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THE GARRET OF MADAME LEMOYNE

By W. K. MASHBURN, Jr.

WHEN Merriweather's idea took definite shape, Annette refused to have anything to do with it. A haunted house was a haunted house, as far as she was concerned. Yet she was really the cause of all that happened. The innocent cause, of course; but she suggested the thing to Merriweather.

Merriweather wanted to scare his wife, just for the sake of upsetting her poise. That wasn't really as cruel as it sounds, because Janice was a calm, blond Juno, whose eternal self-possession would at times have irked a more reasonable man than her husband. He had had some very vague idea when the pair of them first started for New Orleans to spend the carnival season with Walter and Annette Owen. There would be masks, an Old World atmosphere, and an altogether proper stage setting to make the possibility promising.

The Monday morning before the Mardi Gras Day, the quartet rode through the *Vieux Carré*—the "Old Quarter"—in Owen's car, visiting every spot that was likely to interest the Merriweathers. Annette made a perfect guide: she was of the Quarter herself, and she knew its every legend and historic spot as well as she knew the beads of her amber rosary. As all must do who tour the Quarter with competent guides, they came eventually to the "haunted" house.

Like so many of the old buildings

of that section, the house had, of late years, seen mostly the seamy side of life. Just now, it was desolate and unoccupied. Somebody had recently bought it—a Sicilian, rumor had it—and there was much talk of raising a fund to preserve the place to its traditions, while the *Vieux Carré* Historical Society passed the usual resolution of protest against the desecration of an old landmark. That was all it amounted to, and it was not the fault of any of the protestants that the old house escaped the ignominious fate of becoming a spaghetti factory. Annette said, later, that the legend saved it. That may be so, too, but the Sicilian probably abandoned the place to the Historical Society because of the Merriweathers, and nobody associated them with the legend. Nobody, that is, except the Owens.

On this particular morning, there was an old crone, maybe one of the Sicilian's dependents, possibly just an opportunist, taking advantage of the influx of carnival visitors to charge an admittance fee of twenty-five cents to everyone who wanted a peek at Madame Lemoyne's garret. Annette led the way up, and told the story to the Merriweathers, standing there in the attic's legend-haunted gloom.

"Nearly a hundred years ago," she informed them, "this house was occupied by a Madame Lemoyne. There was a Monsieur Lemoyne, too, but he doesn't seem to have amounted to

anything more than Madame's husband, so it is still known as Madame Lemoyne's house.

"This Madame Lemoyne was a Parisian of wealth and excellent family, so that her house became a gathering place for the élite of that day. Everyone agreed that Madame was a most charming woman, a brilliant hostess, and thoroughly worth cultivating. None suspected her of being the human fiend she was, nor dreamed of what her garret—*this* garret!—concealed, until one day her house burned.

"It didn't burn much, because the fire brigade arrived with unusual promptness. The blaze was in the attic, and that led to the discovery of the other things up there. At last Madame's secret was out! The horrified volunteer firemen—some of them blades of her very own circle—discovered seven black slaves in chains, all of them in various stages of mutilation.

"The charming *Parisienne* had maintained a private torture chamber, where she gratified her secret lust for cruelty upon the bodies of shackled and helpless negro slaves. All the details were never given out, but you can imagine them to have been horrible from the fact that one of the pitiful victims, a woman, somehow obtained the means to fire the garret, in the hope of ending, in the flames, her torment at Madame's beautiful white hands."

Annette paused to give her story dramatic effect, and Janice Merriweather made a slight grimace of distaste. Her husband, watching her, laughed at even so slight a ruffling of her calm; and Annette's climax fell rather flat as a result.

"What happened to the old girl herself?" Merriweather then wanted to know.

"Luckily for her, she was away from home when the fire broke out," Annette answered. "Very luckily,"

she continued, "for a mob soon formed and set about finding her, and Madame barely made her way aboard a French ship that was just then in the act of clearing port. She spent the rest of her life in Paris, and report had it that she became very noted for her piety and charity, and died at a ripe old age."

"So prosper the wicked," sententiously pronounced Merriweather. "But you have yet to tell us why the place is supposed to be haunted."

"Ah!" Annette enlightened. "The slaves. They are said still to haunt this old attic, hoping that Madame may some day come back."

"Hoping that she may come back?" echoed Merriweather, with a show of interest. "Then that means hoping for a chance for revenge?"

