

A Spanish Gang Of Gamblers And Counterfeiters

A Distressed Mother—A Good Friend—Changing Names—The Ballet—A Gambling-Hell—
An Exciting Game—An Obedient Alarm-Bell—The Decisive Moment—Meeting Their Doom—
A Happy Mother And Son.

by George McWatters

Early in the month of June, 1876, I received a note from the chief-of-police of Madrid, requesting me to call at his office. I did so. He informed me that my services were required in a case which was of the most delicate nature. Señora Alvarez, a lady belonging to one of the most aristocratic families of Madrid, had applied to him to have a detective follow the track of her son, as she was afraid that he had fallen in with a gang of gamblers and sharpers, who made him squander his fortune and that of the family. I at once understood the delicate nature of the case, and, neatly dressed, called on Señora Alvarez, who vividly painted to me her deep grief and promised to reward me royally if I should succeed in showing her son the abyss upon the brink of which he was standing. I told her that I would do all that was in my power, and hoped to succeed. On my further inquiries, she told me that a certain Toledo was the special friend of her son Juan, and that she thought he was a very bad companion for him, and even the aristocratic name which he bore was only adopted, and did not belong to him. Her son, after he had become of years, had the misfortune to fall into the hands of gamblers, most of whom moved in good society; this was clear to me, and provided with this information, I told her that I would use my utmost endeavors to bring her son back to the path of virtue. I insisted, however, that Señora Alvarez should keep this a profound secret from her son, and in order not to arouse his suspicion, I should not call on her any more, but inform her of my proceedings by the mail. I requested her to give me a picture of Toledo, which was in her possession. Provided with this, the man could not escape my notice, and I took leave of the lady.

Señora Alvarez informed me that her son usually attended the opera in the evening, and therefore I went that very evening. At nine o'clock I was in the parterre; the ballet was about to commence, but the curtain had not yet been raised. Therefore I had time to look into all the boxes with my opera-glass. Soon I observed Señor Toledo sitting in a box, and, judge of my astonishment, I had the misfortune of knowing him. I had lost, some years previous, my whole fortune in gambling with him and his club. He looked more elegant than ever. He sat next to a pale, young gentleman of aristocratic bearing. I could not doubt but this was Señor Alvarez. My resolution was soon taken. I only waited a few moments, to silence my hatred for the fiend who had ruined me, and then I stepped into the box.

Toledo sat with his back towards me. I touched his shoulders and he turned around.

The sight of the fabulous Basilisk could not have surprised my old *friend* any more than my unexpected appearance. However, I was bound not to arouse his suspicion and treated him in the most cordial manner.

“Carlos!” he stuttered at last, while he shook hands with me, “who would have thought to see you here again?”

“You certainly did not think so, Cardon,” I replied; “you look at an old friend as if he were a ghost!”

“Hush!” he said, quietly; “we will go out, so as to be able to speak undisturbed.”

He turned toward Señor Alvarez, and replying to his inquiring looks he said: “This is an old friend, my dear Señor. Congratulate both of us. I have something of importance to impart to him; we will return in a moment.”

Cardon hurried into the corridor; I followed him. We were almost entirely alone.

“What does this mean, Carlos?” said Cardon, with his usual calmness, as he saw that nobody noticed us. “Excuse me, my dear friend, but when I saw you the last time, I thought—well, I don’t know how to express myself.”

“Yes, ruined, you mean to say; nobody can know it better than yourself.”

“I hope you do not imagine that it was my fault.”

“I do not imagine anything, my dear friend. Three months ago I might have imagined a great deal; but at that time my venerable uncle was kind enough to say farewell to this world. . .”

“Impossible!” interrupted Cardon. “The old gentleman has taken his departure?”

“You see that I am in mourning yet.”

“Dear friend,” he replied, “accept my heartfelt condolence, although I presume that the catastrophe is not so disagreeable to you as one might infer from your gloomy face.”

“You are not entirely in the wrong, Cardon; you know I have never questioned your sharp look. But I have buried my old habits in the coffin of my uncle. I have said goodbye to cards and dice, and have promised my wife never to gamble again.”

The cold, sharp look of the demon in flesh, expressed mockery when he heard this good intention from my lips. But he only replied: “You are perfectly right, Carlos. Now come; I will introduce you to my friend Alvarez.”

“Also one of the boys?” I asked, laughingly.

“He is of very good family. . . Apropos Carlos,” he said, in a confidential tone, “for family reasons, which I will explain some time, I wish you would call me now Toledo.”

“Toledo?” I repeated.

“Yes; do not forget the name. But let us go into the box, or the ballet will be at an end, without us seeing it.”

We went into the box. I was introduced to Señor Juan Alvarez, as an old friend of Toledo.

When the ballet was at an end, Toledo proposed to go to a café, whither we went, and he opened, in my honor, three bottles of champagne; at about midnight he offered to introduce us to a friend, where we would find good company. Señor Alvarez accepted at once.

I stood up and took my hat, as if I intended to leave.

“Oh, go with us, Carlos!” said Toledo. “You do not play, but you can look on.”

“Yes,” I replied, “but you must give me your word of honor not to coax me to play.”

“Oh! with all my heart; your virtue shall not be endangered, as true as I am a gentleman.”

In ten minutes, we were standing before a very quiet, good-looking house, not far from the river.

