

FICTION

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# The Phantom Of Bogue Holauba

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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# THE PHANTOM OF BOGUE HOLAUBA

By Charles Egbert Craddock

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Gordon never forgot the sensation he experienced on first beholding it. There was no mist in the midnight. The moon was large and low. The darkness of the dense, towering forests on either hand impinged in no wise on the melancholy realm of wan light in which the Mississippi lay, unshadowed, solitary, silent as always, its channel here a mile or more in breadth.

He had been observing how the mighty water-course was sending out its currents into a bayou, called Bogue Holauba, as if the larger stream were a tributary of the lesser. This peculiarity of the river in the deltaic region, to throw off volume instead of continually receiving affluents, was unaccustomed to him, being a stranger to the locality, and for a moment it focussed his interest. The next, his every faculty was concentrated on a singular phenomenon on the bank of the bogue.

He caught his breath with a gasp; then, without conscious volition, he sought to explain it to his own shocked senses, to realize it as some illusion, some combination of natural causes, the hour, the pallor pervading the air, the distance, for his boat was near the middle of the stream,—but the definiteness of the vision annulled his efforts.

There on the broad, low margin, distinct, yet with a coercive conviction of unreality, the figure of a man drawn in lines of vague light paced slowly to and fro; an old man, he would have said, bent and wizened, swaying back and forth, in expressive contortions, a very pantomime of woe, wringing gaunt hands and arms above his head, and now and again bowing low in recurrent paroxysms of despair. The wind held its breath, and the river, mute as ever, made no sign, and the encompassing alluvial wilderness stood for a type of solitude. Only the splashing of the paddle of the "dug-out" gave token of the presence of life in all the land.

Gordon could not restrain his wonder. "What--what--is--that Thing--over there on the bank of the bogue?" he called out to the negro servant who was paddling the canoe.

He was all unprepared for the effect of his words. Indeed, he was fain to hold hard to the gunwales. For the negro, with a sudden galvanic start, let slip the paddle from his hand, recovering it only by a mighty lunge in a mechanical impulse of self-preservation. The dug-out, the most tricky craft afloat, rocked violently in the commotion and threatened to capsize. Then, as it finally righted, its course was hastily changed, and under the impetus of panic terror it went shooting down the river at a tremendous speed.

"Why, what does all this meant" demanded Gordon.

"Don't ye talk ter me, boss!" the boatman, with chattering teeth, adjured his passenger. "Don't ye talk ter me, boss! Don't tell me ye seed somepin over dar on Bogue Holauba--'kase ef ye *do* I'se gwine ter turn dis dug-out upside down an' swim out ter de Arkansas side. I ain't gwine ter paddle dis boat fur no ghost-seer, sure 's ye are born. I ain't gwine ter have no traffickin' wid ghosts nur ghost-seers nuther. I'd die 'fore de year's out, sure!"

The sincerity of the servant's fright was attested by the change in his manner. He had been hitherto all cheerful, though respectful, affability, evidently bidding high for a tip. Now he crouched disconsolate and sullen in his place, wielding the paddle with all his might, and sedulously holding down his head, avoiding the stranger's eye.

Gordon felt the whole situation in some sort an affront to his dignity, and the apparition being withdrawn from view by the changed direction, he was in better case to take account of this,—to revolt at the uncouth character of the craft and guide sent for him; the absence of any member of his entertainers family to welcome the visitor, here at their instance and invitation; the hour of the night; the uncanny incident of the inexplicable apparition,—but when that thought recurred to him he sheered off precipitately from the recollection.

It had the salutary effect of predisposing him to make the best of the situation. Being to a degree a man of the world and of a somewhat large experience, he began to argue within himself that he could scarcely have expected a different reception in these conditions. The great river being at the stage known as "dead low water," steamboat travel was practically suspended for the season, or he could have reached his destination more directly than by rail. An accident had delayed the train some seven hours, and although the gasoline launch sent to meet him at the nearest way-station had been withdrawn at nightfall, since he did not arrive, as his sable attendant informed him, the dug-out had been substituted, with instructions to wait all night, on the remote chance that he might come, after all.

