

## *The Horror at the Old Stone House*

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There is an old stone house far back in the old Faubourg Marigny, with ruined gables and moss-covered roof. The wild vines creep up the gray walls, and the mildew clings to the arches. The soft twilight gathers around the pillars and arcades, while the summer night wind nestles among the clinging ivy. Long-ago memories blend with the legend that haunts the place. Silent and still the old house stands, a relict of other times. Its glory and magnificence have fled; the feet of the spoiler have trampled down its splendors, but even in decay it showed how grand it once had been.

Now, as the moonbeams gleam around its quaint mosaics, lighting up its sculptured arches and broken statuary, a mournful beauty lingers on the scene. It was such a night as this, not many years ago, that the horror was revealed that made it desolate. It was then the residence of a merchant, who had purchased it from the last descendant of the Spanish founders. He had not disturbed the old furniture nor displaced the adornments of the grand old rooms. As he found it, so had the house remained. The superstitions of the place were even respected, and the closed room far back in the wing of the mansion endured no intrusion. The old servants looked upon this room with a nameless dread; why, they could scarcely tell—but it was haunted. From children they had grown up to look upon it with horror. Generations had passed away since the room was closed, but the legend that clung to it was fresh in their memories and the fears it had created were still vivid.

It was said that many years ago an old Spaniard had condemned his beautiful daughter to imprisonment in that cell-like vault, and that she had died there of want. Often the old servants said of stormy nights, when the wind screamed through the ruined gables and the broken arches, a young girl's cries for [help], mingled with the echoes of the storm, and the moans of one in distress, were sometimes heard in the silent corridors. It was said, too, that in that room were stored the jewels and wealth of a buccaneer; but if this were so, no treasure could be more securely guarded. The story of the haunted room kept far away intrusive footsteps and prying eyes. So time went on, and the mildew gathered on the crusted marbles and the graceful arches of the old stone house. Silent and still remained the darkened room, and the old legend became a tale told with trembling lips and superstitious awe.

But time in its flight had brought a change to its inhabitants. A few years ago new claimants of the property appeared upon the scene. The father of the last owner had two sons. The eldest had died in Spain: the youngest succeeded to the estate, and being wild and reckless soon squandered his revenues, and at last sold it to the merchant who then resided in it. But before the father's death he made a will. He never believed his eldest son was dead. To him the old stone house was left. In case his death without heirs was proved, then it descended to his younger son. These new claimants were the son and daughter of the exiled heir. Although the will was probated and its provisions understood, there yet remained some papers necessary to establish their identity. These papers could nowhere be found. Many claimed that none such existed, and laughed to scorn the pretensions of the young people who had crossed the sea to claim the dead heir's inheritance. Suit had been commenced and the day of trial was approaching. For many months we had been employed in looking up evidence and searching the records of the family. We were not lawyers, it is true—only detectives; but we felt a vivid interest in the case, and when we were

sent for to assist in the search our whole hearts were given to the work.

It was evident the papers sought for one had an existence. But had they been destroyed? I thought not. There were many secret recesses in the old building, and in one of them I felt sure the papers had been placed. We had acted on this supposition, and had ransacked the old mansion high and low—all but the haunted room. And now we determined to search there.

I confess a strange uneasiness as I approached the door. What it was I feared it would have been difficult to explain. I had heard the old legend often repeated, and it is possible some trace of superstition is yet in my nature. But I did not let it interfere with the work I had in hand.

The door was forced open. At the sight that met our eyes the strongest frame trembled. The room was in wild disorder. The dust of a century covered the walls, and a green mold had settled on the furniture. The carpet crumpled like dust beneath our feet. The room had been a library, and worm eaten books, dusty and moldy, showed through the glass cases. But that which most appalled us was a human skeleton, stretched on the floor. Jewels glittered on the fleshless arms and a cluster of brilliants flamed on the boney finger. A mass of dark brown hair lay in a heap on the floor, and a sapphire gleaned mockingly from the tangled tresses. When the air from the open door rushed in a vaporish dust arose from the floor and hung for a moment in the air—then dissolved and past away. It was a moment before we recovered our senses and regained composure. Stepping over the ghastly relict, we went to a niche in the wall, and hidden away were the papers we had searched for so long—the title deeds from the Spanish crown; and beside them were gold and jewels that would have purchased an emperor's ransom. A century had fled since the strange deposit was made. No bolts and bars secured it—guarded alone by the silent skeleton and the legend of the old stone house.

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