

Not a Ghost Story
by Judge Clark

GEORGE MARLEY having none but fashionable vices, was not what the world calls vicious. He drank without being a sot, gambled without being a blackleg, and if not a saint, was no profligate.

He had recently come into a handsome fortune, and was spending his first winter, and a good deal of money, in New Orleans. Among others whose acquaintance he formed, was a young Frenchman, a few years his senior, named Antione Giraud, between whom and himself a similarity of tastes soon caused an especial intimacy to spring up.

Young Giraud was perfectly acquainted with the city and its ways, and was nothing loth to place his knowledge at his friend's disposal. When the theatre and opera grew tiresome, as they did at last, and masked balls and wine suppers began to lose their zest, fresh excitement was sought and found in those temples where the fickle goddess nightly distributes her "buffets and rewards" without troubling herself whether or not they are received "with equal thanks."

Giraud played persistently against his friend. Marley thought it was because they *were* friends. There was another reason, perhaps. However, if money was the Frenchman's object, he was signally disappointed, for he was uniformly unsuccessful. Though evidently chagrined at his losses he seemed to bear them with equanimity, returning each night to the encounter, led by the blind hope that has lured so many to destruction, that luck, at last, must change.

One night their play ran unusually high. Marley was flushed with wine, while the expression of his companion's face betokened a still deeper excitement. With a nervously trembling hand, the latter deposited on the table a sum larger than any he had yet risked. It was promptly covered by his adversary.

"*This* time I have won!" cried Giraud eagerly, throwing down his cards.

"Not so fast!" exclaimed the other; "your hand is *almost* invincible, but *this* beats it."

It was true; the Frenchman had lost again.

"Ruined!" he muttered to himself between his clenched teeth; and after glaring a moment fiercely at the winner, he rose hastily from the table.

"Come, George," he said, with a forced laugh, "it is time to go now;" and taking his friend's arm, the two left the place together.

It was past midnight, and the streets were almost deserted, when a drowsy watchman, pacing his accustomed round, came suddenly on a scene that startled him into life, and caused him to signal for assistance, which happily proved to be at hand.

A man was stooping over the prostrate form of another. At the sound of approaching footsteps he raised himself, recoiling quickly as if in flight. But the summoned help was already on the spot, and the fugitive was intercepted. In his hand he held a bloody dagger, and at his feet lay the inanimate body of the victim, still warm and bleeding.

On finding himself in the hands of the officers, the prisoner's self-possession entirely forsook him. His answers were so incoherent as to be wholly unintelligible. Nothing could be gained by questioning him in his present condition, and he was at once taken to the nearest station-house and locked up.

The body was conveyed to the Morgue, where, on the following day, it was identified as that of George Marley.

At the inquest, Giraud testified to having accompanied his friend as far as their way lay in common, and that they had then separated for the purpose of going to their respective lodgings. The facts sworn by the policeman were those already stated. If the crime had been committed with a view to robbery, the perpetrator had been interrupted before accomplishing his object, for the murdered man's watch and pocket-book were found on his person unmolested, and nothing identified as his was discovered in the prisoner's possession.

Eugene Aubrey, the person accused of the atrocious deed, was a young artisan of hitherto unblemished character, and the only child and sole support of his widowed mother. The day after the arrest he gave an explanation of the circumstances against him, which, had it been given at once, might have received credence. As it was, it was looked upon as a cunning afterthought.

His story was this:

He had been spending the evening—and so much he was able to prove—in a visit to a young girl to whom he was betrothed. On his return two men, walking arm in arm, turned into the street before him, continuing in the same direction as himself, but some distance in advance. Suddenly one of them disengaged his arm and dealt his companion a swift blow with some instrument, which, as it descended, gleamed in the gaslight like the blade of a weapon. The one stricken reeled and fell, uttering a faint cry. The other glanced hastily around, and seeing the prisoner rapidly approaching, turned and fled. When the latter reached the body, life was extinct. He had just withdrawn the weapon, which had been left in the wound, and was about to run or call for help, when he was apprehended as already stated.

But a prisoner's statement, though all-powerful *against* him, goes but a little way in exculpation. A verdict of "willful murder" against Eugene Aubrey was returned by the coroner's jury, and he was fully committed for trial.

It was at this stage of the case I was retained for the defence. The task seemed hopeless enough. On the final trial, the only facts in evidence would be those which told so damningly against the prisoner. His own statement, which the coroner had allowed to be received, would there be entirely excluded. But one result could reasonably be anticipated.

The poor widow never doubted her son's innocence. "He was always so good and gentle," she said. Still less would it have been possible to create a suspicion in the mind of her who loved him with all the blind devotion of a young and trusting soul. "I *know* he is not guilty," she would again and again reiterate; "when he left me that night with words so tender and loving, there *could* have been no murder in his heart."

It was impossible to witness a faith so pure and steadfast without feeling its influence. The young man's statement, if true, perfectly reconciled every fact with his innocence; and, after all, less weight was due to his first confusion and failure to explain the circumstances than was generally supposed. A man brought suddenly face to face with an appalling crime, and while still staggering under the shock, accused of its commission, may well lose his presence of mind. Before saying he looks and acts guilty, wouldn't it be well to be quite sure we know how an innocent man would look and act in this like case?

The day of trial came. I had no witnesses, save a few to previous good character. I had determined to risk all on a stroke, the wisdom or folly of which could only be determined by the event.

Giraud was the first witness called. He gave his evidence with great precision and clearness. I cross-examined him very briefly, and he had just quitted the stand, when, as if transfixed by some instantaneous shock, he stood the very impersonation of terror. His hair literally stood on end. His eyes were riveted on a figure advancing towards him with slow and measured tread. *It was the exact image of the murdered man!*—his face all pale and ghastly as when he lay in his coffin. That such a visitor was not of this world was the common feeling even of those who had never seen Marley, and who knew not whose was the ghostly form thus mysteriously revealed.

"Merciful God!" shrieked rather than articulated the frightened wretch who had just steeped his soul in perjury against another's life, "but unchain my senses from this horrible vision, and let man's weightiest condemnation fall upon me."

Then falling on his knees, in disjointed and broken sentences, he poured forth a confession that fully justified the belief I had for some time entertained, that he, Giraud, and not my client, was the real culprit.

And now, reader, don't throw away the paper with a sneer at "ghost stories," till you find out whether I have been telling one or not.

I had a friend, a young actor, who, if living [today], would be the brightest star on the American boards. His power of imitation was wonderful. He knew and had seen Marley. A week's practice made him perfect in the part he was to perform, and it was *he*, and no ghost, that appeared, as prearranged between us, at the critical moment. I had read:

"That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul, that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions;"

and the result proved that the great dramatist, as usual, was right.

The New York Ledger, July 17, 1869