Nevertheless, it was with an averse, disaffected gaze that he silently watched the summit-line of foliage on either bank of the river glide slowly along the sky, responsive to the motion of the boat. It seemed a long monotony of this experience, as he sat listless in the canoe, before a dim whiteness began to appear in a great, unbroken expanse in the gradually enlarging riparian view--the glister of the moon on the open cotton-bolls in the fields. The forests were giving way, the region of swamp and bayou. The habitations of man were at hand, and when at last the dug-out was run in to a plantation landing, and Kenneth Gordon was released from his cramped posture in that plebeian craft, he felt so averse to his mission, such a frivolous, reluctant distaste that he marvelled how he was to go through with it at all, as he took his way along the serpentine curves of the "dirt road," preceded by his guide, still with eyes averted and sullen mien, silently bearing his suit-case.

A few turns, and suddenly a large house came into view, rearing its white facade to the moonlight in the midst of a grove of magnolia trees, immense of growth, the glossy leaves seeming a-drip with lustre as with dew. The flight of steps and the wide veranda were here cumbered with potted ferns and foliage plants as elsewhere, and gave the first suggestion of conformity to the ways of the world that the adventure had yet borne. The long, broad, silent hall into which he was ushered, lighted only by a kerosene hand-lamp which the servant carried as he led the way, the stairs which the guest ascended in a mansion of unconscious strangers, all had teerie intimations, and the comfort and seclusion of the room assigned to Gordon was welcome indeed to him; for, argue as he might, he was conscious of a continuous and acute nervous strain. He had had a shock, he was irritably aware, and he would be glad of rest and quiet.

It was a large, square, comfortable room in one of the wings, overlooking a garden, which sent up a delectable blend of fragrance and dew through the white muslin curtains at the long, broad windows, standing open to the night. On a table, draped with the inevitable "drawn-work" of civilization, stood a lamp of finer fashion, but no better illuminating facilities, than the one carried off by the darky, who had made great haste to leave the room, and who had not lifted his eyes toward the ill-omened "ghost-seer" nor spoken a word since Gordon had blurted out his vision on Bogue Holaba. This table also bore a tray with crackers and sandwiches and a decanter of sherry, which genially intimated hospitable forethought. The bed was a big four-poster, which no be-dizenment could bring within the fashion of the day. Gordon had a moment's poignant recoil from the darkness, the strangeness, the recollection of the inexplicable apparition he had witnessed, as his head sank on the pillow, embroidered after the latest fads.

He could see through the open window that the moon was down at last and the world abandoned to gloom. He heard from out some neighboring swamp the wild lamenting cry of the crane; and then, listen as he might, the night had lapsed to silence, and the human hearts in this house, all unknown to him, were as unimagined, as unrelated, as unresponsive, as if instead of a living, breathing home he lay in some mute city of the dead.

The next moment, as it seemed, a sky as richly azure as the boasted heavens of Italy filled his vision as he lifted himself on his elbow. A splendid, creamy, magnolia bloom was swaying in the breeze, almost touching the window-sill. There was a subdued, respectful knocking at the door, which Gordon had a vague idea that he had heard before this morning, preceding the announcement that breakfast was waiting. Tardily mindful of his obligations as guest, he made all the speed possible in his toilet, and soon issued into the hall, following the sound of voices through the open doors, which led him presently to the threshold of the breakfast-room.

There were two ladies at the table, one of venerable aspect, with short, white curls, held from her face by side-combs, a modish breakfast-cap, and a morning-gown of thin gray silk. The other was young enough to be her daughter, as indeed she was, dressed in deep mourning. Rising instantly from her place as hostess behind the silver service, she extended her hand to the stranger.

"Mr. Gordon, is it not? I was afraid you would arrive during the night. Mercy! So uncomfortable! How good of you to come--yes, indeed."

She sank into her chair again, pressing her black-bordered handkerchief to her dark eyes, which seemed to Gordon singularly dry, round, and glossy--suggestive of chestnuts, in fact. "So good of you to come," she repeated, "to the house of mourning! Very few people have any talent for woe, Mr. Gordon. These rooms have housed many guests, but not to weep with us. The stricken deer must weep alone."

