

The Ghost in the Red Shirt

by B. M. Bower, 1871-1940

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THE proper way to begin this story would be to assure the reader, first of all, that I have never believed in ghosts; that is the way ghost-stories usually begin, I think. Also, I should say that what I am about to relate is perfectly true—but I won't begin it like that. As a matter of fact, I don't care much whether you believe me or not, and I always did believe in ghosts—at least, I always hoped they were truer than Santa Claus, and that some day I should see one.

Aunt Jane—but I don't want to begin with Aunt Jane either: she always did begin everything in my life, ever since I can remember, and she sha'n't begin this story. I don't mean her even to know I wrote it— she'd only say I'm crazy, and I'm not.

This is the way it all happened, and, mind, I don't care whether you believe it or not It *happened*, and your belief or disbelief won't alter that one important fact. And he was the dearest old ghost—but wait till I start at the beginning, as I should have done before.

We had gone across the lake that evening in the little sail-boat, the NEW WOMAN. Jack named it, you might know; he said she was full of whims and it took a man to hold her nose in the wind—Jack's awfully sarcastic.

There were just six of us—Aunt Jane and Mabel, Cousin Jack, Professor Goldburn, and Clifford Wilton. Clifford and I weren't on very friendly terms. We had been engaged, though Aunt Jane didn't suspect it. But it was all over, and my sweet little ruby ring was lying somewhere off Weir Point, where Clifford threw it one day—but this is a ghost-story.

Nothing happened during the sail except that my hat blew away and Mabel hinted that it wasn't an accident—that I liked to show off my hair. I said I didn't show off any hair but what I might justly call my own, and, of course, that made Mabel mad—angry, I mean. Aunt Jane scolded me, as usual: it's easy to tell which niece has the money.

We landed to visit a cave in the cliff, and Mabel and Clifford flirted outrageously. It wasn't a bit interesting—I mean the cave. The flirting didn't worry me: I was particularly nice to Professor Goldburn—so nice that Aunt Jane called me her dear child twice, and the Professor came near offering me his heart and hand. Jack saved me: he called us all to the boat just as the Professor got fairly warmed to his subject. Of course, I ran as soon as Jack called, leaving the Professor to come nipping along behind—I hate fat men, anyway.

A storm was muttering up from the horizon, and the oily, ugly clouds were almost over our heads before we pushed off, on account of Mabel and Clifford loitering along the cliff path and acting that silly!

The lake was smooth as glass and ink-black, and the look of it made me shiver, with four miles of it between us and home.

Jack raised the sail, but it hung limp, so there was nothing for it but to row. Jack and Clifford went to work, while I steered the boat. Clifford spoke once to me: we ignored each other, as a rule.

"Better keep her close in. We'll try to round this point and run into the cove before she strikes."

"If we don't," remarked Jack cheerfully, "she'll flop us; and, oh mister, she won't do a thing to us!"

I rather thought "she" would do several things to us, but I didn't stop to argue the point—there wasn't time. I don't know just how it came about, but Jack was right—she "flopped" us.

We weren't far from shore, so the upset wasn't very serious. The water was so shallow we could easily wade ashore, though Mabel called for help, and, of course, it was Clifford who rescued her—from water no deeper than our bathtub! It is incredible, the foolishness of that girl!

I was first to climb the bank, and when I had watched the others land I just sat down in the wind and the rain and laughed. (Mabel says I will probably laugh at my own funeral; I'm positive I could have laughed at hers just then.) The idea of a great, overgrown girl like her (she weighs a hundred and fifty pounds if she weighs an ounce) sobbing on a young man's shoulder! and the curl all out of her hair, and the complexion washed off her face in streaks. It's a wonder she didn't turn Clifford sick; but, then, men show dreadfully poor taste at times. I don't suppose I

was very entrancing myself just then, but, thank goodness, my complexion will bear washing!

The NEW WOMAN reached the shore, upside down, almost as soon as we did, and my old golf-cape, that Aunt Jane insists I shall carry with me always in the boat, dangled on a wave-washed willow. Jack waded in and rescued it and Aunt Jane's little gray shawl (her green umbrella's gone forever, for which I am very thankful). Mabel's sailor-hat washed ashore while we stood there, and Clifford got that.

