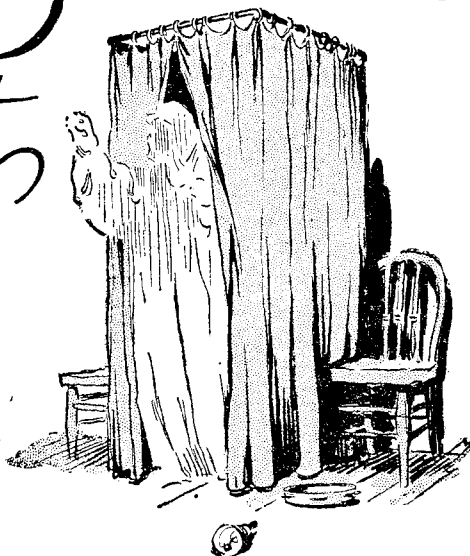


Dad Barker's Ghost

by

R.C. Canterbury



WHILE I ain't got no serious objection to anybody's particular brand of religion, (began Sonora Bill), the same being peculiarly their own affair, like their particular brand of lickor or terbaccor, I shore maintains it as my firm conviction and belief that the fakes and false prophets hooked up with several of the current and popular brands who are going up and down the country, seeking what they may devour along about dinner time, are some numerous and ought to be suppressed a whole lot for th' good uh th' order.

Which same is not said in a spirit of carping criticism, as I may say; me being ready to extend th' right hand uh fellowship to any *hombre*, whether he be Methodist, Protestant or Suffragist. Th' only thing I inquires about being said *hombre's* honesty in his peculiar belief, which same I reserves likewise for myself.

Which th' case I has in mind calling forth these few remarks is that of this two-legged he person over in Cerdo who calls himself a

spiritualist or clairvoyant or something like that. I confesses here and now that my attendance at churches has been some few and far between, and likewise my *sabe* of the finer p'int of the game some vague and nebulous, as I may say: but when it comes to bringing up spirits uh th' departed, I shore perfesses to qualify as an expert.

This locoed galoot who's at present extracting pesos from the pockets of th' proletariat of Cerdo is not th' first uh th' breed it's been my happy fortune to bump up against, and, I may say with truth, the first application shore took good and plenty.

I wouldn't believe in a ghost if he carried his own burial certificate 'round with him and brought three more spooks along as witnesses. And even at that I ain't saying but what there may be honest spooks, but th' only ones I ever see shore were liars, and th' truth was not in 'em.

I never does figger it out in my own mind who starts it, whether it were Bob Hawkins, or

Sam Kinney, or Sile Cooper, or maybe it was old Dad Barker begins it when he croaks. But anyway, she starts, and she shore assumes some large proportions *muy pronto*. Which she happens like this:

Me and Bob Hawkins finishes cuttin' hay on Colonel Borden's place down th' valley, and drifts over to town to lay up for a spell. I reckon we puts away about a million bales uh hay that season, and she's shore some job; but I maintains th' hardest of it is havin' to live for three or four months with Bob Hawkins. I can't just name off-hand any single *hombre* as I'd enjoy hearing th' sound uh his voice exclusive for that length uh time, but if I was to make up a list of th' humans that I'd shore hate to be thrown in company with for that long. Bob Hawkins' name would head th' list.

Somehow I gather that Bob kinda thinks th' same about me for some reason.

Well, we tells each other everything we know and a thunderin' lot we don't in th' first few days, and then we starts argufyin', and durned if I ever see sech a argufyin' cuss as Bob. We argufies about everything we can think of, beginnin' with th' price uh hay and th' Mexican sitiuation, and finally windin' up on ghosts. I always maintains, and always will, that there ain't no sech animal; that she always turns out to be a white cow, or a rock, or a union suit somebody has fergot to take off the line. But Bob he tries to down me by quotin' from Shakespeare and the Bible and Ayer's Almanack and sech like authorities in a loud tone uh voice.

I never see sech a cantankerous cuss as that Bob Hawkins in my life.

We don't seem able to settle that argument noway. Most times when we runs out uh argument and gets tired uh abusin' each other, we jest goes 'round and won't talk for a day or two until something else comes up to argufy about. But this time she's plumb serious. So when we drifts into Cerdo we argufies all th'

way, and after we has a drink or so we sets down at a table in the Palace Bar and keeps her up.