She fell to hysterical sobbing, which her mother interrupted by a remonstrant "My dear, my dear!" A blond young man with a florid cheek and a laughing blue eye, who sat in an easy posture at the foot of the table, aided the diversion of interest "Won't you introduce me, Mrs. Keene?--or must I take the opportunity to tell Mr. Gordon that I am Dr. Rigdon, very much at his service."

"Mercy! yes, yes, indeed!" Mrs. Keene acceded as the two young men shook hands; then, evidently perturbed by her lack of ceremony, she exclaimed pettishly, "Where is Geraldine? She always sees to it that everybody knows everybody, and that everybody is served at a reception or a tea. I never have to think of such things if *she* is in the house."

The allusions seemed to Gordon a bit incongruous with the recent heavy affliction of the household. The accuracy with which the waves of red hair, of a rich tint that suggested chemicals, undulated about the brow of the widow, the art

with which the mourning-gown brought out all the best points and subdued the defects of a somewhat clumsy figure, the suspicion of a cosmetic's aid in a dark line, scarcely perceptible yet amply effective, under the prominent eyes, all contributed to the determination of a lady of forty-five years of age to look thirty.

"Geraldine is always late for breakfast, but surely she ought to be down by this time," Mrs. Brinn said, with as much acrimony as a mild old lady could well compass.

"Oh, Geraldine reads half the night," explained Mrs. Keene. "Such an injurious habit! Don't you think so, Mr. Gordon?"

"Oh, *she* is all right," expostulated the young physician.

"Geraldine has a constitution of iron, I know," Mrs. Keene admitted. "But, mercy!--to live in books, Mr. Gordon. Now, I always wanted to live in life,--in the world! I used to tell Mr. Keene"--even she stumbled a trifle in naming the so recent dead. "I used to tell him that he had buried the best years of my life down here in the swamp on the plantation."

"Pleasant for Mr. Keene," Gordon thought.

"I wanted to live in life," reiterated Mrs. Keene. "What is a glimpse of New Orleans or the White Sulphur Springs once in a great while!"

"This world is but a fleeting show," quoted Rigdon, with a palpable effort to laugh off the inappropriate subject.

"Oh, that is what people always tell the restricted, especially when they are themselves drinking the wine-cup to the bottom."

"And finding the lees bitter," said Rigdon.

The widow gave an offhand gesture. "You learned that argument from Geraldine--he is nothing but an echo of Geraldine, Mr. Gordon--now, isn't he, Mamma?" she appealed directly to Mrs. Brinn.

"He seems to have a great respect for Geraldine's opinion," said Mrs. Brinn primly.

"If I may ask, who is this lady who seems to give the law to the community?" inquired Gordon, thinking it appropriate to show, and really beginning to feel, an interest in the personnel of the entourage. "Am I related to her, as well as to Mr. Keene?"

"No; Geraldine is one of the Norris family--intimate friends of ours, but not relatives. She often visits here, and in my affliction and loneliness I begged her to come and stay for several weeks."

Not to be related to the all-powerful Geraldine was something of a disappointment, for although Gordon had little sentiment or ideality in his mental and moral system, one of his few emotional susceptibilities lay in his family pride and clannish spirit He felt for his own, and he was touched in his chief altruistic possibility in the appeal that had brought him hither. To his amazement, Mr. Keene, a second cousin whom he had seldom even seen, had named him executor of his will, without bond, and in a letter written in the last illness, reaching its destination indeed after the writer's death, had besought that Gordon would be gracious enough to act, striking a crafty note in urging the ties of consanguinity.

But for this plea Gordon would have doubtless declined on the score of pressure of business of his own. There were no nearer relatives, however, and with a sense of obligation at war with a restive indisposition, Gordon had come in person to this remote region to offer the will for probate, and to take charge of the important papers and personal property of the deceased. A simple matter it would prove, he fancied. There was no great estate, and probably but few business complications.