Then Jack remembered that there was an old cabin near there, and we found what had once been a well-trodden path leading back from the shore into the woods. We followed it dimly, with the lightning to guide us.

Jack led the way, reciting: "It was night! The vivid lightnings flashed athwart the vaulted sky and shook their fiery darts upon the shuddering earth. The elements were in wild commotion!"—or something like that. I think he got it out of a *Penny Dreadful*.

Just as Jack said "commotion," with a fine roll upon the word, the Professor caught his toe upon a root, and down he went—and I laughed. Aunt Jane didn't call me her dear child that time; she said, "Zel-l-l-ah!" But I don't care. Jack laughed too, though he did pretend he was just coughing.

We found the cabin, half hidden by the tall burdocks and wild rose-bushes. The door-step was sunken and covered deep with the leaves of many summers.

Jack threw open the door and cried "Spooks!" in a sepulchral tone which gave me a chill, but when Mabel gave a squawk and caught Clifford's arm I just pushed Mr. Jack headlong over the threshold and went on in.

The lightning glared in at the open door and showed us a great, old fireplace, with a huge pile of dry wood stacked in one corner, and there were some chairs and a table, and that was all.

Jack swooped down upon the fireplace with a shout, and we had a roaring fire in no time, for Jack's matches were dry, for a wonder. Goodness knows he paid enough for his matchbox; Aunt Jane said it was a scandalous price, but it was worth every cent of it to have dry matches that night. We huddled around the fire, half frozen from our ducking. I spread out my old golf-cape to dry, so that I might have some good of the old thing—I had lugged it around all summer and hadn't used it once. Aunt Jane and I took down our hair and wrung out the water. Mabel wouldn't; she said hers wasn't very wet—and that settled the switch question in my mind, and from the way Jack grinned I know what he thought about it—and Aunt Jane trying to make a match between those two!

Professor Goldburn backed up to the fire, rubbed his pudgy hands together behind him, and ogled till I felt downright sick, but I wouldn't show it. He had lost his eyeglass and the curl was out of his mustache and his collar all crumpled, and that oily smile didn't seem to match the rest of him a bit. I don't care if he is worth a million or more, I just think he's horrid! I smiled back at him just to see Clifford scowl. But Clifford wasn't looking my way. He was whispering something to Mabel and had his back turned to me—both of which I consider rude in anybody, no matter who does it.

Then Jack got to wondering what was in the next room, for there appeared to be two, and he and I went to explore.

The room had been a bedroom, I think. It was bare of everything but dust and cobwebs, and was so small it didn't take us long—Jack only burned one match and two fingers.

After that we sat around the fire and listened to the storm, and tried to think we weren't famished, which was hard to do, seeing we had had nothing since luncheon.

Aunt Jane worried over Uncle John and how anxious he'd be, but I was rather glad for him. He'd lectured me awfully that morning because I wasn't nice and dignified, like Mabel. I hoped he'd remember it with remorse.

Jack sang coon-songs and even did a cake-walk. I got up and helped him in that, just to shock Mabel. She thinks cake-walking is very unladylike, and always looks scandalized when I begin anything of the kind.

Aunt Jane—to punish us, I think—started the Professor going on his pet microbes, and once he was started, no one else had any show whatever. He droned on about bacilli and other horrors, and gravely assured us that old cabin was undoubtedly swarming with awful-sounding germs. Fancy being married to such a man—ugh!

Aunt Jane presently fell asleep, and as Clifford took to staring moodily into the fire and not seeming to remember anything but his thoughts, Mabel soon followed Aunt Jane's example. I was hungry and cross, and even the Professor couldn't talk me to sleep.

I wrapped my golf-cape around me and cuddled in an old armchair in front of the fireplace, with Jack and the Professor upon either side of me and Clifford on a little bench against the wall. Aunt Jane and Mabel were on the side opposite Clifford, though they, being asleep, do not count.

I was beginning to hold my eyes open with some effort, when something roused me, and I sat up straight and listened. The storm was still beating furiously against the cabin walls, but another sound was distinctly audible. There could be no mistake—someone was walking back and forth in the other room.

We looked at one another, and I admit a creepy feeling went up my spine just at first.

Clifford caught up a brand from the fire and started for the closed door, and we all followed him. When we crowded into the doorway we saw nothing but the dust and the cobwebs and the dancing glare of Clifford's torch upon the rough board walls. It was such a bare little room that I think we all felt a bit ashamed of our nerves.