You know how it is when you get to argufyin' where there is a crowd. Every durn fool there has to put his lip in, whether he knows anything about it or not. I hasn't called Bob a liar and proved it more 'n twice 'till there's eight or ten other yaps takin' sides and offerin' to bet they're right.

I reckon old Sile Cooper is th' worst. When that old gin-head sets in a game he shore perjures himself some scand'lous. He swears that he's not only seen ghosts, but has held converse with 'em.

And old Jim Tate! I kinda 'spects Jim to stick to me. but to hear that old fool run on about spirit-rappin' and table-tiltin' was sinful. Of course. I has Sam Kinney and a few more on my side, but shucks, we can't talk near loud enough to win no argument.

Argument is a whole lot like love; whichever way she turns out she leaves a bad taste in your mouth, and they're alike in lots uh other ways, too. But at th' same time she's a plumb human trait. You get a lot uh fool he-men together and let 'em start one uh these here long-winded, red-hot arguments with everybody taking sides, and she most always winds up one uh two ways—they either gets plumb peeved and hostile at one another, or they starts to bettin'. Which is what happens to this little debate. Bob Hawkins, figurin' to make a grandstand play before th' crowd, suddenly fishes out a roll uh good paper money and slams her down on the table.

"There's one hundred perfectly good pesos," he says, "which I've shore perspired some strenuous to collect, and that dinero says there's plenty evidence uh ghosts. Which I plays her straight as she lays and pauses for some of you galoots to cover th' bet."

Now, I've always maintained that backin' your opinion with your bank roll is plumb poor

argument, but at th' same time it's shore human, so I reaches for my own bundle and slams her down.

"Bob Hawkins," says I, "me and you has fit, bled and argufied for some several weeks in that hay pasture, and I've tried in my poor, weak way to show you th' error uh your ways, and p'int out to you your various shortcomings; but if nothing but separatin' you from your filthy coin will convince you that you're locoed and a dad-blamed idget besides, your Uncle Pete will shore proceed to th' separatin'. Son, your bet's covered, and with your kind and indulgent permission we places th' dinero in th' keepin' of our esteemed fellow townsman, Doc Stringer, to hold till same is decided. So trot out your ghost."

Bob, he don't make no kick on th' Doc holdin' th' money, but just grins kinda nasty like and says:

"Wait and see."

The Doc, bein' th' official stake-holder uh th' community, gets some dignified and sorta pompous, like he always does, and writes each of us a receipt on a perscription blank.

"In acceptin' th' position uh arbiter in this momentous case," he says, "I naturally inquires how th' same is to be settled. As I understands her, our esteemed fellow citizen, Mr. Bob Hawkins, is to produce evidence uh th' existence uh disembodied spirits, which, I take it, is to be done in sufficient manner to convince th' party uh th' other part, our likewise esteemed fellow citizen, Mr. Pete Suggs, otherwise known as Sonora Pete. This bein' th' manner in which I diagnoses th' case, I inquires from Mr. Bob Hawkins as to how he intends to produce said evidence."

"It bein' my only desire," says Bob, "to prove that truth is mighty and will prevail, and to convince this old wall-eyed coyote that I'm right, as usual, I submits that if I produces before th' citizenship uh Cerdo, and this old reprobate in particular, th' human ghost uh

some deceased party within reasonable time, I wins th' bet. Does that satisfy you?" he says to me.

"She do," I says; "only me not believin' in 'em none in th' first place, I protests against your ringin' in strange and unknown phantoms, and holds out for th' ghost uh some late lamented that we're acquainted with, which same I maintains is only fair and intended to exclude imposters."

"I even agree to them terms," said Bob. "Name your deceased *hombre*."

Somebody suggests old Triste Borrachon, th' greaser that tried to steal powder from th' Picaro Company's powder house while smokin' a cigarette, but seein' that they only found a finger or two and part of his sombrero Bob protests that it's puttin' too great a job on Providence to collect th' material for a ghost, and besides some uh th' crowd objects that a greaser, not havin' a soul nohow, wouldn't be apt to have a ghost.

Sile Cooper then mentions Bill Lemon's first, or maybe it was his second wife—anyway, it was th' one which dies—but Bill raises sech a row about it that Sile don't insist none.

Durned if it warn't funny, considerin' th' number uh corpses that's happened in and around Cerdo th' past few years, how few of 'em anybody wanted back.