"Going home, Dr. George?" his hostess asked as the young physician made his excuses for quitting the table before the conclusion of the meal.

"Dr. Bigdon is not staying in the house, then?" Gordon queried as the door closed upon him, addressing the remark to the old lady by way of politely including her in the conversation.

"No, he is a neighbor of ours--a close and constant friend to us." Mrs. Brinn spoke as with grateful appreciation.

Mrs. Keene took a different view. "He just hangs about here on Geraldine's account," she said. "He happens to be here today because last night she took a notion that he must go all the way to Bogue Hoolauba to meet you, if the train should stop at the station above; but he was called off to attend a severe case of ptomaine poisoning."

"And did the man die?" Mrs. Brinn asked, with a sort of soft awe.

"Mercy! I declare I forgot to ask him if the man died or not," exclaimed Mrs. Keene. "But that was the reason that only a servant was sent to meet you, Mr. Gordon. The doctor looked in this morning to learn if you had arrived safely, and we made him stay to breakfast with us."

Gordon was regretting that he had let him depart so suddenly.

"I thought perhaps, as he seems so familiar with the place he might show me where Mr. Keene kept his papers. I ought to have them in hand at once." Mrs. Keene remembered to press her handkerchief to her eyes, and Gordon hastily added, "Since Dr. Big-don is gone, perhaps this lady--what is her name?--Geraldine--could save you the trouble."

"Mercy, yes!" she declared emphatically. "For I really do not know where to begin to look. Geraldine will know or guess. I'll go straight and rouse Geraldine out of bed."

She preceded Gordon into the hall, and, flinging over her shoulder the admonition, "Make yourself at home, I beg," ran lightly up the stairs.

Meantime Gordon strolled to the broad front door that stood open from morning to night, winter and summer, and paused there to light his cigar. All his characteristics were accented in the lustre of the vivid day, albeit for the most part they were of a null, negative tendency, for he had an inexpressive, impersonal manner and a sort of aloof, reserved dignity. His outward aspect seemed rather the affair of his up-to-date metropolitan tailor and barber than any exponent of his character and mind. He was not much beyond thirty years of age, and his straight, fine, dark hair was worn at the temples more by the fluctuations of stocks than the ravages of time. He was pale, of medium height, and slight of build; he listened with a grave, deliberate attention and an inscrutable gray eye, very steady, coolly observant, an appreciable asset in the brokerage business. He was all unaccustomed to the waste of time, and it was with no slight degree of impatience that he looked about him.

The magnolia grove filled the space to the half-seen gate in front of the house, but away on either side were long vistas. To the right the river was visible, and, being one of the great bends of the stream, it seemed to run directly to the west, the prospect only limited by the horizon line. On the other side, a glare, dazzlingly white in the sun, proclaimed the cotton-fields. A far the gin-house showed, with its smoke-stack, like an obeliscal column, from which issued heavy coils of vapor, and occasionally came the raucous grating of a screw, telling that the baler was at work. Interspersed throughout the fields were the busy cotton-pickers, and now and again rose snatches of song as they heaped the great baskets in the turn-rows.

Within the purlieu of the inclosure about the mansion there was no stir of industry, no sign of life, save indeed an old hound lying on the veranda steps, looking up with great, liquid, sherry-tinted eyes at the stranger, and, though wheezing a wish to lick his hand, unable to muster the energy to rise.

After an interval of a few moments Gordon turned within. He felt that he must forthwith get at the papers and set this little matter in order. He paused baffled at the door of the parlor, where satin damask and rosewood furniture, lace curtains and drawn shades, held out no promise of repositories of business papers. On the opposite side of the hall was a sitting-room that bore evidence of constant use. Here was a desk of the old-fashioned kind, with a bookcase as a superstructure, and a writing-table stood in the centre of the floor, equipped with a number of drawers which were all locked, as a tentative touch soon told. He had not concluded its examination when a step and rustle behind him betokened a sudden entrance.

"Miss Geraldine Norris!" a voice broke upon the air;--a voice that he had not before heard, and he turned abruptly to greet the lady as she formally introduced herself.

