

# The Vacant Lot

By Mary Wilkins-Freeman

When it became generally known in Townsend Centre that the Townsends were going to move to the city, there was great excitement and dismay. For the Townsends to move was about equivalent to the town's moving. The Townsend ancestors had founded the village a hundred years ago. The first Townsend had kept a wayside hostelry for man and beast, known as the "Sign of the Leopard." The sign-board, on which the leopard was painted a bright blue, was still extant, and prominently so, being nailed over the present Townsend's front door. This Townsend, by name David, kept the village store. There had been no tavern since the railroad was built through Townsend Centre in his father's day. Therefore the family, being ousted by the march of progress from their chosen employment, took up with a general country store as being the next thing to a country tavern, the principal difference consisting in the fact that all the guests were transients, never requiring bedchambers, securing their rest on the tops of sugar and flour barrels and codfish boxes, and their refreshment from stray nibblings at the stock in trade, to the profitless depletion of raisins and loaf sugar and crackers and cheese.

The flitting of the Townsends from the home of their ancestors was due to a sudden access of wealth from the death of a relative and the desire of Mrs. Townsend to secure better advantages for her son George, sixteen years old, in the way of education, and for her daughter Adrianna, ten years older, better matrimonial opportunities. However, this last inducement for leaving Townsend Centre was not openly stated, only ingeniously surmised by the neighbours.

"Sarah Townsend don't think there's anybody in Townsend Centre fit for her Adrianna to marry, and so she's goin' to take her to Boston to see if she can't pick up somebody there," they said. Then they wondered what Abel Lyons would do. He had been a humble suitor for Adrianna for years, but her mother had not approved, and Adrianna, who was dutiful, had repulsed him delicately and rather sadly. He was the only lover whom she had ever had, and she felt sorry and grateful; she was a plain, awkward girl, and had a patient recognition of the fact.

But her mother was ambitious, more so than her father, who was rather pugnaciously satisfied with what he had, and not easily disposed to change. However, he yielded to his wife and consented to sell out his business and purchase a house in Boston and move there.

David Townsend was curiously unlike the line of ancestors from whom he had come. He had either retrograded or advanced, as one might look at it. His moral character was certainly better, but he had not the fiery spirit and eager grasp at advantage which had distinguished them. Indeed, the old Townsends, though prominent and respected as men of property and influence, had reputations not above suspicions. There was more than one dark whisper regarding them handed down from mother to son in the village, and especially was this true of the first Townsend, he who built the tavern bearing the Sign of the Blue Leopard. His portrait, a hideous effort of contemporary art, hung in the garret of David Townsend's home. There was many a tale of wild roistering, if no worse, in that old roadhouse, and high stakes, and quarreling in cups, and blows, and money gotten in evil fashion, and the matter hushed up with a high hand for inquirers by the imperious Townsends who terrorized everybody. David Townsend terrorized nobody. He had gotten his little competence from his store by honest methods--the exchanging of sterling goods and true weights for country produce and country shillings. He was sober and reliable, with intense self-respect and a decided talent for the management of money. It was principally for this reason that he took great delight in his sudden wealth by legacy. He had

thereby greater opportunities for the exercise of his native shrewdness in a bargain. This he evinced in his purchase of a house in Boston.

One day in spring the old Townsend house was shut up, the Blue Leopard was taken carefully down from his lair over the front door, the family chattels were loaded on the train, and the Townsends departed. It was a sad and eventful day for Townsend Centre. A man from Barre had rented the store--David had decided at the last not to sell--and the old familiars congregated in melancholy fashion and talked over the situation. An enormous pride over their departed townsman became evident. They paraded him, flaunting him like a banner in the eyes of the new man. "David is awful smart," they said; "there won't nobody get the better of him in the city if he has lived in Townsend Centre all his life. He's got his eyes open. Know what he paid for his house in Boston? Well, sir, that house cost twenty-five thousand dollars, and David he bought it for five. Yes, sir, he did."