The footsteps had ceased, and only the wind and rain, beating upon the low roof, could be heard.

"It's the wind," said Clifford, pointing his torch downward to freshen the blaze.

"It was the water dripping from some branch upon the roof," said the Professor—and that was the most sensible remark he had made that night.

"More likely it's rats," put in Jack. "Can't be a ghost—they're noted chiefly for the noise they don't make."

I pinched Jack soundly for mentioning ghosts, and spoke as firmly as I could with my teeth chattering so—

"It's your microbes, Professor."

Jack snickered, and the Professor rolled his eyes reproachfully at me.

Then we all went back to the fire and Jack threw on more wood. The Professor went on talking, only this time it was about telepathy, or something of that sort. And soon we heard that heavy, measured tread, as before. I must say I didn't much like the sound of it—coming like that, with no feet to make the thing seem reasonable, and with no ghost to make it creepily interesting, but the men appeared to ignore the tramping, so I tried to not care.

Jack fell to smoking cigarettes, seeing Aunt Jane was asleep, and Clifford poked the ashes into fanciful little heaps and got creases in his forehead. He did look glum and no mistake, but I couldn't see that he was afraid, or anything like that.

After a while my eyes went shut, just for a minute. I could still hear the Professor's voice droning like a big bumble-bee, when suddenly he stopped short in the middle of a sentence. That was odd, for he does love to round out his sentences nicely, even when he is interrupted.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. He was gazing, with mouth half open and with eyes full of fear, at something behind me.

Well, you know how it is when someone begins to stare *behind* you—if you were to be hanged for it the next minute, you'd turn and look. You couldn't help it.

I turned in my chair, and—br-r-r-r! I went cold all over, with little prickles in my scalp. (I suppose that was my hair standing on end, though Jack says it always does.)

Coming slowly across the room, straight towards me, was a man—ghost—oh, I don't know what! I gave one horrified glance, then I jumped from the armchair and with one bound I was on the little bench, snuggled up to Clifford's side. I didn't realize it till I felt his arm—well, under the golf-cape! (That blessed old cape shall never go to the ragman, I assure you.)

I was none too soon, for as I sprang from the chair it slid into it. There he sat—a short, stocky figure, with grizzled hair and rough, toil-hardened hands. His eyes were dull and gazed straight into the fire.

I must confess I was the tiniest bit disappointed after that first glance. I had all my life longed to see a really, truly ghost, but this one was neither picturesque nor orthodox. Where was the white winding-sheet? He wore faded blue overalls and a red flannel shirt! As to the chill, I have felt that before.

For instance, when Clifford threw my ring away out, and I watched the widening circle where it fell, while he said bitterly, "There goes my faith in women," I felt the very same creepy cold trickling down my back. I believe I even felt worse that time.

We all sat as if paralyzed. After a minute I gathered courage to glance up at Clifford's face, and, do you know, he actually seemed to enjoy the situation! He looked down at me, and his eyes smiled—and I'm not sure but his lips did, as well. I know he didn't seem a bit scared.

Jack certainly was white, though he scouted the idea afterwards, and the Professor's face was like a great lump of beef suet.

After what seemed hours—and was probably only seconds—the apparition rose, glided back to the door, and disappeared.

Jack drew a long breath and finished making a cigarette, though I know his hand shook and made it hard work. The Professor gathered himself together, said "Lord bless my soul!"—it was as bad as swearing, the way he said it,—and raised a forefinger.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began in a shaky half-whisper, "it would seem that we have just beheld something unusual and—er—startling."

"Well, I should tell a man!" said Jack, glancing furtively over his shoulder as he drew a match along the edge of his chair.

"Now," continued the Professor hurriedly, somewhat steadied by Jack's composure (though I'm certain that was only assumed), "I would suggest, in the interest of scientific research, that before anything is said upon the subject we each in turn write a brief description of the—er—phenomenon. In this way there will be less danger of our impression being colored by that of another mind, and—er—ladies first."

With this lame finish he handed me a little red note-book and a pencil.

"Write briefly what you saw—I take it you *did* see something—then turn the page and pass the book to Mr. Wilton."