A veritable Titania she seemed as she swayed in the doorway. She was a little thing, delicately built, slender yet not thin, with lustrous golden hair, large, well-opened, dark blue eyes, a complexion daintily white and roseate,--a fairy-like presence indeed, but with a prosaic, matter-of-fact manner and a dogmatic pose of laying down the law.

Gordon could never have imagined himself so disconcerted as when she advanced upon him with the caustic query, "Why did you not ask Mrs. Keene for her husband's keys? Surely that is simple enough!" She flung a bunch of keys on a steel ring down upon the table. "Heavens! to be roused from my well-earned slumbers at daybreak to solve this problem! 'Hurryf Hurry! Hurry!'" She mimicked Mrs. Keene's urgency, then broke out laughing.

"Now," she demanded, all unaffected by his mien of surprised and offended dignity, "do you think yourself equal to the task of fitting these keys,--or shall I lend you my strong right arm!"

It is to be doubted if Gordon had ever experienced such open ridicule as when she came smiling up to the table, drawing back the sleeve of her gown from her delicate dimpled wrist. She wore a white dress, such as one never sees save in that Southern country, so softly sheer, falling in such graceful, floating lines, with a deep, plain hem and no touch of garniture save, perhaps, an edge of old lace on the surplice neck. The cut of the dress showed a triangular section of her soft white chest and all the firm modelling of her throat and chin. It was evidently not a new gown, for a rent in one of the sleeves had been sewed up somewhat too obviously, and there was a darn on the shoulder where a rose-bush had snagged the fabric. A belt of black velvet, with long, floating sash-ends, was about her waist, and a band of black velvet held in place her shining hair.

"I am sorry to have been the occasion of disturbing you," he said with stiff formality, "and I am very much obliged, certainly," he added, as he took up the keys.

"I may consider myself dismissed from the presence?" she asked saucily. "Then, I will permit myself a cup of chocolate and a roll, and be ready for any further commands."

She frisked out of the door, and, frowning heavily, he sat down to the table and opened the top-drawer, which yielded instantly to the first key that he selected.

The first paper, too, on which he laid his hand was the will, signed and witnessed, regularly executed, all its

provisions seeming, as he glanced through it, reasonable and feasible. As he laid it aside, he experienced the business man's satisfaction with a document duly capable of the ends desired. Then he opened with a sudden flicker of curiosity a bulky envelope placed with the will and addressed to himself. He read it through, the natural interest on his face succeeded by amazement, increasing gradually to fear, the chill drops starting from every pore. He had grown ghastly white before he had concluded the perusal, and for a long time he sat as motionless as if turned to stone.

The September day glowed outside in sumptuous splendor. A glad wind sprang up and sped afield. Geraldine, her breakfast finished, a broad hat canted down over her eyes, rushed through the hall as noisily as a boy, prodded up the old hound, and ran him a race around the semicircle of the drive. A trained hound he had been in his youth, and he was wont to conceal and deny certain ancient accomplishments. But even he realized that it was waste of breath to say nay to the persistent Geraldine. He resigned himself to go through all his repertoire,—was a dead dog, begged, leaped a stick back and forth, went lame, and in his newly awakened interest performed several tricks of which she had been unaware. Her joyful cries of commendation—"Played an encore! *an encore!* He did, he did! Cutest old dog in the United States!" caught Mrs. Keene's attention.

"Geraldine," she screamed from an upper window, "come in out of the sun! You will have a sun-stroke—and ruin your complexion besides! You know you ought to be helping that man with those papers,—he won't be able to do anything without you!" Her voice quavered on the last words, as if she suddenly realized "that man" might overhear her,—as indeed he did. But he made no sign. He sat still, stultified and stony, silently gazing at the paper in his hands.

