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San Francisco Call, Volume 82, Number 16, 16 June 1897 — THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY TO THE FORE [ARTICLE]

THE HOUSE
OF MYSTERY
TO THE FORE

A large, bold, black-and-white photograph of the newspaper headline "THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY TO THE FORE". The text is arranged in three lines, with "THE HOUSE" on the top line, "OF MYSTERY" in the middle, and "TO THE FORE" at the bottom. The font is a classic, slightly irregular serif typeface.

Again Appears the Bell Family Skeleton in Public.

FRED BELL SUES HIS MOTHER.

He Desires Her Removed as
Guardian of the Minor
Children.

ANOTHER SUIT TO BE FILED SHORTLY.

Charges of Drunkenness and Misman-
aging Funds—Mammy Pleas-
ant's New Role.

Once more the gibbering ghosts in the family history of the late Thos. Bell, millionaire, threaten to come forth from the gloom and dust of obscurity and stalk before the public eye, and a suit which promises to be more sensational than any of those now famous is soon to materialize.

Fred Bell, son of the deceased, has filed a suit in the Superior Court in effect charging his mother, Mrs. Theresa Bell, with "drunkenness and indecency," by reason of which he alleges that she is unfit to retain the guardianship of the minor

children. He also alleges that she has misused funds appropriated from the family estate for their support and education.

The complaint was filed in the County Clerk's office last Monday by William H. Schooler, Bell's attorney. It is a voluminous document, and the indications are some very peculiar features will be brought to life of the things that make up daily existence in the Thomas Bell mansion at 1661 Octavia street, that spacious abode which has so long been known under the name of the "House of Mystery." Around it are gathered all the associations which come from the residence of "Mammy" Pleasant, alias the "Voodoo woman," the steadfast friend of Sarah Althea Hill-Sharon-Terry.

It was not long after the tragic and mysterious death of Thomas Bell nearly five years ago that the troubles began that have now culminated in the suit. According to the complaint affairs have been at a low ebb financially in the house for some months and there has been not only a lack of funds, but of management as well. In fact, Bell asserts that he has had to do the cooking himself for some time and that all the numerous retinue of the establishment of the household has been compelled to drop away with the single exception of an old blind servant.

Two weeks ago Bell called upon his attorney and laid the alleged facts in the case before him, saying he had been informed by his mother and "Mammy" Pleasant that he had no authority to undertake legal action of any kind. As Fred Bell is 23 years of age, Attorney Schooler thought differently and it was determined to bring suit to have the mother removed from the guardianship of the minor children and the son appointed in her place.

The complaint first states that Thomas

The complaint first states that Thomas Bell died, testate on October 16, 1892, the will stipulating that a monthly allowance should be paid for the support, maintenance and education of the children, Thomas Frederick Bell, Marie Teresa Bell, Robina May Bell, Muriel Bell, Reginald Bell and Eustace Bell. It goes on to say that Mrs. Bell was appointed guardian of the minor heirs on January 10, 1893, the monthly allowance for the family being fixed at \$2000 from the date of Thomas Bell's death to October 16, 1894, when it was reduced to \$1500 a month. The amount stated as received by Mrs. Theresa Bell, the guardian, in trust for her wards since January 10, 1893, is \$47,750, all of which was to be used for their support, maintenance and education and for no other purpose.

The son alleges that his mother has been derelict in her duties in every way and has violated the obligations of her trust, and in particular as follows:

That no inventory of either the real or the personal estate has ever been returned to the court, as required by the statutes.

That the estate has never been managed in the interests of Mrs. Bell's wards or in a lawful manner. That she has misappropriated and applied to her own use the moneys which of right belonged to the wards.

That she has never performed her duties as guardian and that the entire custody, care and government of her wards has been given into the hands of other persons, and that the funds of the wards have been wasted upon herself. The complaint then reads as follows:

That she has failed and neglected to provide her wards with proper food and raiment, and so scantily has she provided food for her said wards that never at any time has the said guardian dined or eaten at the same table with her children, her said wards, at their home, but she has always had food of a different and better kind prepared for herself.

That much of the food furnished to her said wards was unwholesome and unfit for use, and all of it of the poorest quality.

Petitioner further alleges that said guardian has never rendered to this court any account of the property, estate and moneys of her wards which have come into her hands, and, although since her appointment two of her wards have attained to their full age of majority, she has never made any settlement of her account with said wards, nor returned the same to the court as required by law.

Petitioner further alleges that Mrs. Bell is neither a fit nor a proper person to act as guardian of said wards, as she leads a dissipated life, frequently becomes intoxicated and appears in an intoxicated condition before her said wards, and she frequently uses to and toward her said wards, and in their presence and hearing and in the presence and hearing of third persons, vulgar, profane, indecent and obscene language, and makes no effort whatever to instruct her said wards in morals and manners.