"Must have been some out about it," remarked the new man, scowling over his counter. He was beginning to feel his disparaging situation.

"Not an out, sir. David he made sure on't. Catch him gettin' bit. Everythin' was in apple-pie order, hot an' cold water and all, and in one of the best locations of the city--real high-up street. David he said the rent in that street was never under a thousand. Yes, sir, David he got a bargain--five thousand dollars for a twenty-five-thousand-dollar house."

"Some out about it!" growled the new man over the counter.

However, as his fellow townsmen and allies stated, there seemed to be no doubt about the desirableness of the city house which David Townsend had purchased and the fact that he had secured it for an absurdly low price. The whole family were at first suspicious. It was ascertained that the house had cost a round sum only a few years ago; it was in perfect repair; nothing whatever was amiss with plumbing, furnace, anything. There was not even a soap factory within smelling distance, as Mrs. Townsend had vaguely surmised. She was sure that she had heard of houses being undesirable for such reasons, but there was no soap factory. They all sniffed and peeked; when the first rainfall came they looked at the ceiling, confidently expecting to see dark spots where the leaks had commenced, but there were none. They were forced to confess that their suspicions were allayed, that the house was perfect, even overshadowed with the mystery of a lower price than it was worth. That, however, was an additional perfection in the opinion of the Townsends, who had their share of New England thrift. They had lived just one month in their new house, and were happy, although at times somewhat lonely from missing the society of Townsend Centre, when the trouble began. The Townsends, although they lived in a fine house in a genteel, almost fashionable, part of the city, were true to their antecedents and kept, as they had been accustomed, only one maid. She was the daughter of a farmer on the outskirts of their native village, was middle-aged, and had lived with them for the last ten years. One pleasant Monday morning she rose early and did the family washing before breakfast, which had been prepared by Mrs. Townsend and Adrianna, as was their habit on washing-days. The family were seated at the breakfast table in their basement dining-room, and this maid, whose name was Cordelia, was hanging out the clothes in the vacant lot. This vacant lot seemed a valuable one, being on a corner. It was rather singular that it had not been built upon. The Townsends had wondered at it and agreed that they would have preferred their own house to be there. They had, however, utilized it as far as possible with their innocent, rural disregard of property rights in unoccupied land.

“We might just as well hang out our washing in that vacant lot,” Mrs. Townsend had told Cordelia the first Monday of their stay in the house. “Our little yard ain’t half big enough for all our clothes, and it is sunnier there, too.”

So Cordelia had hung out the wash there for four Mondays, and this was the fifth. The breakfast was about half finished--they had reached the buckwheat cakes--when this maid came rushing into the dining-room and stood regarding them, speechless, with a countenance indicative of the utmost horror. She was deadly pale. Her hands, sodden with soapsuds, hung twitching at her sides in the folds of her calico gown; her very hair, which was light and sparse, seemed to bristle with fear. All the Townsends turned and looked at her. David and George rose with a half-defined idea of burglars.

“Cordelia Battles, what is the matter?” cried Mrs. Townsend. Adrianna gasped for breath and turned as white as the maid. “What is the matter?” repeated Mrs. Townsend, but the maid was unable to speak. Mrs. Townsend, who could be peremptory, sprang up, ran to the frightened woman and shook her violently. “Cordelia Battles, you speak,” said she, “and not stand there staring that way, as if you were struck dumb! What is the matter with you?”

Then Cordelia spoke in a fainting voice.

“There’s--somebody else--hanging out clothes--in the vacant lot,” she gasped, and clutched at a chair for support.

“Who?” cried Mrs. Townsend, rousing to indignation, for already she had assumed a proprietorship in the vacant lot. “Is it the folks in the next house? I’d like to know what right they have! We are next to that vacant lot.”