When luncheon was announced, Gordon asked to have something light sent in to him, as he wished not to be disturbed in his investigation of the documents. He had scant need to apprehend interruption, however, while the long afternoon wore gradually away. The universal Southern siesta was on, and the somnolent mansion was like the castle of Sleeping Beauty. The ladies had sought their apartments and the downy couches; the cook, on a shady bench under the trellis, nodded as she seeded the raisins for the frozen pudding of the six-o'clock dinner; the waiter had succumbed in clearing the lunch-table and made mesmeric passes with the dish-rag in a fantasy of washing the plates; the stable-boy slumbered in the hay, high in the loft, while the fat old coachman, with a chamois-skin in his hand, dozed as he sat on the step of the surrey, between the fenders; the old dog snored on the veranda floor, and Mrs. Keene's special attendant, who was really more a seamstress than a ladies' maid, dreamed that for some mysterious reason she could not thread a needle to fashion in a vast hurry the second mourning of her employer, who she imagined would call for it within a week!

Outside the charmed precincts of this Castle Indolence, the busy cotton-pickers knew no pause nor stay. The steam-engine at the gin panted throughout all the long hot hours, the baler squealed and rasped and groaned, as it bound up the product into marketable compass, but there was no one waking near enough to note how the guest of the mansion was pacing the floor in a stress of nervous excitement, and to comment on the fact.

Toward sunset, a sudden commotion roused the slumbrous place. There had been an accident at the gin,—a boy had been caught in the machinery and variously mangled. Dr. George Eidon had been called and had promptly sewed up the wounds. A runner had been sent to the mansion for bandages, brandy, fresh clothing, and sundry other collateral necessities of the surgery, and the news had thrown the house into unwonted excitement.

"The boy won't die, then?" Geraldine asked of a second messenger, as he stood by the steps of the veranda, waiting for the desired commodities.

"Lawdy,—*no*, ma'am! He is as good as new! Doc' George, *he* fix him up."

Gordon, whom the tumult had summoned forth from his absorptions, noted Geraldine's triumphant laugh as she received this report, the toss of her spirited little head, the light in her dark blue eyes, deepening to sapphire richness, her obvious pride in the skill, the humanitarian achievement, of her lover. Dr. George must be due here this evening, he fancied. For she was all freshly bedight; her gown was embellished with delicate laces, and its faint green hue gave her the aspect of some water-sprite, posed against that broad expanse of the Mississippi River, that was itself of a jade tint reflected from a green and amber sky; at the low horizon line the vermilion sun was sinking into its swirling depths.

Gordon perceived a personal opportunity in the prospect of this guest for the evening. He must have counsel, he was thinking. He could not act on his own responsibility in this emergency that had suddenly confronted him. He was still too overwhelmed by the strange experience he had encountered, too shaken. This physician was a man of intelligence, of skill in his chosen profession, necessarily a man worth while in many ways. He was an intimate friend of the Keene family, and might the more heartily lend a helping hand. The thought, the hope, cleared Gordon's brow, but still the impress of the stress of the afternoon was so marked that the girl was moved to comment in her brusque way as they stood together on the cool, fern-embowered veranda.

"Why, Mr. Gordon," she exclaimed in surprise, "you have no idea how strange you look! You must have overworked awfully this afternoon. Why, you look as if you had seen a ghost!"

To her amazement, he recoiled abruptly. Involuntarily, he passed his hand over his face, as if seeking to obliterate the traces she had deciphered. Then, with an obvious effort, he recovered a show of equanimity; he declared that it was only because he was so tousled in contrast with her fresh finery that she thought he looked supernaturally horrible! He

would go upstairs forthwith and array himself anew.

Gordon proved himself a true prophet, for Rigdon came to dine. With the postprandial cigars, the two gentlemen, at Gordon's suggestion, repaired to the sitting-room to smoke, instead of joining their hostess on the veranda, where tobacco was never interdicted. Indeed, they did not come forth thence for nearly two hours, and were palpably embarrassed when Geraldine declared in bewilderment, gazing at them in the lamplight that fell from within, through one of the great windows, that now *both* looked as if they had seen a ghost!

Despite their efforts to sustain the interest of the conversation, they were obviously distraught, and had a proclivity to fall into sudden silences, and Mrs. Keene found them amazingly unresponsive and dull. Thus it was that she rose as if to retire for the night while the hour was still early. In fact, she intended to utilize the opportunity to have some dresses of the first mourning outfit tried on, for which the patient maid was now awaiting her.