Annette nodded. "Surely. There was one horribly mutilated giant of a black, so the story goes, whose tongue had been torn out with pincers, and who refused to leave his torture-chamber after they had taken the chains off him. He made people understand that he wanted to wait for Madame's return; and, as his unshackled hands and arms were unmaimed, and of enormous size and strength, he resisted all efforts to move him so savagely that they left him there until he died, a few days later."

"I don't blame them," volunteered Walter Owen. "I've seen buck niggers working on the wharves with arms as big as my thighs, and knotted with muscles until they looked like the limbs of an oak."

"Well, I don't suppose ghost arms could do much harm, regardless of how tremendously they were thewed," was Janice's practical observation.

"Oh, but they could in this case," Annette quickly corrected. "You see, if they are able to stay on earth at all, spirits seeking vengeance on their murderers have the power to

embody themselves momentarily, under the right circumstances, and on the scene of the crime. That's what the old mammies say, I mean."

Janice laughed a little, indulgently. "I'm almost inclined to suspect that you half believe all that, yourself," she gently scoffed.

Annette retorted, in a flash, "Would *you* come up here, alone, at midnight?"

"Oh, come," interrupted Owen. "None of us believe that part of it, of course. But it would be sort of creepy up here, at that time of night. Right now, it's just stuffy: let's get down to the car, and out into the sunshine."

With that, they went down to the street, but Annette decided, on the way, that she didn't wonder that Janice's calm superiority irritated her husband.

MERRIWEATHER was not content to let the subject drop. Next day he brought it up again. "You *wouldn't* go up alone into that haunted attic at midnight, would you?"

"Why not?" Janice coolly demanded.

"Would you?" insisted her husband.

"Certainly," replied Janice, "if there were any reason for it."

"I *dare* you—tonight!" challenged Merriweather.

Janice laughed, tolerantly. "Did you ever before see such persistence on a foolish subject?" she asked the Owens. Then, with the slightest of shrugs, she answered her husband. "Very well, since you are so set on it. After the ball, tonight."

"Bully for you!" Merriweather applauded. He seemed delighted with her decision.

"Oh!" Annette uneasily objected. "I wouldn't, if I were you."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know, but I just don't like it. You know, you're going to

wear a costume that is just the sort of dress Madame Lemoyne might have worn in her day."

"Meaning——?" suggested Janice.

"Nothing!" decided Annette, rather flatly. "You-all go if you will, but I shall not." If Pontius Pilate had been a Louisiana Creole, he would have disavowed responsibility with just such a shrug of his shoulders as she used.

AT A little after a quarter of midnight, Merriweather sought out Owen in the crowd of revelers at the Mardi Gras ball. Both were in costume, and masked, but each was, of course, acquainted with the other's disguise; so that finding him was no great matter. Owen, in fact, was also searching for Merriweather, and anticipated the latter's question when they met. "The ladies have already gone out to the car," he stated. "It's a couple of blocks down the street, and, as I didn't know how long it would take to find you, I sent them on to save time."

"Good!" approved Merriweather. "So Annette decided to go, after all?"

Owen nodded. "Yes; Janice persuaded her that it was just a harmless lark."

"Good!" Merriweather said again. "Now listen: I'm not going with you. You tell 'em you couldn't find me, and that I told you beforehand that I'd follow in a taxi, if you went off and left me. I want to beat you down there," he went on, in explanation, "and be in the garret when Janice climbs up. I'll scare her out of her calm, for once!"

Owen remonstrated, but Merriweather cut him short. "I know it wouldn't do for Annette—she'd have double hysterics, and so would any normal woman. Not Janice! I may hand her a jolt, but it won't be a very big one."

Merriweather had become detached from the others, earlier in the night, and it was evident to Owen that he had found a bootlegger in the interval, and, more or less, taken a doubtful advantage of his discovery. Owen realized, moreover, that Merriweather's determination to shatter his wife's irritatingly cool self-possession had become something of an obsession with the man, even without the whisky.

"Go ahead," urged Merriweather. "I *am* going in a taxi—I have one waiting. The door to the stairs will be open: I fixed it with that old hag this afternoon."

With that, he was off, and Owen went out to repeat his lame story to the women.

Janice smiled. "I know quite well what he plans," she remarked; "but I think he'll be disappointed."

Owen said nothing as he started the car toward the Old Quarter, but he, as Annette had already done, reached the decision that a woman so eternally poised was a phenomenon to set the nerves of any man on edge.