“I--dunno--who it is,” gasped Cordelia. “Why, we’ve seen that girl next door go to mass every morning,” said Mrs. Townsend. “She’s got a fiery red head. Seems as if you might know her by this time, Cordelia.”

“It ain’t that girl,” gasped Cordelia. Then she added in a horror-stricken voice, “I couldn’t see who ‘twas.”

They all stared.

“Why couldn’t you see?” demanded her mistress. “Are you struck blind?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Then why couldn’t you see?”

“All I could see was--” Cordelia hesitated, with an expression of the utmost horror.

“Go on,” said Mrs. Townsend, impatiently.

“All I could see was the shadow of somebody, very slim, hanging out the clothes, and--”

“What?”

“I could see the shadows of the things flappin’ on their line.”

“You couldn’t see the clothes?”

“Only the shadow on the ground.”

“What kind of clothes were they?”

“Queer,” replied Cordelia, with a shudder.

“If I didn’t know you so well, I should think you had been drinking,” said Mrs. Townsend. “Now, Cordelia Battles, I’m going out in that vacant lot and see myself what you’re talking about.”

“I can’t go,” gasped the woman.

With that Mrs. Townsend and all the others, except Adrianna, who remained to tremble with the maid, sallied forth into the vacant lot. They had to go out the area gate into the street to reach it. It was nothing unusual in the way of vacant lots. One large poplar tree, the relic of the old

forest which had once flourished there, twinkled in one corner; for the rest, it was overgrown with coarse weeds and a few dusty flowers. The Townsends stood just inside the rude board fence which divided the lot from the street and stared with wonder and horror, for Cordelia had told the truth. They all saw what she had described--the shadow of an exceedingly slim woman moving along the ground with up-stretched arms, the shadows of strange, nondescript garments flapping from a shadowy line, but when they looked up for the substance of the shadows nothing was to be seen except the clear, blue October air.

"My goodness!" gasped Mrs. Townsend. Her face assumed a strange gathering of wrath in the midst of her terror. Suddenly she made a determined move forward, although her husband strove to hold her back.

"You let me be," said she. She moved forward. Then she recoiled and gave a loud shriek. "The wet sheet flapped in my face," she cried. "Take me away, take me away!" Then she fainted. Between them they got her back to the house. "It was awful," she moaned when she came to herself, with the family all around her where she lay on the dining-room floor. "Oh, David, what do you suppose it is?"

"Nothing at all," replied David Townsend stoutly. He was remarkable for courage and staunch belief in actualities. He was now denying to himself that he had seen anything unusual.

"Oh, there was," moaned his wife.

"I saw something," said George, in a sullen, boyish bass.

The maid sobbed convulsively and so did Adrianna for sympathy.

"We won't talk any about it," said David. "Here, Jane, you drink this hot tea--it will do you good; and Cordelia, you hang out the clothes in our own yard. George, you go and put up the line for her."

"The line is out there," said George, with a jerk of his shoulder.

"Are you afraid?"

"No, I ain't," replied the boy resentfully, and went out with a pale face.

After that Cordelia hung the Townsend wash in the yard of their own house, standing always with her back to the vacant lot. As for David Townsend, he spent a good deal of his time in the lot watching the shadows, but he came to no explanation, although he strove to satisfy himself with many.

"I guess the shadows come from the smoke from our chimneys, or else the poplar tree," he said.

"Why do the shadows come on Monday mornings, and no other?" demanded his wife.

David was silent.

Very soon new mysteries arose. One day Cordelia rang the dinner-bell at their usual dinner hour, the same as in Townsend Centre, high noon, and the family assembled. With amazement Adrianna looked at the dishes on the table.

"Why, that's queer!" she said.

"What's queer?" asked her mother.

Cordelia stopped short as she was about setting a tumbler of water beside a plate, and the water slopped over.

"Why," said Adrianna, her face paling, "I--thought there was boiled dinner. I--smelt cabbage cooking."

