

A Family Skeleton

A Detective's Experience

There is an old brick mansion on Esplanade street, that stands a little way back from the Lanquette, and from its quaint construction, arrests the attention of the passer by. It was built near a century ago, and has a strange history yet fresh in the memory of many. Once the habitation of wealth and refinement, it has passed to far different uses. It is now a tenement house, and the wind and the storm make a solemn music in the ruinous rooms when the elements are at strife.

“It is connected,” said Mr. F, “with an event somewhat remarkable in my experience. It was then the residence of a Spanish family of great wealth and distinguished social position. Mr. I. and myself were strangers to them personally, although we were familiar with their reputation in the community. One night we were surprised by a visit from Antone Pallotta, the then head of the family which consisted of a nephew and daughter. Rumor had it, that the wife was yet living; but if so, it was in such retirement that even her name was never mentioned to strangers. For a year previous it had been observed a strict seclusion was maintained by the family. Some gossips had it that strange noises were frequently heard in the house and wailings as of one in distress.[”]

On introducing himself to us, Mr. Pallotta stated that he might possibly need our services in a matter—terminate how it would which must be kept secret until after his death. This injunction we were, of course, willing to observe, and so stated.

He then disclosed to us the fact that he had recently missed from his safe some jewels of great value, and that the circumstance of their disappearance left no doubt in his mind that they were taken either by his nephew or daughter. The profound agitation with which this disclosure was made left no doubt in our minds of the grief it cost him to make it.

“I would not,” he said, “put this matter in your hands, but that I am bound by a solemn obligation of honor to transmit them to the representative of my house when I die. It may be that my child has them, or my nephew, urged by debts which young men sometimes contract, has taken them to pledge, to enable him to raise money. In either event they will have to be recovered, since I cannot evade the vow I am under. You perceive now why I am compelled to require of you a pledge of secrecy.[”]

With this the interview terminated, and we set ourselves to work upon the case. To prosecute our inquiries more effectually it was necessary for me to visit the house. This I did as a guest, from a distant State.

A more beautiful creature than Marie Pallotta I had never seen. She seemed, indeed, a child of the tropics, radiant as a gem of the orient, star-eyed as the Egyptian queen. Long black hair, soft and silky, fell to her waist, while her slender, exquisitely proportioned figure would have been a sculptor's ideal. Graceful and witching in her young girlhood, and so innocent, that it seemed impossible to associate with a creature so lovely an idea of crime. The nephew was a tall, fine

looking man, with the dark tint of the Spaniard in his complexion, and the fire of his passionate race in his eyes. But they were bold, honest eyes, to which guilt seemed a stranger.

I knew at once that the old man's theory was waning. However suspicious the circumstances, these young people were guiltless. Still I kept my own counsel, and accepted the hospitalities I had come apparently to enjoy.

My room was on the second floor, elegantly and sumptuously appointed. After retiring, I sat before the fire enjoying a Havana and reflecting on the case. It must have been near midnight when my reverie was disturbed by a scream so piercing that my blood curdled at the fearful sound. It was succeeded by a sound of maniac laughter. The singular cadence echoed along the vaulted passages with a weird utterance that seemed to the fancy ghostly and chilling as the wind in a charnel house.

I could not account for it. Struck spellbound, I could only listen for its repetition; but it came no more. I will confess a nameless dread as I hastily undressed and sought forgetfulness in sleep. But my nerves were excited and slumber had utterly forsaken me. At last I dropped to sleep—a troubled uncertain kind of repose that wearied instead of resting mind and body. I awoke from this with a start. An icy hand was on my forehead, the weird cadence of that horrible laugh was in my ears. I sprung upright in bed, and before me in the dimly lighted room was a creature, so distorted in appearance, so misshapen and deformed, that my first impression was that I was in the presence of the supernatural. Before I had time to think, however, it fled. I sprung from the bed and followed hastily. Far up the flight of stairs I heard the patter of fleeing feet. Determined to see who my visitor was I followed hastily. Up into the highest story and back along a gallery the creature fled. I could see it run distinctly—a maniac woman. She stood in the center of a brilliantly lighted room formed like a cell. She was laughing and beckoning me on. At the threshold of the door lay a servant felled by some heavy instrument, and still insensible. All was plain to me now. The strange creature was a maniac confined in the house. In escaping she had nearly murdered her keeper. It was necessary to secure her, and for this purpose, before alarming the family, I advanced to where she stood. In doing so, my eye fell upon a casket concealed in the bosom of her dress. I gave the alarm, and in a moment almost the room was filled with frightened servants. Shortly afterwards the father and daughter came in. They both were greatly agitated, and evidently greatly surprised. I detailed to them as hastily as I could the circumstances that brought me there, and taking the casket in my hand I asked Mr. Pallotta what it was?

“The jewels! the jewels!” he exclaimed, and grasped it eagerly. The rest was soon explained. The woman was his wife. For long years she had been a maniac. Before her reason deserted her and her mind became a ruin, she knew where the jewels were kept and had frequently worn them. Inspired by some strange freak she had sought them with the result as stated.

Of course, all suspicion was now put at rest. I was enjoined to keep another secret. It can do no harm to publish it now, for both him who enjoined and she about whom it was made, are dust. Another clime protracts the life of the beautiful girl and the brave youth. No eye save those of a stranger will peruse these lines. It is a memory only to us who mingled in the scene.

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