed among the rocks below, are gone—swept away by the spring floods, or, having lived their appointed time, have died and fallen into the stream, and been carried down to their last resting place along the shore. The waters beneath the bridge, except in the spring, or when there had been heavy rains, was quite shallow, so much so that many of the rocks in its bed were quite bare, and one could have leaped from one to the other and so crossed dry shod.

“There was no moon, but the stars were shining bright as I went down the road on my way to see Susan. My delight at the prospect of seeing her again filled my mind, but as I neared the outskirts of the woods that lined the Branch, I could not help thinking of the stories I had heard that day, and as I went along I must confess that I cast many a glance among the trees, as if I expected to see something that would cause the hair to rise upon my head. Whistling, I’m half afraid to keep up my courage, I passed along and over the bridge, without seeing or hearing anything that I could not account for.

“Susan was at home, and so glad to see me that the hours passed unheeded, and it was past midnight when I gave her a parting kiss on the doorstep, and set out for home, despite her repeated invitation to retire to rest there, and not brave the terrible monster that had taken up its quarters at the bridge; for she, like the rest, firmly believed in the story of the ghost. I think she was secretly proud of my courage, and on that account was glad that I did not accept her invitation, for a woman always likes pluck in the man she has chosen for a husband. Her last words, when she found I was going, were a caution to be careful, and then she closed the door,

and I was alone, with the lonely walk and the ghost before me.

“It must be confessed that when I drew near to the edge of the forest that led to the bridge, I had less courage than when I set out from home that evening. As I have said, it was past midnight—the very time when ghosts may be expected to be wandering about, according to old but good authority; and if such a thing did haunt the bridge, I was in a fair way to be favored with a view of it. However, I summoned all the courage I could muster, and went boldly forward, and in a few minutes I was so close upon the bridge that I could hear the water as it rippled over the stones beneath.

“Although I told myself that there was no occasion for any feelings of dread or alarm, I did not feel hardly at ease as I neared the spot where the ghost was said to be seen. Every one I had met since I had got home told the same story, Susan among the number, and her, at least, I regarded as a person of sense; and such evidence will go far to convince a fellow, even against his own better judgment. If there really was a ghost, I was just in the right time to see it, and making up my mind to face whatever was before me, I approached the bridge, which I could now see in the glimmer of the starlight.

“Everything looked peaceful about. There was not a breath of air, and the leaves hung motionless upon the trees. I neared the bridge; a moment more I would set my foot upon it, when a sound fell upon my ear, coming up apparently from the earth beneath my feet. It sounded like the ring of hammers striking upon metal, but in a measure deadened by the passage of the sound through the earth. I paused for a moment, listening eagerly, and glancing about me on every side. The sound of the several hammers kept up their ring beneath my feet, but all was quiet about me. Every living thing seemed to be sleeping. Nothing spoke of life, save that strange sound that came up from the solid earth on which I stood.

“I moved forward and set my foot upon the bridge somewhat heavily, and then I paused and listened again. All was as silent as the grave. The rat-tat of the hammers had ceased, and although I waited several moments it was not renewed, and I began to think that I had been mistaken in the direction from whence the sound had come; that it might be a woodpecker at work on a dead tree that stood near by, though why it should be at work at night when it ought to be on its roost I could not determine.

“I moved slowly across the bridge, and paused again by the further edge. The fear I had felt ten minutes before, as I neared the bridge, was nearly departed, and I am afraid I was pluming myself on my courage, when, glancing towards the other end of the bridge, I beheld a sight that caused the hair on my head to rise so violently as to almost throw off my hat, while I felt cold shivers running over me strangely.

“On the opposite end of the bridge, in the very spot where I had stood but a moment before, now towered a tall figure, wrapped in a sheet that touched its feet. One hand was held aloft, in which was grasped what appeared to be a bloody dagger. The eyes seemed burning with a blue flame, and a similar light shone from its mouth and nostrils. A more hideous sight it would be hard to conceive; and when it uttered a fearful groan, as if in mortal agony, it was more than I could stand, and taking to my heels I left the bridge behind me at a pace not to be despised by those

who value a light pair of heels.

