

The Detective
A Story Of New Orleans

by Binnacle

On a dismal, gloomy evening in the fall of 18—, some half dozen of us sat in the back parlor of the café Bordeaux, quaffing our coffee, speculating on our future prospects, and now and then spinning a yarn.

None of us, however, had roughed it enough in the world to make our lives an interesting episode, save and except one, and he being of a rather meditative mood, seemed better pleased in listening, half-dreamily, to our attempts at a story, than favoring us with one himself.

Being of an obliging disposition, however, we at last succeeded in getting him fairly under way; and as his story may serve to while away an hour with others, as it did with us, I will give it in his own words as nearly as I can:

The Detective's Story

It is but recently, as you are aware, that I resigned my position in the detective force, which I have held for the last twenty years—and I believe I may say, without egotism, that I served with some credit to myself and to the satisfaction of my employers, which fact is amply attested by the great number of important cases which were entrusted to my care, and the almost marvelous success attending my efforts.

This was not due to any extraordinary alertness on my part, but rather to some innate power which I possessed of fastening my suspicion on the proper parties, or putting together and drawing solutions from the simplest facts which, to the majority, would seem to have no bearing on the case whatever.

Some fifteen years ago, crime of every description seemed to be at a flood, and the unsuspecting were lured in to some den, where they were robbed and assassinated; and in some instances were even butchered in the streets in the broad light of day.

There seemed to be some regular, systematic organization by means of which the offender generally escaped justice, until, at length, our police became a reproach to the city.

I, however, had met with considerable success, though young in years, and but new in the force. It was about this time that I was sent for by the chief of police, who directed me to throw aside all minor cases and devote my whole attention to a certain gang, which, it was well known, were located some where in the lower portion of the city.

That there was some such organization none could doubt, for persons—more particularly strangers—could often be traced to this portion of the city, when they would suddenly disappear, and all traces of them would be sought for in vain.

And but a few days before, the detective who had preceded me on this duty had been missing, and there was little doubt as to his fate.

My present undertaking was one of unusual difficulty and danger; for there were spies in the police, I well knew, and I felt that from that moment forward I would have to be the embodiment of caution if I wished to preserve my life, for, ere the setting of the sun I would be a marked man.

I did not shrink from the undertaking, for danger always imparted a zest to any enterprise with me, and I went to work with a will.

Days and weeks flew by, however, without the slightest success attending my exertions; and although the number of mysterious disappearances rather increased than diminished, yet I still continued without the slightest clue.

I was untiring in my exertions, and mortified by want of success, I discarded all caution, and penetrated every hold and den where it were possible to gather any information.

Wearied and worn, both in body and mind, I strolled into Jackson Square on a bright afternoon, and seated myself on one of the many benches, soon became lost in one of those day-dreams of which, at such a time and in such a place, I am so fond.

I had been sitting in this way for some time, but in reverie, and dead to all around me, when I felt, rather than saw, that there were a pair of eyes fastened upon my own; and looking up quickly I encountered the orbs of my disturber—though, evidently, much to the dissatisfaction of the offending party, who seemed to experience no little annoyance at being detected.

I could well pardon the interruption to my day-dreams, though, when I was to be awakened to such an agreeable reality.

On the opposite side of the walk, and some ten or twelve paces from myself, sat one who would at once fix the attention of the most unobservant.

The personage referred to was of the gentler sex, and possessed, in an extraordinary degree, of those attractions of form and feature which play such havoc with the hearts of the “lords of creation.”

My Neighbor was, evidently, of Spanish origin, for the rich dark blood of old Castile burned brightly on the clear olive cheeks, whilst the eyes, jetty as the brow above them, blazed forth with a life-like brilliancy which seemed to light up and enliven the whole face.

Her figure, though slight, was graceful and commanding; and though she was sitting, her very attitude was the embodiment of grace.

It was impossible for me to withdraw my gaze, though rude it might seem, and whenever I encountered those lustrous eyes, as I occasionally would, they thrilled through me like an electric shock.

Darkness, in the meantime, was drawing on apace, and the spires of the Cathedral of St. Patrick were already casting their shadows far out into the square.