"I knew there would something else come up," gasped Cordelia, leaning hard on the back of Adrianna's chair.

“What do you mean?” asked Mrs. Townsend sharply, but her own face began to assume the shocked pallor which it was so easy nowadays for all their faces to assume at the merest suggestion of anything out of the common.

“I smelt cabbage cooking all the morning up in my room,” Adrianna said faintly, “and here’s codfish and potatoes for dinner.”

The Townsends all looked at one another. David rose with an exclamation and rushed out of the room. The others waited tremblingly. When he came back his face was lowering.

“What did you--” Mrs. Townsend asked hesitatingly.

“There’s some smell of cabbage out there,” he admitted reluctantly. Then he looked at her with a challenge. “It comes from the next house,” he said. “Blows over our house.”

“Our house is higher.”

“I don’t care; you can never account for such things.”

“Cordelia,” said Mrs. Townsend, “you go over to the next house and you ask if they’ve got cabbage for dinner.”

Cordelia switched out of the room, her mouth set hard. She came back promptly.

“Says they never have cabbage,” she announced with gloomy triumph and a conclusive glance at Mr. Townsend. “Their girl was real sassy.”

“Oh, father, let’s move away; let’s sell the house,” cried Adrianna in a panic-stricken tone.

“If you think I’m going to sell a house that I got as cheap as this one because we smell cabbage in a vacant lot, you’re mistaken,” replied David firmly.

“It isn’t the cabbage alone,” said Mrs. Townsend.

“And a few shadows,” added David. “I am tired of such nonsense. I thought you had more sense, Jane.”

“One of the boys at school asked me if we lived in the house next to the vacant lot on Wells Street and whistled when I said ‘Yes,’” remarked George.

“Let him whistle,” said Mr. Townsend.

After a few hours the family, stimulated by Mr. Townsend’s calm, common sense, agreed that it was exceedingly foolish to be disturbed by a mysterious odour of cabbage. They even laughed at themselves.

“I suppose we have got so nervous over those shadows hanging out clothes that we notice every little thing,” conceded Mrs. Townsend.

“You will find out some day that that is no more to be regarded than the cabbage,” said her husband.

“You can’t account for that wet sheet hitting my face,” said Mrs. Townsend, doubtfully.

“You imagined it.”

“I FELT it.”

That afternoon things went on as usual in the household until nearly four o’clock. Adrianna went downtown to do some shopping. Mrs. Townsend sat sewing beside the bay window in her room, which was a front one in the third story. George had not got home. Mr. Townsend was writing a letter in the library. Cordelia was busy in the basement; the twilight, which was coming earlier and earlier every night, was beginning to gather, when suddenly there was a loud crash which shook the house from its foundations. Even the dishes on the sideboard rattled, and the glasses rang like bells. The pictures on the walls of Mrs. Townsend’s room swung out from the walls. But that was not all: every looking-glass in the house cracked simultaneously--as nearly as they could judge--from top to bottom, then shivered into fragments over the floors. Mrs. Townsend was too frightened to scream. She sat huddled in her chair, gasping for breath,

her eyes, rolling from side to side in incredulous terror, turned toward the street. She saw a great black group of people crossing it just in front of the vacant lot. There was something inexpressibly strange and gloomy about this moving group; there was an effect of sweeping, wavings and foldings of sable draperies and gleams of deadly white faces; then they passed. She twisted her head to see, and they disappeared in the vacant lot. Mr. Townsend came hurrying into the room; he was pale, and looked at once angry and alarmed.

“Did you fall?” he asked inconsequently, as if his wife, who was small, could have produced such a manifestation by a fall.

“Oh, David, what is it?” whispered Mrs. Townsend.

“Darned if I know!” said David.

“Don’t swear. It’s too awful. Oh, see the looking-glass, David!”

“I see it. The one over the library mantel is broken, too.”

“Oh, it is a sign of death!”

