

The Masked Phantom

THE MASKED PHANTOM

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THE BOTAFOGO Bay district of Rio de Janeiro is not the best place for a woman walking alone at night. The main streets were still fairly safe at 12:30 A.M., but Carmen Neves had decided to take a shortcut down a lonely alley. It was her last, fatal mistake.

The witnesses all testified to hearing two gunshots. "I was walking down Rua Mariana," said Gomes Cavalho, a waiter who had just come off his shift. "A garbage truck was in the street. I thought it was backfiring. A few seconds later, I passed by the alley and looked inside. A woman was on the ground, and a man was kneeling over her. At the far end of the alley stood another woman. She looked like a passerby, like me."

The other passerby, Maria Gil, was an off-duty police officer. She had been on the parallel street, heard the shot, and seconds later glanced into the other end of the alley. "The kneeling man looked up from the body. He saw us, seemed a little dazed, and then he started shouting, 'He went that way. A masked bandit with a gun. Help!' The man pointed to a side alley a few feet ahead of him."

The witnesses both came to the kneeling man's aid. Maria pulled out her service revolver and gave chase into the narrow side alley. Gomes, more afraid for the female officer's safety than his own, followed. A minute later, they emerged back in the main alley, their faces troubled and wary. Maria aimed her weapon at the stranger, now standing over Carmen Neves's body. "The side alley is empty." She turned to Gomes Cavalho. "Call the police. I think we have our killer right here."

When the Rio homicide squad arrived, they agreed with Officer Gil. The side alley had turned out to be a dead end with only two doors opening onto it. One was the boarded-up door to an abandoned building. The other was the fire exit to Movie Palace, a door locked on the outside.

The suspect, Fernando Fernas, was an out-of-work carpenter. He was taken into custody and grilled for hours. "I'm innocent," he insisted and told his story once again. "I had just turned off the street into this alley. There was this woman walking ahead of me. She was about halfway through when

this man jumped out. He was about average height with a beard and wearing a mask. I was still in the shadows. I stopped when I saw his gun. It looked like a robbery. But she wouldn't give him her purse. Then all of a sudden he shot her. Just like that—bang, bang. The killer started to come my way and then he saw me. That's when he turned and ran into the side alley. I know you say it's a dead end and there's no way he could have escaped. It's the truth. You have to believe me."

It was hard to believe. Fernando's story wouldn't have had any credibility at all, except for the missing gun. No gun was found—not on his person, not in the empty garbage cans, not in the scattered litter, nowhere in the entire neighborhood. Turning their attention from Fernando to the side alley, the police returned to the scene and inspected the boarded-up door. Thick layers of dust and cobwebs gave mute testimony to the fact that no phantom had used that entrance.

Next on the list was the fire exit. Alvaro, a Movie Palace usher, listened to their questions, then shook his head. "Around 12:30? No. We're on a strict schedule. A show lets out at 12:10. Once the place is empty, we do our cleanup. Cashew boxes, drink cups. At 12:25, they start letting people in for the last show. That's when I take my post by the fire exit. This is a big auditorium and we used to have trouble with kids. The fire exit is hidden from view by a curtain. Kids used to push open the door and let their friends sneak in. That's why I'm there. I stand on the inside of that door from the time they let people in until the movie's almost over. Then it's my turn for a break."

The police showed the usher's testimony to Fernando. "There's no way your masked killer could disappear. Come clean, Fernando. What did you do with the gun?" But Fernando protested his innocence and they had to let him go. "Don't leave town," the chief of detectives warned.

It was two nights later when the phantom struck again. At 12:20 a.m., another foolish pedestrian took a shortcut. This woman was luckier than the first. She had walked only ten feet into the alley when a masked man of average height popped

out from the side alley, his gun drawn. But the would-be robber had miscalculated the distance to his victim. He was far enough away so that the woman didn't feel compelled to obey. The masked man motioned with his gun. "Come here," he growled. And the woman screamed.

Within seconds, a passerby came to her aid. Together they watched as the gunman fled, disappearing down the same side alley. Just as before, the passerby gave chase. And just as before, the phantom vanished.

"Perhaps Fernando was telling the truth," said the chief of detectives begrudgingly. "Our killer must know some way out of the dead-end alley. Let's just hope we catch him before he strikes again."

Whodunit? (1) Who killed Carmen Neves? (2) How did the killer make his two escapes? (3) What were the motives for the attacks?