The senora seemingly became apprised of the approaching dusk at the same moment with myself, for arising hastily, she turned to leave the square.

So much occupied had I been with the fair Spaniard, I had not noticed a personage who approached from the opposite direction, and who now met her face to face, just as he was passing me.

The party in question presented a squalid appearance, and possessed a cut-throat countenance, which would have gone far in convicting him of any crime for which he might be placed before a jury.

Just as he passed the senora, he seized a small reticule which she held in her hand, and tearing it from her grasp, bounded off toward the gate.

In an instant I was on my feet, and ere he had gained half the distance to the street I had seized him by the collar and hurled him to the ground.

He was a powerful fellow, and for a moment I had a struggle for mastery.

But it was brief; for in another instant I held him tightly by the throat, causing him to relax all efforts at escape.

I was about to dash my disengaged fist into the face of the miscreant, when the pleading voice of the senora—who had turned and followed us—caused me to desist, and at her earnest request I allowed the ruffian, to arise to his feet, though I still clutched him tightly by the throat.

He had dropped the reticule, which he had torn from the senora, and I now picked it up and returned it, and I at the same time requested her name as it would be necessary for her to appear before the Police Court in the morning to testify against the thief.

But my inamorata besought me to spare her the mortification of appearing in public as a witness in such a case, while she at the same time testified her thanks by word and gesture for the service I had done her.

“Think, too,” said she, in the most sympathetic tone, “what sorrow you may heap upon the head of this poor man, and also perhaps a deserving family whose very want may cause him to commit this act. You have rendered me a great service,” continued she, gratefully, “by restoring my property, but you will confer a far greater favor by restoring this poor man to his liberty.”

I excused myself from complying on the ground of my being an officer, whose duty it was to arraign all known criminals, but even this would not answer my purpose, for the senora was evidently determined to use every effort to secure the release of the ruffian.

“But,” continued she, “it is now growing so dark that I shall fear to continue my way home by myself, particularly since receiving this fright, and I know by the alacrity you displayed in coming to my assistance that you have too much gallantry to decline to escort me home when we have just had an illustration of the dangers besetting one at every turn. Besides, my aunt will never forgive me, should I fail to bring you home with me, that she may have an opportunity of returning her thanks for the service you have rendered me.”

I had never faltered in my duty before, but the winsome words of the fair stranger proved too powerful for me, and gradually my hand released its hold on the collar of the robber, and fell to my side.

The senora took several pieces of gold from the reticule which the robber had torn from her, and placing them in his hand with the sweetest smile, bid him go; taking my arm at the same time, and leading me toward the gate as if afraid that I would reconsider my determination, and again take charge of the thief.

As we passed out of the gate and turned down the street, I was informed by my companion that she had left her carriage some two squares down the street, where it was still waiting for her, and to this she proceeded at once.

I assisted the senorita to enter, and taking my seat by her side, soon became so enraptured with my new acquaintance that I lost sight as to where I was going, or what was transpiring around me. Indeed, it would have been almost impossible for me to have informed myself had I desired it, for the windows were closed, and it had already turned quite dark.

We had been going at a rapid rate for some fifteen or twenty minutes when the carriage abruptly turned a sharp angle, and by the peculiar sound I imagined that we were passing through a closed court.

I had hardly any time to think of any thing, however, before the door was thrown open, and in an instant the senora leaped to the ground, and before I could realize what was passing around me, I was seized by the feet, and by a powerful jerk, hauled from the vehicle. My head struck the hard-paved court, and for a moment I was unconscious.

It was but for an instant, however, and as I recovered my senses and took a hasty glance around, I became aware of my hopeless position.

The carriage stood in a closed passage way and a heavy gate—through which I had entered from the street—barred all egress.

A dim and smoky lamp, swinging from the ceiling of the vault-like enclosure, and enhanced the ferociousness of the savage and villainous faces that glowed upon me.