“I reached home without further adventure, and went to bed; but I never closed my eyes to sleep that night. I thought of what I had seen and heard, and I made up my mind to sift the matter to the bottom. If the ghosts of the departed, wrapped in sheets, walked the earth, I wanted it fairly understood that such was the case; and if it were a trick I wanted to expose the author. At any rate, I would pay the bridge a visit by daylight, and see what discoveries I could make. That would throw light upon the subject.

“When I made my appearance at the table the next morning I was questioned as to what I had seen, and I told them all, and also of my determination to go to the bridge that forenoon. As the visit was to be made in daylight, father offered to accompany me, and we went, accordingly.

“For one hour we wandered over and under the bridge; and then I discovered a clue—a very slight one, indeed—one that might lead to nothing, but still worth the trial of following up, and we went home to make our arrangements.

“Nine o’clock that night saw a half score of men secreted about the bridge, Sheriff Clark among the number, and a quarter of an hour later I came whistling down the road as unconcerned as though the bridge was not haunted by so fearful an object every night. I crossed the bridge and went out through the woods, and made a call on Susan. I saw and heard nothing while coming, and an hour later I set out on my return. I had told Susan during the day of my plan, and that was why she had been sitting up waiting for me.

“On my return through the woods I was not troubled with the fear of meeting the ghost, for I knew there were enough in number waiting by the bridge to lay any decent one that should make its appearance, if its composition should prove to be of our earthly mould. So I went bravely on, and when I came in sight of the bridge I fell to whistling, and walked slower, so as to give the ghost a chance to make its appearance before I crossed over; but it did not; so I passed along, and crossing over paused in the very spot where I had the night before. A groan sounding behind me caused me to turn quickly, and there I beheld the figure standing where I had seen it the night before, and in spite of the extra courage I had put on I was half tempted to fly, and leave my comrades to fight the battle alone.

“The thought was only for a moment; the next all fear was gone, and I gave the signal we had agreed upon. In a moment it was echoed from the other side of the bridge, and my comrades sprang into the road behind the object, which now seemed inclined to flee. Its retreat was cut off, so there was nothing for it to do but advance, and it came bounding across the bridge towards me at a swift pace, no doubt thinking that one man was better to be encountered than half a dozen.

“It came on, and was about to pass me without paying me the least attention, when I put out my foot, and it fell headlong upon the timber with a substantial sound that was very unghost-like, and before it could recover itself I was upon it and stripping it of its sheet and a sort of mask it wore. There lay revealed the half insensible form of Joe Hanson, a fellow who bore an evil repute in the neighborhood, and whom many wondered by what process he obtained a livelihood.

“Joe was taken in custody by the sheriff, but he was so stunned by the fall that nothing could be obtained from him then. Nothing further could be found about the bridge that night, but the next day Joe confessed all. A gang of counterfeiters had a sort of cave in the bank beneath the bridge, and to frighten people away while at work he had acted the part of ghost. There were two entrances to the cave—one that would not have been suspected in the bank beneath the bridge, and which puzzled us greatly to discern after being assured by Joe that it was there—and the other some half dozen rods away in the woods. The cave, when visited the next morning, was found to be well fitted up with tools, and there was also a large amount of bogus coins found therein. The hammers were lying on the benches where the gang had left them and made their escape when they heard the scuffle on the bridge, and I knew that they had produced the sounds that had at first attracted my attention, and which, with the finding of a bogus coin in the bed of the stream, led to the discovery we had made. A part of the gang made good their escape, and those that remained were arrested on the evidence of Joe, and convicted. The ghost, that so long had troubled Parson Brown and his flock, was laid, and I had no further cause for fear when paying Susan the remainder of the visits I made her before I took her home, which proceeding rendered them no longer necessary.”

“The usual wind-up of all ghost stories, Uncle Ben.”

“Yes, or ought to be,” was the answer.

Flag of our Union, August 31, 1867