This struck me as being decidedly original, and since I was not nearly as frightened as one would suppose (it was *such* a comfort being reconciled to Clifford!), I took the book and did the best I could.

Then Clifford drew his arm reluctantly from under my cape—I hope and pray no one knew it was there all this while—scribbled rapidly, turned the page, and gave the book to Jack, and then his arm—oh, well, what could I do? I did try pinching his hand, but his fingers caught mine in an awful grip and wouldn't let go, and so—what could I do?

Just then Aunt Jane woke with a shiver.

"Mercy," she said, "what an awful storm!"

In a moment she noticed the steps in the other room. "Strange," she said, turning her head to listen. "What is it, do you think?"

"Wind," said the Professor rather curtly, for him. "Water," said Clifford, giving my fingers a squeeze. "Rats," announced Jack, in a tone which left us doubtful as to his meaning.

"Microbes," finished I, not to be outdone by their brevity and aplomb.

"Zella!" cried Aunt Jane, glancing apprehensively at the Professor.

The Professor looked at me and sighed, and Jack clapped both hands over his heart and nearly sighed himself off the three-legged stool. Jack can't endure Professor Goldburn.

"Zella," began Aunt Jane pointedly, "don't you think you would be more comfortable in that chair?" (meaning the ghost chair.)

"No, I don't!" I snapped, very impertinently, I'm afraid—but catch me sitting in that chair again!

Aunt Jane turned to Jack, perched uncomfortably on the stool. (Now Jack is proverbially lazy: he never sits upright when he can lean.)

"Well, Jack! I never knew you to let a cushioned armchair go begging an occupant. What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing," drawled Jack. "You sit there yourself, mother."

"Well, I will. It looks more comfortable than this straight-backed one," and she settled down heavily on the faded calico cushion, while I shivered with horror.

If the ghost in the red shirt returned—well, Aunt Jane is one of the screaming sort.

We sat quiet a long time, it seemed to me. I was just wondering if I dared lean my head against Clifford and take a nap when I felt his arm tighten warmly. I looked, and there was the ghost gliding up to the chair, his lustreless eyes fixed upon the fire as before.

Jack turned and saw it, and grew white. He can't convince *me* he wasn't scared, for he looked it.

I stared, horrified. I tried to cry out, but before I could limber my tongue (it felt so dry and helpless) the ghost reached the chair and—sat right down upon Aunt Jane! He really did! She stirred a little and shivered.

"Throw more wood on the fire, Jack," she said, "I feel chilly."

Chilly! Good Heaven, I think we all did! Even Jack's splendid nerve was shaken at sight of his own mother dandling that Thing upon her knees.

"Mother!" he cried, and his voice sounded hoarse (for a fellow that wasn't scared), "for God's sake, move!"

Well, there's a gap in the story here that I can't fill.

The next I remember Aunt Jane was fanning me with Mabel's sailor-hat, and Jack stood by with an old tomato-can full of water which leaked a stream almost, and he looking very sober. The Professor was rubbing his hands together and saying, "Lord bless my soul!" over and over. I hate that man!

The ghost in the red shirt was gone, and I could not hear any footsteps in the vacant room.

After that it was a thousand years till morning. Our watches had all stopped, so I may be allowed my own estimate of the time, I hope.

Well, I think that's all of the ghost-story. It would take too long to tell how we walked home at daybreak—six miles, it was, right through the woods, and Aunt Jane and the Professor puffing like steam-engines before we had gone a mile—or how Uncle John had a steam-launch out searching for our remains. All that would make another story, and one is my limit.

Oh, I didn't go to sleep in that cabin and dream all this—how would you account for Clifford's behavior since that night, then? And what about the red note-book? That is evidence that the ghost was real enough, I should think.

We had all seen him alike, only Jack said he "wanted a shave," which I hadn't noticed, and the Professor wrapped his description up in so many long words that there was no getting at the sense of it—except that he *did* see a ghost.

Aunt Jane didn't see him at all; she says she'd have died of fright if she had; and, of course, Mabel, sleeping through the performance as she did, was perfectly furious. She even went so far as to say we all made it up among us just to annoy her.

Mabel and the Professor left the same day soon after that. Mabel simply couldn't treat me decently after she knew—

Oh, and I have another ruby ring, exactly like the one which lies off Weir Point. And Clifford has oceans of faith in women.