But I had little time to scrutinize my captors, for the party who had removed me in such a summary fashion from the coach only paused sufficiently long to take a breath and again dashed on with me, hauling me up a flight of some five or six stone steps, the sharp corners of which cut into my head, causing the blood to flow in streams. I was drawn up the steps through a long passage way and into a spacious room, in one corner of which I was thrown—the party who had dragged me scarcely deigning me a look as he released my feet and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

The room was a large square apartment, the windows of which had been bricked up with a view to prevent any sound reaching the street. Goods of every description were scattered around the room in endless confusion, and here and there a small table, around which clustered a party gambling or drinking. There were some thirty-five or forty persons present, and a more fiendish looking set I had never seen.

That I had been trapped and had fallen into the hands of the very gang I was seeking to destroy, I knew at once, and it required but a glance at the faces of the wretches that surrounded me to convince me that my fate was sealed.

The senora sat near me on a sofa, relating the incidents of my capture, while the party that I had knocked down for assaulting her in the square, assisted in securing my hands and feet and gagging me.

The gang discussed their plans for the future with a disregard of my presence that boded me no good, and convinced me that they already looked upon me as one of those “dead men that tell no tales.”

I had heard enough to satisfy me that this was to be my last night on earth, and I was casting about me to see if there was any chance of escape. More than once I had noticed one of the party gazing at me in a peculiar manner, and upon scrutinizing him more closely, I became certain that I had met which him before; and I imagined at one time that he made me a rapid sign—yet it was so slight it was impossible to read its meaning, or even to say whether it were really made.

I was some time before I could recollect where I had met this personage; but at length the whole thing flashed across me at once, and I felt that is he had possessed one spark of gratitude—that then I had one friend in the party, though whether he had sufficient pluck to attempt to assist me, or whether it would avail anything if he did, remained to be seen. I had never seen him but once before in my life, and then but for a few moments.

The circumstance which first brought us together I will narrate in as few words as possible.

It was some eight years before this, on a dreary November night, as I plodded long alone in one of the streets adjacent to the levee, that my attention was attracted by the singular movements of a small party of persons who were clustered around a lamp-post on the opposite side of the street.

As the party seemed to be somewhat under the influence of liquor, and as there appeared to be some disturbance going on in their midst, I crossed over to ascertain the trouble.

They informed me that one of their party, whilst walking along some distance in advance of the rest, had been knocked down by two persons who attempted to rob him, and that having succeeded in overtaking and securing one of these, that they now intended to take the law in their own hands, and swing him up to the nearest lamp-post.

To this I objected, informing them that I was an officer of the law, and could not allow any such proceeding.

To this the party demurred, and as I was alone, and my opponents too much under the influence of whisky to listen to reason, there was a fair prospect of my having a serious encounter.

But just as the quarrel was about to culminate in a row, I was reinforced by a squad of police, and the prisoner was taken from the hands of the would-be hangmen and turned over to the guardian of the law.

He was tried and convicted for a short term; but before being taken from court, he had thanked me for saving his life, and he furthermore expressed a desire to befriend me, should an opportunity ever occur.

As I said before, I had never seen him from that day until now, and I felt that this debt of gratitude was all that stood between me and death.

As the clock struck the hour of midnight, the captain of the gang arose and signaled out some eight or ten of his men, three of whom raised me up and bore me to the coach, which stood just as I had left it, whilst the rest proceeded with the chief, and amongst the latter I was glad to see my friend.

The blinds were closely drawn, but as the heavy gate swung back, and we passed into the street, the patter of the rain and the hoarse voice of the wind as it moaned around us, told of the dismal weather without.

In a short time the carriage halted, and as the door was thrown open, the surging rush of many waters, rising above the noise of the storm, convinced me that we were on the banks of the Mississippi.

I was not allowed to remain in doubt, however, for I was hastily lifted from the vehicle, and being borne to the edge of the water but a few yards distant, was unceremoniously tossed into the boat, in which the captain and the rest of the party were already awaiting us.

The boat was immediately shoved off, and as we left the shore behind, and the robbers could converse without fear of attracting attention, I was not long in ignorance as to my fate.

I learned from their conversation that they intended rowing to the middle of the stream, where a weight was to be fastened to my feet, and then I was to be thrown overboard.

I lay in the bottom of the boat, my hands and feet being securely tied, and the captain seated above me with his feet resting upon my breast.

