

## *The Maplewood Mystery*

BY SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

It was called Maplewood. There were one hundred and fifty acres in the estate—one hundred acres of land, and fifty acres of water; and this water was a beautiful lake upon the northern shore of which, on a gentle slope, backed by a forest of huge rockmaples, stood the mansion.

Capt. Ralph Severns had lived in the mansion until he died. He had never married,—or, at least, he had never had a wife in this country,—and the only members of his household whom he had admitted to share at all in his companionship had been Seth and Hester Dabney—man and wife—the two servants who had been with him in the beginning, and who remained to the end.

Upon his death-bed, contrary to expectations, Capt. Ralph Severns had remembered a sister whom he had not seen for years, and to this sister and her heirs he had willed his estate. This sister, then a widow, and named Atherton, did not remain at Maplewood a month. She got frightened at strange things which happened there, and moved away; and ere long afterward she died.

And so Maplewood came to be the property of Lillie Atherton, the widow's daughter. But Lillie would not go there to live. She let old Seth and Hester Dabney hold the place in charge, directing Seth to find good tenants if he possibly could. Parties came, and hired the mansion; but they did not remain. And other parties came,—for in all the country around there was not a more charming spot,—but these other parties were driven out as the first had been.

Capt. Ralph Severns had been dead three years, and a full score of people had tried to live at Maplewood, and had failed, when my attention was attracted by the beauties of the place. I had just come home from sea, and had promised my wife that I would try and settle down and become a sober landsman. My wife and Lillie Atherton were bosom-friends, and it was partly through this friendship for the young heiress—for Lillie was only nineteen—that I was led to Maplewood; but having once seen the place, and admired the beauties of its surroundings, I was anxious to make it my home.

Lillie shook her head, and advised me not to go. She was eager to find a good tenant, as the valuable estate was at present simply an incumbrance upon her hands, but she would not have my wife subjected to the horrors of the great mansion. And then she told me, candidly, that it was haunted. She had herself seen and heard most frightful things there, as had all who had attempted to live beneath the roof.

But I was determined to make the trial. And after due deliberation and discussion, my wife, who had great faith in my courage and prowess, consented to go with me.

And so, with a letter from Lillie, we presented ourselves at Maplewood.

I found Seth Dabney to be a man of sixty, or thereabouts, and his wife of the same age. They were meek and humble, and seemed very anxious to serve me. In fact, Seth was altogether too meek. He was an old sea-dog; and if Capt. Ralph had ever been a pirate, as had been whispered since his death, it was not hard for me to believe that Seth Dabney had been his "best bower." Seth's face was never made for the face of a meek and humble man. He had evidently schooled himself into the character. His face was cunning and sinister.

Besides Seth and Hester I found dwelling at Maplewood Peter Dabney and his wife. Peter was a young man of five-and-twenty, a son of Seth and Hester, and his wife was an innocent looking woman, with the appearance of a household drudge.

Old Dabney shook his head with mysterious solemnity when I told him I had hired the place, and said he hoped I might be able to do what the others had not done.

I asked Seth how he and his wife had managed to remain there; and he replied that he had bound himself by a solemn oath to Capt. Ralph that he would remain and care for the mansion while he lived, or until satisfied tenants had possessed it.

"And how," I asked, "does your son and his wife manage to stand it?"

"My boy," answered Seth, with a tremendous sigh and groan, "stays for his poor mother's sake. The same oath which reminds me binds my wife; and she would die if Peter were to forsake her. It wears upon the boy's wife, as you can see; but she will not leave her husband.

Could I have had my own way, under the impressions which forced themselves upon me, I should have turned Seth Dabney and his family out before I moved in; but that could not be done, as it had been a condition of Capt. Ralph's will that Seth and Hester should find a home beneath the roof while they lived, unless they chose, of their own accord, to depart. So the Dabneys were permanent fixtures. But the mansion was large enough, and they had their own living rooms and dormitory in an attached wing.