Cordelia’s feet were heard as she staggered on the stairs. She almost fell into the room. She reeled over to Mr. Townsend and clutched his arm. He cast a sidewise glance, half furious, half commiserating at her.

“Well, what is it all about?” he asked.

“I don’t know. What is it? Oh, what is it? The looking-glass in the kitchen is broken. All over the floor. Oh, oh! What is it?”

“I don’t know any more than you do. I didn’t do it.”

“Lookin’-glasses broken is a sign of death in the house,” said Cordelia. “If it’s me, I hope I’m ready; but I’d rather die than be so scared as I’ve been lately.”

Mr. Townsend shook himself loose and eyed the two trembling women with gathering resolution.

“Now, look here, both of you,” he said. “This is nonsense. You’ll die sure enough of fright if you keep on this way. I was a fool myself to be startled. Everything it is is an earthquake.”

“Oh, David!” gasped his wife, not much reassured.

“It is nothing but an earthquake,” persisted Mr. Townsend. “It acted just like that. Things always are broken on the walls, and the middle of the room isn’t affected. I’ve read about it.”

Suddenly Mrs. Townsend gave a loud shriek and pointed.

“How do you account for that,” she cried, “if it’s an earthquake? Oh, oh, oh!”

She was on the verge of hysterics. Her husband held her firmly by the arm as his eyes followed the direction of her rigid pointing finger. Cordelia looked also, her eyes seeming converged to a bright point of fear. On the floor in front of the broken looking-glass lay a mass of black stuff in a grewsome long ridge.

“It’s something you dropped there,” almost shouted Mr. Townsend.

“It ain’t. Oh!”

Mr. Townsend dropped his wife’s arm and took one stride toward the object. It was a very long crape veil. He lifted it, and it floated out from his arm as if imbued with electricity.

“It’s yours,” he said to his wife.

“Oh, David, I never had one. You know, oh, you know I--shouldn’t-- unless you died. How came it there?”

“I’m darned if I know,” said David, regarding it. He was deadly pale, but still resentful rather than afraid.

“Don’t hold it; don’t!”

"I'd like to know what in thunder all this means?" said David. He gave the thing an angry toss and it fell on the floor in exactly the same long heap as before.

Cordelia began to weep with racking sobs. Mrs. Townsend reached out and caught her husband's hand, clutching it hard with ice-cold fingers.

"What's got into this house, anyhow?" he growled.

"You'll have to sell it. Oh, David, we can't live here."

"As for my selling a house I paid only five thousand for when it's worth twenty-five, for any such nonsense as this, I won't!"

David gave one stride toward the black veil, but it rose from the floor and moved away before him across the room at exactly the same height as if suspended from a woman's head. He pursued it, clutching vainly, all around the room, then he swung himself on his heel with an exclamation and the thing fell to the floor again in the long heap. Then were heard hurrying feet on the stairs and Adrianna burst into the room. She ran straight to her father and clutched his arm; she tried to speak, but she chattered unintelligibly; her face was blue. Her father shook her violently.

"Adrianna, do have more sense!" he cried.

"Oh, David, how can you talk so?" sobbed her mother.

"I can't help it. I'm mad!" said he with emphasis. "What has got into this house and you all, anyhow?"

"What is it, Adrianna, poor child," asked her mother. "Only look what has happened here."

"It's an earthquake," said her father staunchly; "nothing to be afraid of."

"How do you account for THAT?" said Mrs. Townsend in an awful voice, pointing to the veil.

Adrianna did not look--she was too engrossed with her own terrors. She began to speak in a breathless voice.

"I--was--coming--by the vacant lot," she panted, "and--I--I--had my new hat in a paper bag and--a parcel of blue ribbon, and--I saw a crowd, an awful--oh! a whole crowd of people with white faces, as if--they were dressed all in black."

"Where are they now?"

"I don't know. Oh!" Adrianna sank gasping feebly into a chair.

"Get her some water, David," sobbed her mother.

