

Catching A Ghost
A Philadelphia Detective's Story

Detective skill is not frequently invoked to solve matters outside of the profession. The better class of secret agents decline such cases, but “snide and sneak detectives” are delighted to have the handling of all such.

The case about to be narrated, while not in the regular line, was undertaken by reason of intimate personal relations, and eventually led up to legitimate detective work. The lady, whose husband was a commercial traveler for a large New York house, was in a highly excited condition; indeed it was owing alone to her indomitable spirit that she was able to remain out of bed.

I do not much wonder at the young wife's consternation, for the case was a very mysterious one, as the reader will confess. Mr. Blanque had been absent some weeks somewhere in the far west, but just where was not known, and it was this fact that caused Mrs. Blanque's greatest agitation when coupled with the singular manifestations. Mrs. Blanque in the last ten days had been using the second story front room of her house as a sitting room. One evening, wearied with reading, she moved her chair from the open grate, and leaned her head against the wall, so she said; but I judge from subsequent facts that she had been making love to the fine photograph of her husband which hung upon the wall. She heard this appalling announcement uttered in a sepulchral voice:

“Kill the dog, Blanque!”

At the same moment the picture fell to the floor, and as I suppose, from her hand. The glass was broken. There are many people who are sure the breaking of a looking-glass is a certain portent of sudden death in the family, and while this did not fill the conditions because it was not a mirror, it none the less occupied her mind with the idea that this event was a certain token of her husband's death.

Mrs. Blanque was brave enough, however, to place her head close to the wall again, and heard the most diabolical noises— noises the like of which she never heard. The spoken words, as well as the sounds which followed, seemed to proceed from some deep subterranean cavern.

Mrs. Blanque hastily left the room, and did not venture back again that evening. Several times during the next day she repeated her experiment, but heard nothing, and were it not for the broken glass she might have persuaded herself that it was imagination. Recovering her self-possession somewhat, she ventured the next night to seat herself as before, but up within a few minutes of 11 o'clock heard no further disturbances.

She had the glass replaced, and once more it was suspended from the wall. An evening or two afterward she read until late, and, I imagine, pressed a good-night kiss on the portrait

of her husband. She heard the uncanny racket, and continued listening to this for some moments, when the awful announcement was made:

“He is dead!”

Some other words there were, the purport of which she did not catch; and soon after the house seemed filled with shrieks and hollow reverberations. These made her blood run cold, and she fled from the room. She had the coachmen sleep in the apartment all that night, and every succeeding night. With the return of daylight she felt somewhat braver, and resolved to make another experiment before she made known her fears. The fact that these disturbances occurred about midnight only served to indicate their supernatural origin.

The third trial was made about 12 o'clock, when Mrs. Blanque had her maid by her side. No sooner had the lady taken down the picture and placed her ear to the spot it covered than the blood-curdling din began, which she described as the mindling of noises by drawing heavy iron chains over zinc or tin and ear-piercing shrieks from demon lips. It was some time before she heard any words, and those caught were “Blanque, Blanque.” Then she heard something about “bones rotting,” which of course she concluded were her husband's and no other.

The awful import of this revelation overcame her and she fainted. She could stand it no longer, and the next day sent for me, as being one of her husband's nearest friends. That night, with one of my subordinates, I called at the house and began the investigation. Between eleven and twelve I heard the dreadful sounds as described by the lady. I was nonplussed, for I could find no reasonable hypothesis on which to base a theory. I heard some words but could distinguish nothing but the one word Blanque. I obtained permission to attack the wall, and in a short time had several bricks removed. I uncovered a small tin flue, with a triumphant cry, “There is the secret of your ghost!” I pointed it out to Mrs. Blanque, but was surprised to observe she was far from being satisfied.

Going down to the cellar we discovered the pipe had an outlet there, it belonging to some now disused system of ventilation. That the passage was free was easily demonstrated by dropping pebbles. Again the terrible noises were heard, this time more distinct than before. The discovery of this passage, however, did not solve the mystery. Where did the voice and the noises come from? They were not made in Madame's house, that was clear, and I began to fear I was as far away from the secret as ever.

Making some excuse, I left the room, and proceeded to examine the houses along the row, some six or seven being all alike in design. At each of the gratings I listened carefully. At the second house I observed that unusual precautions had been taken to prevent outsiders from peeping inside. Here, too, I heard peculiar sounds, which resembled rasping, and by placing my ear close to the wall, heard the indistinct rumble of voices. I next rung the doorbell, but obtained no answer.

Returning to Mrs. Blanque's house, my operative repeated parts of several sentences he obtained, one of which spoke of the door bell. More important than this was the name "Southgate Bank," which he affirmed he caught distinctly.

After assuring Mrs. Blanque that I would explain the whole matter inside of twenty-four hours, and leaving my man on guard, I hastened to the office and made arrangements to have the second house shadowed. I called next day on the cashier of the Southgate Bank, and found that the watch dog had been found dead some days before. To close the whole matter I may as well explain that the noises were made by filing and sharpening iron tools with which a gang of robbers meant to break into the safe of the Southgate Bank. This work was done in the cellar, and immediately above the bench on which the work was progressing there was an opening in the wall through which another ventilating pipe ran until it opened out into the upright shaft in Mrs. Blanque's house. This conveyed the sounds as well as added to the mysterious quality of tone. The excited woman had mistaken the word bank for Blanque, and the "rotting bones" referred to the dog, which these rascals had poisoned preliminary to effecting an entrance into the bank. Thus was the ghostly voice accounted for; and the incident goes to prove what an influence our thoughts and our brains have upon other senses. It only remains to add the fact that the gang were subsequently allowed to enter the bank, were caught in the very act of breaking the safe, and finally "sent up" for an appropriate term of years. No one outside knew, nor did the thieves guess, that they had revealed their secrets to a ghost-catcher.

The [Washington D.C.] *Bee*, January 27, 1883