On our first night at Maplewood we were kept up until very late. It was almost midnight before our beds had been set up, and while the servants were at work in that department my wife Molly and myself worked at arranging our library. The clock had just struck twelve when Peter's wife—her name was Lucy—looked in and informed us that the chamber was arranged. I was hanging a picture, and wished to finish it before I left it. Molly's dressing-case was in a small tiring-room up stairs, and she said she would run and get it while I hung the picture. She took a lighted candle and went. I had just finished my work to my satisfaction, and had just folded up my step-ladder, when my wife came rushing in, with her candle extinguished, and as she dropped her dressing-case upon the floor I caught her in my arms. She was pale and frightened, and looked over her shoulder as though expecting something had followed her. As soon as she could speak I heard her story.

She had gone to the tiring-room and got her case, and as she reached the head of the broad staircase on her return she had seen, upon the landing at her right, a female figure, robed in white, with blood upon its ashen face, and with dabs of blood upon its snowy drapery.

“Oh, it was dreadful!” said my wife. “The spectre waved its hand in a threatening manner, and said to me in an awful whisper,—‘*Woman, there is a curse upon this house, and upon all who follow in the footsteps of Ralph Severns!*’ And then she pointed to a gaping wound upon her forehead, and with a cry of terror I fled down the stairs.

Surely this was not a pleasant opening; but I urged it upon my wife that she had not been harmed; and, furthermore, that a respectable ghost would have appeared to me rather than to her.

“It was cowardly,” I told her, “to frighten a woman when there was a strong man in the house who was alone responsible for the interruption of strangers upon the solitude of her ghostship.” And I kissed her and asked her if she would wait until I had seen the spectre. She said she should not fear while I was near her; and of her own thought she declared that if goblins had not harmed Seth Dabney, or any member of his family, in all these months, they could not possibly have cause to harm us who were innocent of all thought of offence.

It was half an hour after midnight when we retired. The chamber which we had selected was the pleasantest one in the mansion—a large square room, with a deep bay-window looking down upon the lake. The hangings were of green velvet, heavily fringed with gold, and the curtains, though slightly yellow from time, were clean, and of the finest lace. I left a small lamp burning upon the dressing-table, and, being very tired, I fell asleep soon after touching the pillow.

How long I had slept I cannot say, but it could not have been a hour, when I was awakened by my wife, who was clinging to me in fright; and as I awoke I heard a low moaning sound, as of some one in deep distress; and presently a whisper, as though the speaker were close to my ear—a whisper awful and distinct,—and there were the words that were spoken:

*“A curse is upon this house, and upon all who would follow in the footsteps of Ralph Severns!—BEWARE!”*

The lamp had been extinguished, and while the foregoing words were being whispered the apartment was pervaded by a ghostly light—a sulphurous, deathly, waving glare—and presently a female figure appeared at the foot of the bed—the same which my wife had seen upon the landing. It was robed in white, the face pale and ghastly, and dark spots were upon the brow and upon the robes. It was surely nothing of human mould, for it stood upon the air, and as I sat up I could see its feet treading empty space on a level with the bed-frame! With a threatening wave of the hand the figure bowed its head, and melted away into thin air—melted away with a sorrowing sigh—and the ghostly glare faded out, leaving only the pale glimmer of the star-beams to break the midnight gloom.

As soon as I could collect my scattered senses I broke from my wife’s grasp and leaped out upon the floor, and very quickly lighted the lamp. The doors were fast—locked, as I had left them; the windows had not been touched; the hangings were all intact; and nowhere, after the strictest search, could I find the slightest trace of any method of ingress or egress to a material body.

If my wife had held the reins of direction we should have packed up in the morning, and left; for she was not only convinced that she had seen a *bona-fide* ghost, but she believed that the terrible visitation would be repeated so long as we remained beneath the roof. But I was not to be driven off so easily. I spent the greater part of the remainder of the night in thinking, and I thought a great deal; and in all my thinking there was no thought of ghosts.