Which we finally fixes on old Dad Barker, him that shuffles off this mortal coil when him and Sam Kinney was placer mining up in Corvo Cañon. Nobody has anything much against old Dad, though I don't think he does me just right about that flea-bit sorrel I trades him for th' year Bryan runs for president.

"I accepts th' corpse," says Bob, "and I guarantees to produce th' spook within two weeks from to-night. As I take it, th' only thing necessary is to produce th' spirit uh Dad Barker, th' manner uh doin' which bein' our own affair exclusive. I don't mind statin', however, that I'm aimin' to import a party from El Paso for

th' purpose. Which raisin' spooks is his regular occypation."

Me and Sam Kinney ain't particular strong for an outside party, but we don't suspect nothin's wrong with th' deal 'till th' next day, when Sam tells me that Bob borrows an old photograph of him and Dad Barker, which was took by that lunger picture guy about a year ago.

"Which I don't impugn his motives none whatever," says Sam, "me not bein' prone to ascribe dishonorable intentions to nobody. But what for he wants a chromo uh me and Dad, th' same not doin' me justice and failin' to bring out my best p'int, I shore can't see."

She does look some suspicious, for a fact. If this party from El Paso is so plumb familiar with spooks that he's on speaking terms with 'em, what's he want with a picture? We finally figgers it out that maybe he needs it to identify Dad by after he cuts him out uh th' herd. But I remarks that if he tries to pick Dad out by th' picture, he's shore got a job on, because that picture's th' only time anybody ever sees Dad dressed up and his jaws not workin' on his cud.

You know how these photograph sharps make a feller stand or set when they unlimbers th' camery on him, with a two-pronged pitchfork clamped on his dome to hold him straight, and him tryin' to look pleasant so durned hard he's strainin' his face. Well, in this picture old Dad is standin' up straight and dignified, not humped over as usual, and shore looks imposin' and proud.

He's got all shaved up nice and clean, top lip and all, which shows it was some barber job and not Dad's usual homemade scrape. He's got one hand on Sam's shoulder kinda protectin' like, Sam squattin' in a chair with his hands spread out on his knees, his old bald head ashinin' and his rope-yarn mustache spreadin' all over his face. The whole durn pose looks a heap like Sam was gettin' ready to bark at somebody and Dad is tryin' to quiet him.

I remarks somethin' like this to Sam, but he

don't take it kindly, him bein' sorta jealous uh his looks.

Monday mornin' our imported ghost-master drifts in on th' Overland with his family. He's a tall, rangy, sickly-lookin' guy, dressed all in black, and lookin' a heap like an undertaker or a doctor. Maybe that's because their jobs are some-thin' alike, only different—one hazin' 'em off, as I may say, and th' other enticin' 'em back.

His wife, I reckon she was, is a little, fat, dumpy female with a poker face and one uh these smiles that don't go any higher up her features than her nose.

They heads for th' Oriental Hotel with about a dozen uh us trailin' along behind with our fool mouths hangin' open like we was watchin' for spirits uh th' departed to come flockin' around and begin a ghost dance. Notices is flung round town that afternoon for a "seance," as they calls it, at th' Woodmen Hall that night—admission twenty-five cents, which looks sorta sordid and commercial, as I may say, but we reckons that ghost masters has to eat and buy things th' same as other folks.

Me and Sam Kinney gets in th' hall kinda late that night, most uh th' crowd havin' already arrived and th' festivities just ready to begin. Our respected and successfully-dodged maiden school teacher, Miss Arabella Dobbs, is playin' kinda soft like on the pianner, extractin' agony from my old favorite, "The Ship That Never Returned," and th' lights are turned down low. Me and Sam sidles 'round th' wall so as not to attract attention, and sorta eases ourselves into seats 'round to one side and near th' front.

Miss Arabella finally wrecks th' ship and stops, and th' spook-sharp requests three or four of us to tie him up in what he calls th' cabinet, which I always figgers heretofore a cabinet was some kind uh furniture. This time she turns out to be a little coop they has fenced off in one corner with some curtains.

Well, me bein' interested to th' extent of a

hundred dollars, I naturally trails along to see that a good job is did, which she shore was. We sets him down and ties his hands and feet to th' chair, and ties a handkerchief over his eyes. I shore satisfies myself that that *hombre* don't do any gallivantin' round, playin' ghost.

Then we pulls th' curtains round him and moseys back to our seats.

