

## A Detective's Experience

### *A Lost Will*

"I will tell you," said Mr. F——, "of an incident that at the time excited universal interest in New Orleans, and was the occasion of the success which subsequently attended Mr. I—— and myself as detectives. In other words, it was our beginning. The success we met with gave us reputation and started us in the public confidence.

An old gentleman, a Creole, named Cortier, had died leaving an immense fortune. He had two heirs at law, a niece and nephew. It was the old man's earnest wish that the young people should marry. He wished to preserve his property as a whole and transmit it undivided. It was a princely estate, and if guarded with care the possessor might attain to any influence, and would certainly wield a flattering control in the financial world. This was the dream of the old man's ambition. It gave consideration to himself, and he hoped to found a great moneyed aristocracy in his family. But the girl was averse to the match. She was a fair, delicate creature, one whom we intuitively loved, and who exercised over all who came within the sphere of her influence a magic control. The young man, on the contrary, was wild and dissipated, and if not already depraved, was fast approaching a period when dishonor would be as familiar to him as the air he breathed. He was passionately in love with his cousin, and aside from moneyed considerations wished to make her his wife.

Mr. Cortier, however, before his death, perceived the reluctance of his niece to the marriage, and made a will providing for a division of the estate. A former one had been made, giving the whole of his immense property to the orphan, relying on the willingness of his niece, when she came to understand his wishes, to comply with them.

As I said before the old man died, and to the surprise of the lawyer who had drawn up the last will, it could not be found. It was searched for in every conceivable place, but defied the researches of those interested in its recovery. The old will was, however, produced, and insisted on as the last testament of the deceased.

By it the niece was disinherited.

The lawyer was convinced that the will had been stolen or destroyed. He commenced suit in behalf of the niece for a division of the property, and entrusted the case of the discovery of the will to us.

There was a large reward, and, besides, the case claimed all our interest. We went to work, therefore, with mind and soul in our undertaking.

Our first step was to find the actual criminal. Suspicion of course rested on the nephew. Everyone believed him the guilty party. We both inclined to this belief at first, but soon came to a different conclusion. Our investigations satisfied us that he knew nothing of the matter. The will, together with other valuable papers, was kept in a curiously carved antique box, studded with jewels, [and] was formerly the casket of an Indian prince. It was not known by the family that this box was kept by the owner for any other purpose other than as an ornament. This box

had disappeared. The last time it was seen was a few days before the old man's death. Silently we looked for this box. There was not a jeweler's establishment in the city we did not enter; there was nor a "clew" we did not pull. Early and late we were on the watch; but every trace had disappeared, and our exertions seemed fruitless. As a last resource, we adopted a hazardous experiment. Among the cracksman in the city was a mere boy. We had arrested him once or twice, and knew him well. He was shrewd, daring and unscrupulous, but we believed we had a power over him which would make him faithful. This boy was sought out. We told him all, and promised him a large reward if he would search the premises of an old "receiver," and let us know what it contained. This was late in the evening; the next day the trial came on. The boy undertook the trust, and was to report to us at daylight. He was punctual to the time. Among the articles mentioned, we recognized a description of the box. The old villain had it.

A warrant was immediately procured and his house searched. Hid away in a secret recess, among silver plate and jewelry of immense cost, we found the casket. It had been stolen by the nephew, and pledged to the "receiver" for money. He did not know that it contained anything, and it had never been opened. We hastened to the courtroom with our treasure. The will was there all right; but the trial did not proceed. The rights of the niece were acknowledged and the half of the estate was surrendered. It was out first big case, and it was a source of pride to us since that it was in behalf of virtue and innocence. The courts [have] faded from men's minds, but it comes to us in many a silent musing with memory, replete with the recollections of an early triumph.[']

*The Daily Picayune* [New Orleans, LA], September 27, 1868

This story was part of a series titled "A Detective's Experience" and featuring detectives Mr. F— and Mr. I—— that was published in the Sunday *Daily Picayune* from August 1868 to November 1869.