

The Ghost Detective

By Mark Lemon

“You take an interest in Christmas legends, I believe?” said my friend Carraway, passing the claret.

“Yes, I think they are as good as any other,” I replied.

“And have faith in ghosts?”

“Well, I must answer that question with an equivocation. Yes—no.”

“Then if you care to listen, I can, I fancy, remove your scepticism,” said Carraway.

I professed my willingness to be converted, provided I might smoke whilst my friend talked, and the conditions being agreed to, Carraway commenced:

“When I first came into the City—now some thirty years ago—I formed an intimacy with a young man in the wine trade, and we passed most of our leisure time together. He was much liked by his employers, whose principal business was with publicans and tavern-keepers, and after a time my friend became their town traveller—a position of trust and fair emolument. This advancement enabled my friend, James Loxley, to carry out a long-cherished desire, and that was to marry a fair cousin to whom he had been attached from his boyhood. The girl was one of those pretty *blondes* that are so attractive to young fellows with a turn for the sentimental, and a tendency to sing about violet eyes and golden hair and all that. I was never given that way myself, and I confess Loxley’s cousin would not have been the woman I should have chosen for a wife had I ever thought of taking to myself an incumbrance. I had had a step-mother, and she cured me of any matrimonial inclinations which I might have had at one time. Well, Loxley thought differently to me, and his marriage with his cousin, Martha Lovett, was settled, and I was appointed best man upon the occasion.

“The bride certainly looked very pretty in her plain white dress—very pretty, though somewhat paler than usual, and that perhaps made me think more than ever that Martha was not the wife my friend James should have selected, knowing as I did that they would only have his salary to live upon, and that much would depend upon her to make his means sufficient for decent comfort. However, they were sincerely attached to each other, and that, I was told, was worth one or two hundred a year, which I did not believe. Martha was greatly agitated at the altar, and at one time I thought she would have fainted before the ceremony, as they call it, had finished. As it was, she had a slight attack of hysteria in the vestry, but the pew-opener told me that was nothing unusual with brides, especially with those who had been widows.

“The wedding-breakfast was a quiet affair—nothing like the sacrificial feasts of the present day—and we were all merry enough until the happy pair were to leave for their own home, and then poor little Martha hung about her mother’s neck and sobbed—much more than I thought was complimentary to her new husband—but then I was not a fair judge of the sex, having been worried all my life by a step-mother.

“When Loxley and his wife were fairly settled in their new home I used frequently to pop in for a game at cribbage or a chat with my old friend, and a more loving couple I never saw in my life. Not being by any means rich, they had babies, of course, and in less than three years there were two most charming creatures—when they didn’t cry or poke out their eyes with the tea-spoons, or perform any other of those antics which are the delight of parents, but can only be designated as inflictions to unattached spectators.

“I have thought it only fair to mention these little matters; you will see wherefore by and by.

“Loxley had invited me to take my Christmas dinner with him, and a pleasant day we had I He was partial to keeping Christmas with all the honours, and his little dining-room—it was his drawing-room also—was sprigged about with holly, even to the picture frames. He had only two oil paintings—portraits of his father and mother, both long deceased, but the likenesses, he said, were so good, that he could always fancy his parents were present.

“Well, as I have mentioned, we passed a happy day and night; Loxley had arranged to go with me for a couple of days into the country, on a visit to a good old uncle of mine, as an atonement for keeping me away from the family dinner.

“The visit was paid; but I was rather annoyed at the effort which Loxley evidently made to appear entertained, and I thought he was home-sick, or vexed that I had not invited his wife to join us, as there were lady visitors at my uncle’s. Whatever was the cause of his frequent abstractions, I could only regret it, as I had given him such a good character for cheerfulness and pleasant companionship, that one of my cousins twitted me, with rural delicacy, for having brought a thorough wet blanket from London.

“During our journey back to town Loxley was silent and thoughtful, and I longed to ask if anything troubled him. But we had passed such a jovial Christmas Day together that I could not suppose he had any other anxiety than what the restoration to the arms of his Martha would remove. We parted, however, without any explanation being asked or volunteered.

“On the second day after our return, I was astounded at receiving a message from Loxley to come to him at the Mansion House. The officer who brought the note told me that Loxley was in custody, charged, he believed, by his employer with no less an offence than embezzlement.