Wherefore the petitioner prays that a citation be issued directing Mrs. Teresa Bell, guardian as aforesaid, to be and appear before said Superior Court, on a day in said citation to be fixed, and show cause, if any she has, why her letters of guardianship should not be revoked and she removed as such guardian. Second, that she be suspended as such guardian during the hearing of this petition, and until its final determination. Third, that she may be required to settle her accounts with her said wards as such guardian.

It will be seen from the foregoing part of the complaint that one of the most serious allegations made against Mrs. Bell is her way of mistreating the children. Fred Bell declares that when intoxicated she has a habit of swearing at them. Such allegations as these make fresh the old stories that Bell used to pay his wife \$50,000 on the birth of every child, having made the promise sixteen years ago. The girl, Robina, is now 15 years of age. Muriel and Revinald, twins, were born a year later and little Eustace

made his appearance in the world a year later. These have all been legally recognized as the children of Bell in his will, and consequently cannot be deprived of their share in the estate whether they are or not.

In some way or another, which has never been explained, Thomas Bell fell over a railing and down two floors in the "House of Mystery" on October 16, 1892. He died from the effects of the fall. On April 23, 1896, his son fell over a bannister on the third floor to the ground floor of the residence at 1107 Bush street, sustaining injuries which would have resulted in death if it had not been for a splendid constitution and the unremitting efforts of his physician. He was intoxicated at the time, and entered the house for the purpose of calling on Mrs. Etta Haines. It was asserted at the time and has been repeated since that the son of ex-President Barillas of Guatemala was mixed up in the fracas.

An appraisement of the Thomas Bell estate, made shortly after his death, showed the estate to be as follows:

Cash.....	\$79,413 75
REAL ESTATE	
Santa Barbara County, 4000 acres...	42,000 00
San a Barbara County, 20,955 acres.	184,260 00
Tuolumne County, Alabama mine...	4,500 00
Two rock-breakers.....	300 00
Santa Clara County, 141½ acres.....	3,000 00
San Francisco homestead and vacant lot.....	10,000 00
BONDS.	
150 Carson and Colorado Railroad...	75,000 00
75 Eureka and Palisade Railroad...	18,750 00
130 shares Bank of California.....	32,500 00
680 shares Bellingham Bay and British Columbia Railroad Company.....	30,600 00
3435 shares Bellingham Bay Improvement Company.....	85,375 00
3401 shares Black Diamond Coal Company.....	34,010 00
17,000 shares Stanford Quicksilver.	141,610 00
6075 shares North Bloomfield Gold Mining Company.....	6,075 00
500 shares Judson Dynamite.....	3,750 00
175 shares American Lucol Company.....	1,250 00
5750 shares Ruby Gold Gravel Company.....	2,875 00
5000 shares Bellevue Mining and Agricultural Company.....	800 00
Secured debts.....	109,000 00
Total.....	\$1,022,082 90

There was also a life insurance policy on

Bell's life of \$80,000, which went to the estate. The \$109,000 of secured debts are foreclosing, and with the accrued interest will amount to \$140,000. By the terms of the will J. W. C. Maxwell, George Staacke and Henry Pischor were appointed executors, with full power to act until the youngest child attained his majority. A balance of \$48,250 is now due from the executors, but they assert that on account of hard times and the decline in the value of silver there has been no income from the estate for many months. This statement is satisfactory to both Bell and his attorney.

Attorney Schooler asserted yesterday that another suit will be filed in a few days. It will be to prevent Mrs. Bell from obtaining possession of the rest of the income until the settlement of the case determine whether she have the right or not. It is expected that Mrs. Bell will try to prove that Fred Bell is not a fit and proper person to be the guardian of the minor children on the ground that he used to dissipate. He has led a sober life since then, however, and does not think that any such plea will have any effect.

The debts of the estate amount to \$175,000. Mrs. Bell owns the "House of Mystery" and a ranch in Sonoma County, where she spends much of her time. In fact, she is on the ranch now. "Mammy" Pleasant, one of the foremost figures in the case, bought this ranch of 3000 acres for \$40,000 several years ago, and afterward deeded half of it to Mrs. Bell. Many peculiar and unexplainable actions took place between these two women, for Mrs. Bell used frequently to deed the mansion here to "Mammy" Pleasant, and in a short while it would be deeded back.

The old negress, "Mammy" Pleasant, now lies very ill at the "House of Mystery," suffering with acute heart trouble. She is said to be the real mistress of the place, and even Mrs. Bell herself was subject to the wishes of the old colored woman. She used to have a regular retinue of white and colored persons in the house, serving in some capacity or other. Until lately the house contained fourteen persons. There were Mrs. Bell and the six children, a blind man (white), a colored woman named Prymus, a man named George Gordon (colored), a col-

named George Gordon (colored), a colored steamboat cook named Phillips, a white shoemaker named Bankey, and a little white boy who waited on "Mammy" Pleasant. The latter and the Prymus woman are still at the house.