Arrived at Madame Lemoynes house, Walter tried the stair door, and found it unlocked, as Merriweather had said it would be.

"Well," he said, consulting his watch, "let's go up; it doesn't lack a full minute of midnight."

"I am going alone," Janice reminded him. "That was the bargain."

Without more ado she slipped past, and climbed lightly and quickly up the first flight of stairs. Walter looked at Annette in some hesitation. "She didn't even take the flashlight," he remarked. "Hadn't we better follow her?"

"Let her go!" Annette had not forgotten her own contribution to Janice's amusement on their previous visit to the house, and so was inclined to be a bit catty. (She was not

anxious to climb those stairs, anyway!) She swiftly became contrite, however, and as swiftly reversed her decision. "No, I didn't mean that! Let's go!"

They climbed the first flight of stairs, listening for Janice's footfall above them; but the house was as oppressively silent as a country churchyard. Acting upon some impulse, Annette grasped Walter's coat sleeve as they started up the second and final flight of stairs to the garret.

"Hurry!" she whispered.

At that instant, a clock somewhere commenced to strike the midnight hour. Instinctively, Walter paused upon the stairs, and Annette drew closer to him, while the twelve strokes rang out dolorously upon the still night. For no apparent reason they were holding their breaths when the last stroke died out. The quiet was more noticeable than ever, and it seemed that an electric tension had been added to the air. Then—

"Oh!" moaned Annette, clutching frantically at her husband. "I knew it! Oh-h!"

Heedless of her grasping hands, Owen sprang up the stairway, in answer to the agony-laden screams that had come from the garret—screams that had stopped short with a suddenness that was even more awful.

The impetus of his last upward leap carried Walter into the attic, or else he would have stopped short to fight off the fear, terrible and mastering, that gripped him at the top of the steps. He felt his scalp prickle, and sensed the presence of *something* in the farther darkness of that black and barren garret—something terrible, something huge, and black, and utterly malignant.

Dimly conscious of it, he could hear Annette wailing, upon the stairs below him. Ahead, in the thick, almost tangible darkness, there sounded a mouthy, incoherent babble, like unto the gibbering of a soul lost in the

dismal wastes between worlds. That, and the *something*—

Suddenly Owen realized that he had, in his last headlong upward flight, instinctively snapped the switch of his powerful electric torch—snapped it *off*. Click! it went on again. Did he but imagine that a towering shape, blacker than mere darkness, shrank away and melted under the sudden powerful ray of light? A flood of relief and fresh assurance swept over Walter as the white beam leaped forward.

His relief was short-lived! In the light of the torch, Owen beheld a twisted and oddly terrifying heap upon the dusty boards of the attic. Janice! And bending over her, patting her face with hands that came away darkly stained, crouched a frantically gabbling figure, garbed in a harlequin suit.

"Merriweather!" croaked Owen; and the babbler clutched the figure from the floor to his breast, changing his awful mouthing to a whimpering snarl of defiance.

SO ENDED Merriweather's jest. The law would have had his life, except that the police found him raving mad, when they came and forced his arms from their pitiful embrace. Gravely, those upon whom the responsibility for such things rests constructed a theory that satisfied them and the public. From Owen's testimony (they got nothing from Annette but shudders and sobs), they

deduced that Merriweather's obsession to break the perpetual self-control of his wife had become almost monomania; poison whisky, and his rage when he supposedly failed to frighten Janice in the garret, had supplied the final leverage to unbalance his reason. Thus his intended joke became stark tragedy, and Merriweather strangled his wife. In this wise argued the law, and was complacently satisfied when press and public docilely accepted its theory.

As for Walter Owen and Annette his wife, they had their doubts. They kept them, wisely, to themselves, but they had them, none the less. For Owen had seen that huddled heap crumpled upon the floor of Madame Lemoyne's garret—garbed much as Madame might have been!—and had observed that the great marks upon her white neck were more, by nearly double, than Merriweather's small hands could compass. Neither did Walter believe that Merriweather's occasional irritation at his wife's disconcerting lack of feminine "temperament" had become anything like an obsession that finally snapped his reason. Instead, Owen remembered his own almost overpowering fear of the *something* in the attic, that he had only sensed. Suppose Merriweather *saw*—came to grips with—*It!*

One thing more—one detail the coroner, in all propriety, suppressed: *Janice Merriweather's tongue had been torn from her mouth by the roots!*

