

A Detective's Experience

A Den of Phantoms

Many times the reporter had heard Mr. F——, in conversation with his friend J——, make allusion to a ghostly reminiscence, which always called to their countenance an expression of doubt and indecision strangely at variance with the bold and fearless characters they bore. He had always desired to hear the story, and now solicited Mr. F—— to tell it.

“Certainly: but you must promise to believe what I what I say I’ve seen, for there is no deception about it.

“We were after counterfeiters. A number of them were in the city, and were daily putting large sums of spurious money in circulation. Sometimes a woman was made the medium of this fraud; at others, a boy; always those apparently innocent, while the actual offenders kept under cover. One night a young woman came to the station, and complained that she had been brutally ill-treated by a man whose name she appeared anxious to conceal. She did not wish him arrested, but only sought protection for herself from his violence. There was something in her air and manner that interested us. I talked to her, questioned her of her home, associates and means of living. In reply to my questions, she unthoughtfully pronounced the name of Whiting. This was the name of the leader of the counterfeiters, the man we had searched for anxiously, but could never find. I questioned her now to a purpose. I was wild with anxiety, but apparently calm. Before she went away, I got a clue that I thought would serve me. The next night we set out to put a plan we had formed into execution. Disguised, and thoroughly armed, we soon found ourselves at an old house in the Third District, near the bank of the river. It had been long disused, and was rapidly falling to decay. In the old colonial days, when New Orleans was yet an infant city, it had been the mansion of a rich proprietor. But, like most old houses, it had an evil reputation. A murder had been once committed there—a fratricide, a sister had been done to death by a maniac brother. The wraiths of both had haunted the old building. It was avoided by all. To the ignorant imagination it was as fearful as a charnel house. It was such a place, however, as men of evil would select as an abode. We believed we should find the criminals we searched for there. Stealthily we crawled through the weedy lawn—carefully we ascended the rickety stairs. Wide and spacious halls shot out on every side, and the large rooms yet retained a grandeur that well befitted the splendors of the grand old days when they echoed the laugh of beauty and were the abode of elegant and sumptuous hospitality. Hallowed the house had been, as the home of virtue and innocence. Within these walls a race had lived and died—here had lived and triumphed the dark Spaniard and his descendants. Women have lived here whose beauty was yet chronicled in romance—some dark and imperial, with blood fevered by the tropics—others sunny-eyed and golden-haired. We reached a room and sat down. It was near midnight. The din of the city had long died out—the quietness of death reigned in the vast apartments, and darkness, intense and rayless, filled the room. We were listening for some sound to guide us in our search. Suddenly a dull, grayish light penetrated the room. It grew on the instant, soft and luminous, and on the opposite paneling of the room appeared a shadow. It grew gradually on the vision until the outlines of a young girl were defined on the wall. The face was pale and death-like, and from the exposed breast a dark stream of blood seemed to well from a

deep wound. It looked like a shadow and might have been, produced by artificial means; nevertheless, my hair stood on end, and a nameless terror I could not subdue palsied soul and sense. He was not less affected; but neither of us spoke. Suddenly another figure appeared beside the apparition. It was that of a young man; his face was convulsed with horror, and in the protruding eyes was the glare of the maniac. Stunned and motionless, we saw a death struggle commence, a phantom death struggle—a moment more, a scream of mortal agony echoed through the room, and then a laugh, distorted and horrible, as the glee of a maniac. It made our blood curdle and the brain reel in a delirium of fright. But just as we were feeling the utter horror of our situation, in the adjoining room we heard a heavy fall and a muttered curse. It acted like electricity. That sound at least was mortal. We sprang to our feet and dashed open the door of the adjoining chamber—the next instant the light from the dark lanterns flashed through the room. But imagine our surprise to see before us the young woman we had seen at the station the day before, kneeling by the side of a man apparently severely bruised by an accidental fall. The mystery was soon explained. By artificial means, and by a curious combination of lights, the scenes we had just witnessed in the other room were produced by Whiting (for it proved to be the counterfeiter) and his mistress. To scare away the superstitious visitor, if any should chance to come, they had resorted to this deception. We were the first victims of the delusion. In descending from the ceiling, Whiting had fallen and broken his leg. We took them both into custody. In the building were found all the appliances of the counterfeiter and a large sum of spurious money. But even to this day I cannot, without a thrill of dread, think of our first experience with the phantoms.[”]

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