David rushed with an impatient exclamation out of the room and returned with a glass of water which he held to his daughter's lips.

"Here, drink this!" he said roughly.

"Oh, David, how can you speak so?" sobbed his wife.

"I can't help it. I'm mad clean through," said David.

Then there was a hard bound upstairs, and George entered. He was very white, but he grinned at them with an appearance of unconcern.

"Hullo!" he said in a shaking voice, which he tried to control. "What on earth's to pay in that vacant lot now?"

"Well, what is it?" demanded his father.

"Oh, nothing, only--well, there are lights over it exactly as if there was a house there, just about where the windows would be. It looked as if you could walk right in, but when you look close there are those old dried-up weeds rattling away on the ground the same as ever. I looked at it and couldn't believe my eyes. A woman saw it, too. She came along just as I did. She gave one look, then she screeched and ran. I waited for some one else, but nobody came."

Mr. Townsend rushed out of the room.

"I daresay it'll be gone when he gets there," began George, then he stared round the room. "What's to pay here?" he cried.

"Oh, George, the whole house shook all at once, and all the looking-glasses broke," wailed his mother, and Adrianna and Cordelia joined.

George whistled with pale lips. Then Mr. Townsend entered.

"Well," asked George, "see anything?"

"I don't want to talk," said his father. "I've stood just about enough."

"We've got to sell out and go back to Townsend Centre," cried his wife in a wild voice. "Oh, David, say you'll go back."

"I won't go back for any such nonsense as this, and sell a twenty-five thousand dollar house for five thousand," said he firmly.

But that very night his resolution was shaken. The whole family watched together in the dining-room. They were all afraid to go to bed--that is, all except possibly Mr. Townsend. Mrs. Townsend declared firmly that she for one would leave that awful house and go back to Townsend Centre whether he came or not, unless they all stayed together and watched, and Mr. Townsend yielded. They chose the dining-room for the reason that it was nearer the street should they wish to make their egress hurriedly, and they took up their station around the dining-table on which Cordelia had placed a luncheon.

"It looks exactly as if we were watching with a corpse," she said in a horror-stricken whisper.

"Hold your tongue if you can't talk sense," said Mr. Townsend.

The dining-room was very large, finished in oak, with a dark blue paper above the wainscotting. The old sign of the tavern, the Blue Leopard, hung over the mantel-shelf. Mr. Townsend had insisted on hanging it there. He had a curious pride in it. The family sat together until after midnight and nothing unusual happened. Mrs. Townsend began to nod; Mr. Townsend read the paper ostentatiously. Adrianna and Cordelia stared with roving eyes about the room, then at each other as if comparing notes on terror. George had a book which he studied furtively. All at once Adrianna gave a startled exclamation and Cordelia echoed her. George whistled faintly. Mrs. Townsend awoke with a start and Mr. Townsend's paper rattled to the floor.

"Look!" gasped Adrianna.

The sign of the Blue Leopard over the shelf glowed as if a lantern hung over it. The radiance was thrown from above. It grew brighter and brighter as they watched. The Blue Leopard seemed to crouch and spring with life. Then the door into the front hall opened--the outer door, which had been carefully locked. It squeaked and they all recognized it. They sat staring. Mr. Townsend was as transfixed as the rest. They heard the outer door shut, then the door into the room swung open and slowly that awful black group of people which they had seen in the afternoon entered. The Townsends with one accord rose and huddled together in a far corner; they all held to each other and stared. The people, their faces gleaming with a whiteness of death, their black robes waving and folding, crossed the room. They were a trifle above mortal height, or seemed so to the terrified eyes which saw them. They reached the mantel-shelf where the sign-board hung, then a black-draped long arm was seen to rise and make a motion, as if plying a knocker. Then the whole company passed out of sight, as if through the wall, and the room was as before. Mrs. Townsend was shaking in a nervous chill, Adrianna was almost fainting, Cordelia was in hysterics. David Townsend stood glaring in a curious way at the sign of the Blue Leopard. George stared at him with a look of horror. There was something in his father's face which made him forget everything else. At last he touched his arm timidly.