"I leave you a charming substitute," she said in making her excuses. "Geraldine need not come in yet--it is not late."

Her withdrawal seemed to give a fresh impetus to some impulse with which Rigdon had been temporizing. He recurred to it at once. "You contemplate giving it to the public," he said to Gordon; "why not try its effect on a disinterested listener first, and judge from that?"

Gordon assented with an extreme gravity that surprised Geraldine; then Rigdon hesitated, evidently scarcely knowing how to begin. He looked vaguely at the moon riding high in the heavens above the long, broad expanse of the Mississippi and the darkling forests on either hand. Sometimes a shaft of light, a sudden luminous glister, betokened the motion of the currents gliding in the sheen. "Last night," he said in a tense, bated voice--"last night Mr. Gordon saw the phantom of Bogue Holauba, Stop! Hush!"--for the girl had sprung half screaming from her chair. "This is important." He laid his hand on her arm to detain her. "We want you to help us!"

"Help you! Why, you scare me to death!" She had paused, but stood trembling from head to foot.

"There is something explained in one of Mr. Keene's papers,--addressed to Mr. Gordon; and we have been much startled by the coincidence of his--his vision."

"Did he see--really----?" Geraldine had sunk back in her chair, her face ghastly pale.

"Of course it must be some illusion," said Rigdon. "The effect of the mist, perhaps----"

"Only, there was no mist," said Gordon.

"Perhaps a snag waving in the wind."

"Only, there was no wind."

"Perhaps a snag tossing in the motion of the water,--at all events, you can't say there was no water." Dr. Rigdon glanced at Gordon with a genial smile.

"Mighty little water for the Mississippi," Gordon sought to respond in the same key.

"You know the record of these apparitions." Leaning forward, one arm on his knee, the document in question in his hand, Rigdon looked up into Geraldine's pale face. "In the old days there used to be a sort of water-gypsy, with a queer little trading-boat that plied the region of the bends--a queer little old man, too--Polish, I think, foreign certainly--and the butt of all the wags alongshore, at the stores and the wood-yards, the cotton-sheds and the wharf-boats. By some accident, it was thought, the boat got away when he was befuddled with drink in a wood-chopper's cabin--a stout, trig little craft it was! When he found it was gone, he was wild, for although he saw it afloat at a considerable distance down the Mississippi, it suddenly disappeared near Bogue Holauba, cargo and all. No trace of its fate was ever discovered. He haunted these banks then--whatever he may have done since--screaming out his woes for his losses, and his rage and curses on the miscreants who had set the craft adrift--for he fully believed it was done in malice--beating his breast and tearing his hair. The Civil War came on presently, and the man was lost sight of in the national commotions. No one thought of him again till suddenly something--an apparition, an illusion, the semblance of a man--began to patrol the banks of Bogue Holauba, and beat its breast and tear its hair and bewail its woes in pantomime, and set the whole country-side aghast, for always disasters follow its return."

"And how do you account for that phase?" asked Gordon, obviously steadying his voice by an effort of the will.

"The apparition always shows up at low water,--the disasters are usually typhoid," replied the physician.

"Mr. Keene died from malaria,"

Geraldine murmured musingly.

The two men glanced significantly at each other. Then Rigdon resumed: "I mustered the hardihood on one occasion to row up to the bank of Bogue Holauba for a closer survey. The thing vanished on my approach. There was a snag hard by, fast anchored in the bottom of the Bogue. It played slackly to and fro with the current, but I could not see any way by which it or its shadow could have produced the illusion."

"Is this what you had to tell me?" demanded Geraldine pertinently. "I knew all that already."

"No, no," replied the Doctor reluctantly. "Will you tell it, Mr. Gordon, or shall I?"

"You, by all means, if you will," said Gordon gloomily. "God knows I should be glad never to speak of it."