“Such an accusation seemed at first to me, who had known Loxley so long, so intimately, preposterous—impossible. As I walked to the Mansion House a cold sweat seized me, and for a moment I thought I should have fallen, as the strange conduct of my friend during the past two days came to my recollection. Had he found his means too small for his home requirements? Had he been tempted, and yielded as good men had done before him? No, no!—a thousand times, no I—if I knew James Loxley rightly.

“He was standing at the prisoners’ bar when I reached the Mansion House, and I was not permitted to speak to him. He saw me, however, and knew his friend was with him.

“The junior principal, who had recently joined the firm of X. and Co.—by the bye, he had for some reason never taken kindly to Loxley—was giving his evidence. He said: ‘That John Rogers, a customer of the house, had caused a great deal of trouble with his over-due account, and that it was thought he would prove a defaulter. Mr. X. (the prosecutor) had heard accidentally that Rogers had received a large sum of money, and as Mr. Loxley was away from business Mr. X. had called upon the debtor to demand payment of his debt. Mr. X. was received with much insolence by Rogers; and his conduct was accounted for subsequently by the production of Loxley’s receipt for the money, dated the 24th of December. The man had paid £40 by a cheque to Loxley, and no such amount was credited in the books of X. and Co. Rogers produced his banker’s book, and the cheque with Loxley’s signature on the back. It was found, also, that a person answering by description to Loxley had received two notes of £20 each, one of which had been paid at the Bank of England in gold early on the morning after Christmas Day.’

“This evidence was confirmed by John Rogers, who had given the cheque; by the banker’s cashier, who had paid it; and by the Bank of England clerk, who had given gold for the note.

“Loxley was asked—having received the usual caution—if he wished to say anything.

“He answered:

““Yes; and he thought he had been hardly used by his employers, that an explanation of the matter had not been required from him by them before he had been taken into custody as a thief. He had also heard of Roger’s accession to money; and having the interests of his employers in view, went at once to the man and with great difficulty succeeded in obtaining payment of the debt. He received the cheque, but, fearing that Rogers might stop the payment of it at his banker’s, he, Loxley, cashed it immediately, placing the notes he received, as he believed, in his pocket-book. As it was Christmas Eve, he did not return to X. and Co’s, the house being closed, but walked home with a friend he had met in the banking house when he received the money for Roger’s cheque. On the morning of the 26th he had intended calling at X. and Co.’s on his way to his appointment with me; but, finding he was late, he attached no consequence to the omission, having a holiday. When he was at his journey’s end and in his bedroom, he was looking in his pocket-book for some matter or the other, and for the first time missed the banknotes he had received for the cheque. He was completely perplexed, being certain that he had placed the notes in the case, and that he had never lost possession of them. He had employed the morning of his return to town in searching—vainly, he knew—all conceivable places at home for the missing notes, and of course without success. Before he could go to X. and Co.’s offices he was taken into custody.’

“ ‘One of the notes was cashed at the Bank of England early on the morning of the 26th, was it not?’ asked the Lord Mayor.

“The bank clerk who cashed the note said, ‘Yes, it appeared so, but he could not remember exactly whether it was presented by a man or a woman. He thought it was not paid to the prisoner.’

““But it was paid, and in gold,’ said the Lord Mayor. ‘The embezzlement of employers’ money is one of the gravest offences against the law, and must be severely punished and put a stop to. The statement of the prisoner is very plausible—very feasible, perhaps I should say—but I cannot feel it my duty to decide upon its truth and falsehood. He must be committed for trial.’

“Loxley bowed his head and remained immovable, until a shriek in the passage of the court reached him, and he started as from a dream. He instantly looked to where I had been standing, and I understood his meaning. He was right. He had recognized the voice of his wife, who, having heard where they had taken her husband, had followed after. I found her as I had seen her on her wedding day—hysterical, but the attack was very violent; it was with great difficulty I conveyed her to her mother’s, and thence to her own home.

“I said all I could to comfort her. I told her my own conviction of Loxley’s innocence, my full belief in the explanation which he had given, and the certainty of his speedy liberation. But I spoke to a stricken woman, to a distracted wife, a half mad mother. She sat for some time with her children in her lap, rocking to and fro, and sobbing as though her heart would burst. She cried to me to succour her husband, to bring him home, if not for her sake, for that of her innocent children. She would not let her mother speak, but continue to appeal to me until—yes, I own it—until I fairly broke down and could not answer her. And all this while the green holly garnishing the room, and the faces of the father and mother looking on placidly from the walls.”

