

Behind the Scenes

A Detective's Story

From the *New Orleans Picayune*

I will tell you, said Mr. F——, of an incident that occurred here many years ago. It possesses to me now, as I think of it, all the vivid interest it had then. It was among the first cases entrusted to Mr. I—— and myself, and we devoted to it an unwearied patience and assiduity that fitted us for their exercise many times afterward. It was in mid-winter that the circumstance I allude to occurred. The theatrical season was at its height. The St. Charles was nightly thronged with the beauty and fashion of the city. A new star had appeared on its boards, exciting an interest prevalent and absorbing. Her beauty, grace, and accomplishments were the topic of every club-room—the one subject that engaged the attention of all the youth in the city. Her name was Adele Laronde. Very young—scarcely twenty—and very beautiful was this young girl, around whom a web of mystery was woven that seemed to defy human ingenuity to unravel.

I say she was beautiful, but that word does not convey an adequate idea of her exceeding grace of mind and person. Petite in form, the slender figure was exquisite in symmetry. A wealth of bright golden hair shaded a face rosy with health and brilliant with genius. The clear hazel eyes flashed with intelligence, and the delicate curve of the exquisite chiseled lips expressed hatred or scorn, or intensified emotion.

Night after night the theater was filled with her admirers. Passion in every phrase—the very well-springs and impulses of our nature—seemed to find in her an interpreter that never erred. Her analysis of character was perfect; it was true to nature, and therefore perfect.

The night of which I speak had witnessed her greatest triumph. She seemed inspired, and the feelings and emotions of her audience appeared as absolutely under her control as if she wielded the wand of an enchantress. The curtain fell on the last act of the tragedy and the audience dispersed. Some mesmeric power held me to the spot and I lingered around the entrance of the theater.

An hour must have passed by and the last of the company crept out of the narrow aisle leading to the stage, and sought their homes. Still the actress lingered; her carriage at the door—the driver impatient. Suddenly from behind the scenes—echoing along that narrow aisle—came a scream so piercing, that it cut to the heart like a dagger. It chilled my blood. I stood rooted to the spot; anguish, horror, grief, were in its tone.

In a moment more I dashed open the door and rushed into the theater. Close at my back came Mr. I——, the driver, and the porter of the establishment. The light in the green room was still burning. The large mirror that hung from the wall reflected from the opposite sofa the tinsel and mock jewelry of a queen. I noticed this as I dashed open the narrow door that led to the dressing room assigned the actress. *It was empty.* I called her by name. I shouted until the walls of the vast building echoed back my voice. We searched everywhere, beneath and above the stage, even among the rolled curtains in the loft, and the narrow apertures between the scenes—in vain. *The*

actress had disappeared. The loud screams that had so startled us were not repeated. There was no avenue of escape, still she was gone.

Mr. I—— visited her apartment at the hotel. She was not there. The gas was relit in the theater and our search resumed. She was not to be found. Her friends were visited; the most transient acquaintance called on, with a like result.

Each hour, instead of revealing the mystery, only deepened it. In the light of the morning we continued the search. A single object was discovered, which could possibly afford a clue to the missing girl. On the floor of the dressing room was a diamond ear-ring. It was not such a one as was worn by the actress. It established beyond question the presence of another person in her room, and that person a female. This was all. The mysterious interview and its termination were shrouded in a veil of darkness our ingenuity could not penetrate. If the earth had opened and swallowed her, her disappearance could not have been more utterly unaccountable.

What was to be done? We knew she was a native of France, brought thence in childhood, Her relatives had died, her friends knew nothing, save that she was an orphan. Genius had aided her rise, industry had secured her fame. The architect of her own fortunes, she had climbed alone the steep whose ascent is devious and hard to surmount.

Days went by. Friends interested themselves in the search, and large rewards were offered for any intelligence of the missing girl. All was ineffectual. Not even a trace of her could be found. Still I had not given up; at my heart I felt that we would yet succeed in finding her.

One day I stood leaning negligently on the counter of a fashionable jeweler. I loved to gaze upon the brilliant gems that strewed the case, and filled it with a weird, flashing light. My attention absorbed in viewing them, I did not notice the entrance of a lady—her foreign accent in addressing the jeweler caused me to turn around. She held an ear-ring in her hand and was inquiring the cost of one, if made to match it. The first glance I had of it made the blood leap like fire in my veins. It was the counterpart of the one found in the theatre.

You may imagine I did not lose sight of that woman. I knew I had struck on the right clue.

I traced her home. The panther never stole on his victim more silently than I in the footsteps of the dark-brown stranger.

I scarcely know how I got back to the office. I seemed to have triumphed over space and time. More like a maniac than a detective, I rushed up to Mr. I—— and imparted my intelligence. He was not less excited than I. We both felt an interest in the beautiful girl as strong as if she had been a sister. But we knew that our steps must be wary, and our movements as secret as the grave. We had no common criminal to deal with. If not the arch-fiend himself, we knew she was almost as cunning. The mysterious abduction of the actress disclosed a quickness and sagacity at once ingenious and profound. The same subtle spirit we did not doubt we should have to encounter again. It was not, therefore, with a feeling of assured success that we prepared to enter the residence to which I had traced the foreign lady.

It was not as officers of the law usually go, that we went on that occasion. We employed rather the subtle cunning and perfect skill of a man brought up to the business. For once his nefarious art helped him to a noble deed. A life of crime was whitened by a single virtue. Before the skill of this man the door sprung back upon its hinges, and we stood within the portals where the issues of this strange mystery were to be decided. Silently we ascended the stairs. A gas flame, burning from a globe, suspended from the ceiling, flung a mellow light along the stately corridor. At the further end of the hall a door opened into a large apartment. We moved toward this, and as we approached it sounds of weeping struck on our ears, and then we heard a voice of supplication. Sorrowful and sad the strange, sweet voice floated out on the air. It was like the wail of a broken heart, that cry of one in distress.

“Oh, God! Is there no help; no help!”

It thrilled to my heart. Even in that pitiful cadence, I knew those well-remembered tones. Burdened with anguish, I knew them well.

In another instant the door flew open before our impetuous weight and there, in the gloom of a luxurious room, her young limbs fettered, and a single garment shrouded the wasted form, was the young actress. We were not minute too soon, for the next instant, furious as a demon, the dark-browed woman entered the room.

It took but a moment to secure her, and then the mystery was solved.

She was the aunt of the actress. Her niece was heiress to a fortune in France; she removed, her own child would inherit the wealth. It must be done, however, secretly and silently, that no clue could be found. She had secreted herself in the passage way of the theater, and taking advantage of a momentary delay had secured her victim. In the struggle an ear-ring was torn off. A powerful narcotic suddenly applied drowned her senses and stopped resistance. She was behind the drop curtain as we rushed in. Leaving while we were yet in the green room, she made her escape along the aisle that led to the street.

This was the end. It made a sensation at the time, but it was, until now, an unwritten history of the world of crime in New Orleans twenty years ago.

Fayetteville [TN] Observer, December 24, 1868