Toledo knocked in a peculiar manner, at the door. The knock was answered from the inside. A word, which I did not understand, was exchanged through the key-hole; then the door was opened, and we stepped in. The hall was lighted by a lamp. We went up a flight of stairs, entered a room, the blinds of which were carefully closed and bolted, so that no light could be seen from the street. The room was brilliantly lighted. Two tables attracted at once my attention: one was a roulette-table, and the other was provided with cards and dice. Both tables were occupied. On a third table, bottles of wine, liquors, and cakes, were standing. I threw a quick glance over the company. It consisted of twelve or fifteen persons. Some of them, it could clearly be seen, belonged to the higher classes; the others were professional gamblers, like my friend Toledo.

At first, I was afraid that I might be recognized, or some of the sharpers might guess the real reason of my presence, but soon the thought consoled me that my fear had no foundation. I had been connected only three or four months with the secret service, and had never had anything to do with them. However, my presence caused some commotion. One of the gamblers, with an American accent, asked who this suspicious person was.

“I answer for him,” said Toledo. Then he whispered a few words into the ears of the corpulent American, which made him laugh, and his conduct towards me changed.

Soon the game was animated; I was invited to take a part, but refused. Alvarez was losing tremendously; he had not enough money with him to pay his losses, so he gave his notes, and promised that he would mortgage his property on the next day, and meet his liabilities.

I concluded to save him, if possible, from that emergency, and early in the morning we left the gambling-hall, after we had received the watchword for the next day, I having told Toledo that I would try my luck once more. The affair was near its conclusion. Alvarez had mortgaged his property, and, by doing so, was on the verge of ruining himself and his family. I told Toledo, in the course of the day, that I had received £5,000 of my inheritance, and would try my luck in the evening.

Alvarez, when he commenced playing, declared that he would play in such a way that his antagonists should put up his notes against his ready money, hoping in that way to retrieve his loss. They consented, and he whispered in the ear of Toledo, whose perfect toy he was: "Amigos, I swear to you that if I gain, this evening, I will say farewell to cards and dice forever." Toledo smiled, and encouraged his good intention. More than half a million piasters stood on the game; it was a game for life or death. Before we went to the gambling-hell, I had taken Alvarez aside, and had whispered in his ear: "Before you commence playing, this evening, take care that you have all your notes and the gold which you and they are going to risk, laid on the table." He promised me to do so. I entered at about midnight. Señor Alvarez was disputing with his antagonists. The young gentleman desired, according to my advice, that a sum equal to his should be laid on the table by his antagonists, for he hoped, in the critical moment, to be lucky. He was resolved to gain his fortune back; a great amount of notes, jewels, and money, was already lying on the table, but it did not correspond with the amount he had put up. My arrival interrupted the dispute.

"Gentlemen," exclaimed Toledo, "my friend Carlos can help us, as he has received a great amount of money, to-day. Carlos, have you your money with you?"

"Yes, I have," I replied; "but all bills."

"Lend me £4,000," he whispered; "in an hour I will give you £6,000 back."

"No, thank you," said I. "I only give my money away when I have lost it."

He looked daggers at me, but one of the gamblers went out to get £5,000. At last, he returned, with his hand full of bills, and, as I had expected, they were counterfeit.

Alvarez looked closely at them, but did not see their game; they were good specimens. The game commenced. The scene reminded me so forcibly of the night in which I had lost my fortune, that I felt as in a fever.

Alvarez lost in the first game; they gambled without interruption; the sums were doubled, tripled; the poor dupe felt wretched; he saw his fortune go from him; he saw the tears of his mother.

The clock struck two. That was the time I had resolved to capture the gang.

"Hush! what is that?" said Toledo; "hush! did you not hear something?"

"I did not hear anything," I replied. The others said the same.

"Draw the alarm-bell, Adolpho," he said to one of the gamblers. The man did so; all listened breathlessly for the reply. The bell resounded three times. This was the signal that everything was all right. "It is nothing," said Toledo; "let us proceed." Then he continued softly, that Alvarez could not hear him, "It would really be a shame to interrupt this comedy; it is nearly at an end."

I had given the watchword to the police. I had ordered two men to enter the house, dressed in civil clothing, gag the porter, and answer the alarm-bell three times, in case of inquiry; then they were to admit the remainder of the force, and softly ascend the stairs, to be ready to rush in at the critical moment. I knew that they were there, and that all the doors were closely watched.

The decisive moment had come. I put my hand in my pocket, cocked my pistol carefully, for I knew that I had to deal with desperate men. At this moment, Alvarez had lost again; he jumped up; his face was deathly pale; he was in despair, and cursed his antagonists. Toledo and his chums laughed in his face. Alvarez took Toledo by the throat, and exclaimed: "Cheat! rascal! you have ruined me!" Toledo answered him with mockery, and after a short struggle, succeeded in freeing himself from the grasp of Alvarez. At the same time, the gamblers grasped for their part of the spoil, which was lying on the table. "Halt! Toledo," I said, stepping forward, "it seems to me that you have played foul."

"What do you mean?" asked Toledo.

"I mean to say that these bills are counterfeit."

"Dog!" replied Toledo, and threw himself upon me.

At the same time, he tried to tear the bills, which I had taken up, from my hands, but the sight of my pistol forced him to step back. The whole gang now jumped up and surrounded me.

"Take those papers from him!" exclaimed Toledo; "stab him, or we are lost!"

"Yes, you are lost, rascal!" I returned. "Come in, gentlemen, and do your duty."

The policemen entered; in the struggle which ensued, I took charge of the table and the valuables. The eight men were taken prisoners after a most desperate struggle; they were all condemned to transportation for life.

Señor Alvarez received his notes, his jewels, and his money back. He had received a good lesson. I need not add that Señora Alvarez and her son offered me all kinds of rewards; but the only reward I accepted was a shake of the hand of Alvarez, and his word of honor never to play again.

McWatters, George. *Detectives of Europe and America*. Hartford: J. B. Burr, 1877.