The recollection of the painful scene he had been describing made Carraway silent for a time, and I remarked that he had the satisfaction of knowing he had done his duty to his friend, whether he proved guilty or innocent.

“Yes,” continued Carraway, “I had that satisfaction, though I did not desire to blow my own trumpet in what I have said. Well, when the elder X., who had been away from town, heard of

the matter he was inclined to believe Loxley's statement, and blamed his son for his precipitancy. The matter, however, was beyond his control now, and the law had to vindicate its supremacy.

"The trial came on, and the gentleman whose professional business it was to prove Loxley guilty necessarily did all that was possible to show the weakness of the defence. He asked why Loxley had not instantly returned to town when he had discovered the loss of the notes? Why had he not written to his employers? Why had he not mentioned his loss to me—the friend whom he had called to speak to his character? No satisfactory answer could be given for such omissions. What had become of the other note? If a dishonest person had found the notes—supposing them to have been lost—would they not have changed both of them for gold? The most favourable construction which could be placed upon the case was the supposition that the prisoner had need to twenty pounds and had taken his employer's money, intending, very likely, to replace it. That was no uncommon case. The pressure of what seemed to be only a temporary difficulty had often led well-meaning men into such unpardonable breaches of trust. And now, having placed the case as fairly as he could before the jury, his duty was done, and it rested with the twelve intelligent men in the box to pronounce their verdict.

"'Embezzlement,' the judge said, very properly, 'was a serious crime, and must be repressed by the punishment of offenders. The jury had heard the prosecutor's statement—proved by highly respectable witnesses; and the prisoner's defence—unsupported by any corroborative evidence. The jury had to judge between them.'

"Without leaving their box the jury, after a brief consultation, pronounced a verdict of 'Guilty,' and my friend—my dear friend, James Loxley—was sentenced to transportation.

"This terrible sentence was almost fatal to Mrs. Loxley. Her delicate constitution would have given way under her excess of grief had not—well, had not I set before her the duty she owed to her children, who had a right to a share in her affection. Poor thing! she struggled bravely to overcome her great sorrow, but I doubt much if she would have succeeded but for what I am now about to relate to you. Stay—I must mention one or two matters before I tell you that portion of my story.

"The Loxleys occupied only part of the house in which they lived. They had their own furniture, but the landlady of the house provided servants, excepting a little girl who acted as nurse.

"The general servant who waited upon the Loxleys was one of those patient drudges often found in lodging-houses. Her name was Susan, but Loxley had given her the sobriquet of 'Dormouse,' as she was a drowsy, stupid—perhaps sullen is the better word—girl, who moved about more like a piece of machinery than a living being. She never showed any feeling, either of displeasure or gratification, excepting in her strong attachment to Loxley's children. That arose, perhaps, from her womanly instinct. But when Mrs. Loxley's great trouble came, when the girl had come to understand what had befallen Mr. Loxley, and that misery and ruin had overtaken them and their children, Susan's whole nature appeared to undergo a change. She seemed to watch every want, every movement of Mrs. Loxley. More than once she was found sitting on the stairs near Mrs. Loxley's door, when that poor lady was in her paroxysms of grief as though desirous to lend what aid she could in subduing them. I was so struck by the devotion and sympathy of this poor, stupid creature that I could not help noticing her, and on one occasion offered her money. She refused to take it.

"'No, thank'ee, sir,' she said; 'that's not what I want; but I should like to be of use to poor missus, if I could, sir.'

“I told her she had been of great use, great comfort, to Mrs. Loxley, who had seen, as I had, how much she felt for her misfortunes.

“‘Yes, sir, that’s true enough. And what will they do to Mr. Loxley, sir?’ she asked.

“‘He will have to suffer a great deal, Susan—great misery; but neither you nor I can help him.’

“The girl burst into tears, and cried so bitterly that Mrs. Loxley overheard her, and I have no doubt questioned her when I was gone.