"Well," Rigdon began slowly, "Mr. Gordon was made by his cousin Jasper Keene not only the executor of his will, but the repository of a certain confession, which he may destroy or make public as he sees proper. It seems that in Mr. Keene's gay young days, running wild in his vacation from college on a secluded plantation, he often lacked congenial companionship, and he fell in with an uncouth fellow of a lower social grade, who led him into much detrimental adventure. Among other incidents of very poor fun, the two were notable in hectoring and guying the old Polish trader, who, when drunk on mean whisky as he often was, grew violent and antagonistic. He went very far in his denunciations one fatal night, and by way of playing him a trick in return, they set his boat adrift by cutting the rope that tied the craft to a tree on the bank. The confession states that they supposed the owner was then aboard and would suffer no greater hardship than having to use the sweeps with considerable energy to row her in to a landing again. They were genuinely horrified when he came running down the bank, both arms out-stretched, crying out that his all, *his all* was floating away on that tumultuous, merciless tide. Before any skiff could be launched, before any effort could be made to reach the trading-boat, she suddenly disappeared. The Mississippi was at flood height, and it was thought that the boat struck some drifting obstruction, swamped, and went down in deep water. The agents in this disaster were never suspected, but as soon as Jasper Keene had come of age, and had command of any means of his own, his first act was to have an exhaustive search made for the old fellow, with a view of financial restitution. But the owner of the trading-boat had died, spending his last years in the futile effort to obtain the insurance money. As the little he had left was never claimed, no representative could profit by the restitution that Jasper Keene had planned, and he found what satisfaction he could in giving it secretly to an old man's charity. Then the phantom began to take his revenge. He appeared on the banks of Bogue Holauaba, and straightway the only child of the mansion sickened and died. Mr. Keene's first wife died after the second apparition. Either it was the fancy of an ailing man, or perhaps the general report, but he notes that the spectre was bewailing its woes along the banks of Bogue Holauaba when Jasper Keene himself was stricken by an illness which from the first he felt was fatal."

"I remember--I remember it was said at the time," Geraldine barely whispered.

"And now to the question: he leaves it to Mr. Gordon as his kinsman, solicitous of the family repute, to judge whether this confession should be made public or destroyed."

"Does he state any reasons for making it public?" demanded Geraldine, taking the document and glancing through its pages.

"Yes; as an expiation of his early misdeeds toward this man and, if any such thing there be, to placate the spirit of his old enemy; and lastly better to secure his peace with his Maker."

"And which do you say!" Geraldine turned an eager, spirited face toward Gordon, his dejected attitude and countenance distinctly seen in the light from the lamp within the parlor, on a table close to the window.

"I frankly admit that the publication of that confession would humiliate me to the ground, but I fear that it *ought* to be given to the public, as he obviously desires!"

"And which do *you* say!" Geraldine was standing now, and swiftly whirled around toward Dr. Bigdon.

"I agree with Mr. Gordon--much against my will--but an honest confession is good for the soul!" he, replied ruefully.

"You infidels!" she exclaimed tumultuously. "You have not one atom of Christian faith between you! To imagine that *you* can strike a bargain with the good God by letting a sick theory of expiation of a dying, fever-distraught creature besmirch his repute as a man and a gentleman, make his whole life seem like a whited sepulchre, and bring his name into odium,--as kind a man as ever lived,--and you know it!--as honest, and generous, and whole-souled, to be held up to scorn and humiliation because of a boyish prank forty years ago, that precipitated a disaster never intended,--bad enough, silly enough, even wicked enough, but not half so bad and silly and wicked as *you*, with your morbid shrinking from moral responsibility, and your ready contributive defamation of character. Tell me, you men, is this a testamentary paper, and you think it against the law to destroy it!"

"No, no, not that," said Bigdon.

"No, it is wholly optional," declared Gordon.

"Then, I will settle the question for you once for all, you wobblers!" She suddenly thrust the paper into the chimney of the lamp on the table just within the open window, and as it flared up she flung the document forth, blazing in every fibre, on the bare driveway below the veranda. "And now you may find, as best you can, some other means of exorcising the phantom of Bogue Holauaba!"