Miss Arabella and some uh th' other females present starts a kinda hymn tune, singin' and playin' sorta low and solemn like they do at funerals. She shore sounds some mournful and makes me remember all th' mean things I ever did. You know what I mean. Like when it's bright moonlight, and sorta frosty, and you're a long way from home and tired, and th' coyotes are yappin' way off on the mesa, and you're broke and just gettin' over a big drunk and has lost your job.

Oh, shucks, that ain't just like it, either. It's more like when you wake up and hear a funny noise late at night, and you just know it's a rattlesnake, but can't locate him and you're afraid to move. It's just expectin' things to happen, and ain't right shore what they're goin' to be when they do.

I glances over at Sam, and he's settin' there grinnin', but she shore ain't what you might call a pleased grin; it's too nervous like, and I kinda feel that I'm doin' th' same. I reckon it ain't more'n a minute or two, but it shore seems like an hour, we hear a tambourine glangin' away kinda soft like, but gettin' louder all th' time, and pretty soon here she comes sailin' over th' top uh th' curtains and falls on th' floor with a bang. Honest, I could feel th' hair riz up on my backbone.

Then a bell starts ringin', and pretty soon it follers th' tambourine over th' curtains. I hear Uncle Jed Weatherby behind me chawin' real fast on his tobaccer, and I knows that I ain't th' only one feelin' creepy. Uncle Jed usually chaws at th' rate of one hundred and twenty to th' minute, unless he gets scared or mad, and

then he begins to speed.

I'm watchin' th' cabinet pretty close, and right after th' bell comes over I begin to see a dim blue light up near th' top uh th' curtains. Presently she gets brighter, and then I see a hand like it was all fire sorta wavin' slow over th' top. I'm kinda wishin' by now that me and Sam hadn't got so durn near th' front. She shore would have been a heap more comfortable back near th' door.

After this flamin' hand sorta burns itself out, a dim light begins shinin' through th' curtains, gettin' brighter and then goin' down again, and then it seems to come right through th' curtains and begin to form itself into a human figger on our side.

Uncle Jed is shore exceedin' th' speed limit with that cud uh his by now. I can feel his chin whiskers ticklin' th' back uh my neck every time he chaws, him lookin' over th' top uh my head.

The figger keeps on gettin' plainer and plainer, till we can see it's some kinda Injun, from a tribe I don't know. It ain't no Navajo, nor 'Pache, nor Pima, nor Maricopa, nor Papago, nor none uh th' Injuns we're used to, but it's shore Injun for all that, and it starts walkin' toward us, talkin' some kinda outlandish stuff, which same may be its native tongue for all I know.

I feels a cold somethin' like ice-water runnin' down th' back uh my wishbone, and I can't figger whether I'm gettin' cold sweats or Uncle Jed's tobaccer is dribblin', and I ain't takin' th' trouble right then to find out. I reaches back and gets a good grip on my old forty-five—not that she'd have been much use if this is a real ghost, but I figgers that I'll shore feel a whole lot better if I can unlimber her if that durn Injun gets too close.

But th' Injun finally circles round and goes back to th' curtains and disappears, and I hears plenty more besides me kinda sigh real heartfelt and deep.

The lights are turned up bright after a minute, and two or three of us goes and has a look at th' spook foreman. He's settin' there all tied up tight as ever, lookin' kinda sick and pasty like, which I don't wonder at none, seein' as how I'd probably be lookin' th' same way if I was in his place.

Uh course I still ain't convinced that I'm going to lose my bet, but I shore would have admired to call this thing off right here and now. But she ain't over yet, and after another hymn tune or two they turns the lamps down again, and we're off once more.

Well, she starts pretty much the same as before, with bells ringin' and somebody playin' on a mandolin and sech like, and this creepy feelin' comin' back stronger than ever; and presently that blue light begins shinin' again and another spook begins developin' right before our eyes.

Uncle Jed starts speedin' up on his cud as before, and pretty soon we see th' new fantom walkin' toward us. Before it gets plain enough to see very good, we hears th' voice uh th' boss uh th' works sayin' from the cabinet:

"The spirit uh Nathaniel Barker desires to communicate with some one present."

Right here is where I gets a good grip on my chair and prepares to lose a hundred pesos. I hears a little shuffle down th' room like people uncrossin' their legs and kinda straightenin' up, and Uncle Jed's speed goes up another notch. Everybody is got their eyes fixed on that spook and wishin' his chair had rollers under it so he could push it back without drawin' attention to himself.