“Mrs. Loxley’s mother was staying with her, the elder Mr. X. having insisted upon making a temporary provision for the unhappy wife of the man he still believed to be innocent—I say Mrs. Loxley’s mother was staying with her daughter. She had gone to bed in an adjoining room, as Mrs. Loxley frequently begged to be allowed to sit alone, as she found it difficult to sleep. I have reason to believe that after her mother had gone to rest, Mrs. Loxley had an interview with Susan; but, for reasons which will appear, I never questioned her on that point. It was past midnight, according to Mrs. Loxley’s statement, when, sitting with her head resting on her hands, she saw the door of her room open, and her husband enter; saw him as plainly and like himself as she had ever seen him. She rose up; but the figure motioned her to remain where she was. She complied; now conscious that it was not her husband in the flesh upon which she looked. The figure sat down in his accustomed place, and then appeared to gaze steadfastly on the portrait of his father, still ornamented with the faded holly twigs which had been placed there at Christmas-time. This continued for some minutes. The figure then rose up and, looking towards Mrs. Loxley with a most loving expression on its face, walked from the room, opening and closing the door after it.

“Mrs. Loxley tried to follow, but could not. She was not asleep, she had not been even dozing—she was sure of that, but had seen with her waking senses the apparition of her husband, then lying in Newgate prison.

“What followed seemed equally inexplicable to me, who had more than once witnessed her tendency to hysteria and fainting. She said she had felt no alarm at what she had seen. She was stupefied for a few moments, but not alarmed. She went to her mother; but finding her quietly sleeping Mrs. Loxley lay down beside her without disturbing her. In the morning she narrated to her mother what she had witnessed during the past night, and subsequently repeated her story—word for word, her mother said—to me, in the presence of her landlady and the maid Susan.

“The effect upon the poor, dull-witted servant was very remarkable. She fixed her eyes on the portrait which had attracted the notice of the apparition as though she were fascinated by it. She then asked Mrs. Loxley, with a voice and look of terror, ‘Did you speak to the ghost, missus?’ And when Mrs. Loxley replied ‘No,’ Susan inquired, ‘And didn’t the ghost speak to you?’

“Mrs. Loxley answered that she had told all that had occurred, adding nothing, keeping back nothing; and this assurance seemed to have a consolatory effect upon the girl, who then busied herself with her work. I had made inquiries at the prison, as Mrs. Loxley foreboded illness or death to her husband, and learned that my unfortunate friend was in health, and had become more resigned to the cruel future which awaited him. Mrs. Loxley appeared to be satisfied with this account of her husband.

“The night which succeeded Mrs. Loxley proposed to pass in the same manner; but her mother insisted upon remaining with her, and that night no apparition came.

“Mrs. Loxley was disappointed, and attributed the absence of the spirit to the presence of her mother, and it was now her turn to insist. Mrs. Lovett went to her room, having promised to go to bed and not seek to watch or return to her daughter. It was impossible, however, for the old lady

to sleep, and she listened to every noise in the street, and to those unaccountable sounds which we have all heard in our lonely rooms.

“It was again past midnight, and Mrs. Loxley had, she admitted, worked herself into a high state of expectancy, when, without the opening of the door, the figure of her husband stood in the room. Again it regarded her most tenderly for a few seconds, and then fixed its gaze on the portrait of Loxley’s father. It had not seated itself, as on the former visitation, but stood, with its hands folded, as though in supplication. It then turned its face to Mrs. Loxley and opened its arms, as if inviting her to its embrace. Without a moment’s hesitation she rose, and almost rushed to the bosom of the shadow. But the impalpable figure offering no resistance, she dashed herself against the panelling of the room, and the withered holly sprigs in the frame of the picture above her fell rustling to the ground. The shade was gone!

“Mrs. Lovett, hearing the noise against the panel and the scratching of the falling holly, immediately went to her daughter. Mrs. Loxley had not borne the second visitation so bravely as she had done the former one, and it was necessary to call for assistance, as a violent attack of hysteria succeeded the vision.

“The ‘Dormouse,’ usually most difficult to arouse, was the first to hear the calling of Mrs. Lovett and to go to her assistance.

“ ‘Has she seen it again?’ asked Susan, almost directly she had entered.

“ ‘Yes.’

“ ‘And did he speak to her this time, missus?’ asked Susan. Mrs. Lovett con not satisfy the girl’s curiosity, but when Mrs. Loxley revived sufficiently to tell what she had seen, Susan repeated her inquiries and appeared to be relieved when she heard that the ghost had been silent.