He now leaned forward, and taking a rope to which was attached a heavy weight, formed one end into a slip knot and passed it over my feet.

He had hardly regained his seat when I felt the blade of a knife pass between my hands, and the next moment my hands were free.

Then some unseen hand placed the handle of the knife within my own palm, for it was fortunately too dark to distinguish anything; and I knew that now I could expect no further assistance from the same quarter.

I drew my feet up until I could reach them with my hands, and severed the cord with the knife! I at the same time unfastened the weight from my feet, and pulled it towards me. In a moment more I had slipped the knot gently over the feet of the captain, and lifting the weight, balanced on the gunwale of the boat. We were now, I supposed, at about the middle of the river, and the captain ordered them to cease rowing, while he tossed me into the stream. As he laid his hand over my shoulder, I toppled the weight over the side, and bounding to my feet, dashed him into the stream.

The next instant I leaped in myself, and sinking beneath the surface, allowed the stream to carry me along some distance before again coming to the top.

It was well that I did so; for they were now beating the water on every side with their heavy oars, hoping to strike me on the head and render my escape entirely impossible, should I rise to the surface.

This safeguard seemed hardly necessary, however, when it was recollected that I was in the middle of the river, and loaded down with wet clothes.

After lashing the water with their oars for a while, they took to rowing again, and commenced to pull around in a circle, thinking to cut me off, should I be making for the shore.

Several times they passed quite near, but the darkness was too intense to admit them seeing me.

I was rapidly growing weaker and weaker by my exertions to keep upon the surface of the water, and I felt that it mattered little whether I was discovered or not, as it would be impossible for me to reach land. I was just about to give up the struggle, when I discovered the dim outline of the boat again nearing me. In a moment more it was almost over me, and I saw that in another instant it would bear me beneath the water, from which I would never again rise.

Just as the prow touched my forehead, and commenced to carry me under, my hand came in contact with some loose object, and clutching it with the despair of a drowning man, I found that it was the painter of the boat, which in casting loose from the shore had been permitted to hang over the side in the water.

I clung to this, unobserved, just keeping my head above water, and the thieves now having given up all hope of my recapture, and being satisfied, no doubt, that I was, ere this, at the bottom of the river, turned the boat toward the shore.

The rain continued to sweep down in great sheets, whilst the wind, which rushed by in fitful gusts, would at times turn the boat from its course, and send it broadside to the shore.

Gradually the few dim lights scattered here and there along the levee, became more and more distinct, and in a short time the low shore was discernable.

I was now in another strait, for if I held on to the rope until the boat struck, I should be crushed against the wharf; and if I let go, I should be drowned, and between the two I felt that there was little to choose.

My only chance was to hold on until just as the boat was about to strike, when I could let go, and being so near the shore, might succeed in reaching it, after drifting down stream sufficiently far to be out of view of the party.

In this maneuver I was successful, for just before the boat struck, I let go my hold, and after suffering myself to float down for a short distance, succeeded in scrambling on shore.

I dragged myself on the levee more dead than alive, and rising to my feet, with the greatest exertion, commenced to stagger on after the party whose voice guided me in the darkness.

As I proceeded, I rapidly gained strength, and enlivened by the prospect of at last finding out the headquarters of this notorious gang, I used every caution to avoid attracting attention.

I was not kept in suspense long, for after a short walk, the gang reached their destination, and seeing them enter, and noting the house well, I posted off to the chief of police. In less than twenty minutes thereafter, a force of some forty men silently surrounded the building, and the doors being dashed in, the party was taken completely by surprise.

In a short time the whole party were brought to trial, and all received sentences more or less severe.

He that had assisted me in my hour of trial, was after a short time liberated, in consideration of the good deed he had done, and as he immediately left the city, I never heard more of him.

The fair traitor that had betrayed me into the snare, was condemned to confinement for life, like many of the rest, but she succeeded in captivating her jailor, who left his post, and fled with her

to Havana, when, having accomplished her object, she left him to return, perhaps, once more to thieving and warring upon the human race.

This ended the “detective’s story,” and the hour being late, the party dispersed, promising to meet again at some future day, and “fight them battles over again.”

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