The figure I had seen in our chamber was but a shadow,—I knew that. But whence came it? My wife thought, from the land of spirits; but I did not. I had no faith in any such possibility;—or, to put it moderately,—I did not think it at all probable.

In the morning Seth Dabney made it in his way to ask me how I had rested. I told him I had been seriously disturbed; and I gave him to understand that if the spirits of Capt. Ralph Severns' departed victims wished to inhabit the place, I should leave.

I could see by the old man's face, as he turned away, that he was well satisfied. It was a very slight token which his face gave, but it was a key to the mystery. It told me plainly that he wanted me to go—as he had wanted others to go before me.

As soon as I could get away by myself I went up into our chamber, taking with me a hammer and a chisel.

Around the chamber was a high oaken wainscot, and this I proceeded to sound with my hammer, and very soon I found a place opposite the foot of the bed which gave back a hollow sound. A critical examination revealed to me the fact that at this point a panel, three feet long by two feet high, was loose, and I could detect slight abrasions upon its surface, as though it had been slid behind the casing; but I could not move it without breaking it, as it appeared to be fastened upon the other side. But it was a good beginning.

Upon going outside I found that the wall in which was the loose panel was toward a chamber which we had as yet appropriated to no particular use, as its single small window left it far from pleasant. From this chamber, next to the outer wall of the building, and toward my own chamber, opened a closet, occupying not more than four feet of the division partition; so that, from this closet to the opposite wall, there was left a space of at least three feet between the two rooms,—and this space was sealed up,—and it was into this space that the sliding panel opened!

My next field of examination was below; and I was not long in discovering that the space directly beneath the moveable panel, and occupying half the underlying area of the dark chamber, was also sealed up, but so adroitly cut into closets and cupboards that only a well-directed examination could have revealed the fact. Never mind the details of my persistent search. It occupied time; but I succeeded in the end. I found entrance into this last-named sealed up space from the cellar, and there I could what I had anticipated. I found a powerful argand-burner, with a polished concave reflector, and, also, two large mirrors set at a proper angle for throwing a reflection upward; and directly in the line of this reflection was the sliding panel in the wainscot of my chamber! I also found here a long white robe; and it was no longer a mystery how the ghostly spectacle had been produced. The reflection of the operator below had been thrown up through the open panel upon the white curtains at the foot of our bed; and those

curtains had been carefully arranged to perform their part in the optical illusion. And the other thing I found in this secret place: I found speaking tubes leading upward; and upon returning to my chamber I found a point at the head of the bed where the wall-paper was perforated, and upon putting my finger through I found the end of the tube! And thus the dreadful whispers were accounted for.

Seth Dabney had spent both time and money in perfecting his arrangement for frightening tenants away from Maplewood, and he had hoped that for a mere nominal sum he might in time be able to purchase the estate; but his hopes were crushed when I appeared to him with the proofs of his wickedness in my possession.

If he had thought to deny anything, I very soon convinced him that I had travelled, and seen the world, and that all attempts at further deception would be worse than useless. To save himself from a public trial and certain condemnation, he finally confessed to me all his iniquity. He showed me how he had arranged wooden troughs under the eaves, and deep down in the cellar, in which to roll cannon-balls for the production of thunder; and he showed me other speaking tubes, leading from a single point below to various points above, by means of which he could cause the same voice to sound at different parts of the mansion at the same time. He confessed, also, that his wife, and his son's wife, often appeared to female guests in ghostly guise, which accounted for my wife's fright upon the landing.

I sent for Lillie Atherton, and in the depth of her gratitude for the regained estate she allowed Seth Dabney and his family to depart unwhipped of justice; and we heard of them no more.

And so joy and peace came to dwell in the old mansion, and the broad acres of Maplewood bloomed with renewed beauty; and the only shock which followed the disclosure of Seth Dabney's diabolism was the shock to those dear lovers of the marvelous who had thus lost a prop in their faith in ghosts.

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