“I was sent for early in the morning, and, having dispatched what pressing business matters I had, I went to Mrs. Loxley. She was, as before, perfectly circumstantial in her account of what she had seen, not varying in the least from her first statement; and she and her mother believed that she had seen with her corporeal eyes the spirit of her living husband. I could not bring myself quite to this conclusion. I therefore suggested that it was possibly the association of the portrait with her husband, acting upon her overtaxed brain, that had conjured up these shadows. Mrs. Loxley admitted the possibility of such a solution and readily acceded to my proposal to take down the portrait which had attracted, as it seemed, the attention of the figure, and then to abide the result of another night, if Mrs. Loxley felt equal to courting the return of the vision.

“I rang the bell for the maid, and requested her to bring the steps.

“ ‘What for?’ she asked quickly.

“ ‘To take down one of the pictures,’ I replied.

“ ‘There ain’t no steps,’ she said firmly.

“I could have sworn I had seen a pair in the passage as I entered, but I might have been mistaken, and I did not press the request. The picture was easily removed by my standing on a chair.

“As I turned to place the picture on the floor I was perfectly thunderstruck to see the change which had come over Susan. She stood transfixed as it were, her mouth and eyes distended to the full, her hands stretched out, as though she were looking upon the ghost which had disturbed us all.

“ ‘What is the matter with the girl?’ I exclaimed, and all eyes were directed to her.

“Susan fell upon her knees and hid her face almost on the ground and screamed out, ‘I’m guilty, missus! I’m found out! I knowed why the ghost come! I’m guilty!’

“We were all astounded! After a few moments, as I stood on the chair with the face of the portrait towards me, Mrs. Loxley uttered a shrill cry and rushed to the picture. From the inside of the frame to which the canvas was attached she took out a note for £20—the note which had formed part of the forty which Loxley had received and had lost so mysteriously!

“There was no doubt who had been the thief. Susan had already confessed herself guilty, and I did not hesitate to obtain what other confession I could from her. It seemed that Loxley had been mistaken in supposing he had placed the notes in his pocket-book. Owing to his surprise at meeting the friend he had spoken to at the banker’s he had placed the notes in his trousers-pocket, and the force of habit had induced him to think he had otherwise disposed of them. These notes, so carelessly placed, he had drawn forth with his hand whilst ascending his own stairs, and Susan had found them. The half-witted creature showed her prize to an old man employed to clean shoes and knives, and he counselled the changing of one of the notes, with what success we know. Susan received none of the money, as the old scoundrel declared himself a partner in the waif, and told Susan she might keep the other note. But what Susan saw and heard subsequently had so terrified her and filled her with remorse, that she dared not dispose of her ill-gotten money, but, strangely enough, concealed it behind the portrait of Loxley’s father.

“My friend, by the exertions of X., sen., was soon liberated, and by the honourable conduct of the same gentleman, who did all he could to repair the wrong unwittingly done to Loxley, an excellent appointment was found in Australia. There James and Martha and their progeny are now, and thriving, I am glad to say.

“I’ll trouble you for the claret,” added Carraway. “And now do you believe in ghosts?”

“I must make the answer I did before,” I replied. “Yes—no. I think the apparition was provoked by the cause you at first suggested—namely, the association of Loxley’s with his father’s portrait and Mrs. Loxley’s over-taxed brain. You have heard, no doubt, of the well-known case of M. Nicolai, the Berlin banker, who, according to his own account, having experienced several unpleasant circumstances, saw phantasms of the living and the dead by dozens, and was yet convinced they were not ghosts. Mrs. Loxley might have also been dreaming, without being aware of it, as others have done; and it is rather against the ghost, if he appeared only to discover the lost note, that he came not when Mrs. Lovett was present.”

“But the note was found behind the portrait at which the ghost looked so earnestly. How can you account for that?” asked Carraway.

“Well, I am so much a doubter of spiritual manifestation that I can satisfy myself, though not you, perhaps, on that particular. Suppose this stupid Dormouse had taken it into her silly head that Mr. Loxley’s ghost had come for Mr. Loxley’s money, and under that impression had placed the note behind the picture after she had heard Mrs. Loxley’s account of the first visitation, in order to get rid of the money which the ghost wanted?”

“I don’t believe that!” said Carraway. “I believe it was a real, actual ghost!”

“I don’t,” I replied, “and so we end as we began. I’ll thank you for the cigars.”