“Father,” he whispered.

David turned and regarded him with a look of rage and fury, then his face cleared; he passed his hand over his forehead.

“Good Lord! What DID come to me?” he muttered.

“You looked like that awful picture of old Tom Townsend in the garret in Townsend Centre, father,” whimpered the boy, shuddering.

“Should think I might look like ‘most any old cuss after such darned work as this,” growled David, but his face was white. “Go and pour out some hot tea for your mother,” he ordered the boy sharply. He himself shook Cordelia violently. “Stop such actions!” he shouted in her ears, and shook her again. “Ain’t you a church member?” he demanded; “what be you afraid of? You ain’t done nothin’ wrong, have ye?”

Then Cordelia quoted Scripture in a burst of sobs and laughter.

“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me,” she cried out. “If I ain’t done wrong, mebbe them that’s come before me did, and when the Evil One and the Powers of Darkness is abroad I’m liable, I’m liable!” Then she laughed loud and long and shrill.

“If you don’t hush up,” said David, but still with that white terror and horror on his own face, “I’ll bundle you out in that vacant lot whether or no. I mean it.”

Then Cordelia was quiet, after one wild roll of her eyes at him. The colour was returning to Adrianna’s cheeks; her mother was drinking hot tea in spasmodic gulps.

“It’s after midnight,” she gasped, “and I don’t believe they’ll come again to-night. Do you, David?”

“No, I don’t,” said David conclusively.

“Oh, David, we mustn’t stay another night in this awful house.”

“We won’t. To-morrow we’ll pack off bag and baggage to Townsend Centre, if it takes all the fire department to move us,” said David.

Adrianna smiled in the midst of her terror. She thought of Abel Lyons.

The next day Mr. Townsend went to the real estate agent who had sold him the house.

“It’s no use,” he said, “I can’t stand it. Sell the house for what you can get. I’ll give it away rather than keep it.”

Then he added a few strong words as to his opinion of parties who sold him such an establishment. But the agent pleaded innocent for the most part.

“I’ll own I suspected something wrong when the owner, who pledged me to secrecy as to his name, told me to sell that place for what I could get, and did not limit me. I had never heard anything, but I began to suspect something was wrong. Then I made a few inquiries and found out that there was a rumour in the neighbourhood that there was something out of the usual about that vacant lot. I had wondered myself why it wasn’t built upon. There was a story about it’s being undertaken once, and the contract made, and the contractor dying; then another man took it and one of the workmen was killed on his way to dig the cellar, and the others struck. I didn’t pay much attention to it. I never believed much in that sort of thing anyhow, and then, too, I couldn’t find out that there had ever been anything wrong about the house itself, except as the people who had lived there were said to have seen and heard queer things in the vacant lot, so I thought you might be able to get along, especially as you didn’t look like a man who was timid, and the house was such a bargain as I never handled before. But this you tell me is beyond belief.”

“Do you know the names of the people who formerly owned the vacant lot?” asked Mr. Townsend.

“I don’t know for certain,” replied the agent, “for the original owners flourished long before your or my day, but I do know that the lot goes by the name of the old Gaston lot. What’s the matter? Are you ill?”

“No; it is nothing,” replied Mr. Townsend. “Get what you can for the house; perhaps another family might not be as troubled as we have been.”

“I hope you are not going to leave the city?” said the agent, urbanely.

“I am going back to Townsend Centre as fast as steam can carry me after we get packed up and out of that cursed house,” replied Mr. David Townsend.

He did not tell the agent nor any of his family what had caused him to start when told the name of the former owners of the lot. He remembered all at once the story of a ghastly murder which had taken place in the Blue Leopard. The victim’s name was Gaston and the murderer had never been discovered.