In a moment th' light or th' ghost or somethin' gets strong enough to see plain, and durned if I know whether I'm disappointed or not.

One thing is shore. She ain't Dad Barker. The figger I sees is short and kinda bow-legged, and is bald on top, and is inclined to be fat all in one place. You know how I mean—kettle-

bellied.

There's a kinda gasp and a gulp behind me, and I figgers Uncle Jed has finally swallowed his cud, and I sets there with my eyes popped 'way out and hears a sorta gasp go down th' room, and then Sam Kinney jumps right up and yells out:

"Hell, it's *me!* The durn idget's gone and materialized *me!*"

And I'll be durned if he ain't right! It shore was old Sam Kinney to th' life. Even th' clothes looks like Sam's Sunday suit, which he's had for about ten years. It's like Sam was lookin' in th' glass at himself.

While I was gettin' my senses back and tryin' to digest all this, Sam clammers over my legs and out on th' floor where his ghost was, haulin' his six-gun out as he comes.

"I'm a ghost, am I?" he yells, "you durned old fraud! I'm a spook and a fantom and don't know when I'm dead, huh? Whoop-e-ee!"

And *bang* goes his old gun. Sam's ghost hops about two feet straight up in th' air and yells: "*Wow!*"

"Gimme room!" yells Sam. "Right here's where I lays my own ghost." And *bang* goes the old forty-five again.

The ghost starts to run, but Sam gets in between it and th' cabinet and heads it off. All this time a commotion is goin' on in th' cabinet, and at Sam's second shot down comes th' curtains and out rolls the ghost-herder, still tied up and tangled in th' curtains and chair.

Somebody turns a couple uh th' lamps up, and everybody is up on their hind legs, some tryin' to get closer to see what's goin' on, and some more tryin' to get out. But Sam keeps dancin' round his ghost, shootin' holes in th' floor every so often, and yellin' like a drunken 'Pache.

"Vanish, durn ye!" he hollers. "Go off in blue flame and sulfur. Whoop!"

The ghost is hoppin' round and yellin' every time Sam shoots, and I notices that while it

shore looks like Sam, its voice ain't a bit like his'n, Sam's voice bein' a cracked bass and th' spook's a high treble.

The ghost tries to dodge, and it and Sam go hoppin' back and forth, facin' each other, like one of these new-fangled dances. Finally the spirit ducks, and Sam makes a grab and gets it by th' arm. Then th' ghost gets a grip on Sam's ear, and they starts another kinda fancy two-step round and round.

In th' mixup th' ghost's bald head comes off—

Huh? That's right—I mean th' bald part comes off, only there's plenty uh hair underneath, and also th' mustache comes away in sections, and then we begins to see a great light—at least, those uh us who saw them arrive at the depot—because this ghost uh Sam's is th' hard-featured female which I surmises is th' professor's wife. But th' way that fat she-wildcat is clawin' Sam's face and neck and tryin' to bite him in vulnerable spots is plumb scandalous.

Sam has dropped his gun when they begins to dance, and when he sees what it is has got him, he begins to holler for somebody to take it off, which it takes about six uh us to do, and we all gets more or less scratched up in th' operation.

We finally quiets her and Sam down, and then we resurrects th' professor from where he's hard at work kickin' th' chair and curtains to pieces. He wants to fight when we first unties him, but we simmers him down, and finally they 'fesses up. They blames Bob a whole lot for givin' them a wrong steer and not explainin' more fully which *hombre* in th' picture they was to materialize.

We feels some sore at 'em, uh course, on account uh th' fake, but as I wins my bet I'm willin' to be easy, so we kindly but firmly suggests that they leave town sudden like, and lets it go at that.

Bob Hawkins actually has th' nerve to kick on the Doc's turnin' th' money over to me, claimin' that th' ghost uh th' Injun's genuine, anyway; but that don't get him nowhere with th' Doc, who forks over pronto. In fact, th' crowd rides Bob so hard that he threatens to shoot th' next guy who mentions th' name uh Dad Barker. And Sam Kinney gets hot every time he hears uh an Injun ghost-dance, takin' it as a personal reflection.

Which brings me back to what I says before. There may be ghosts and then again maybe there ain't, but whichever way she is I shore don't believe in 'em.