

A Detective's Experience

Retribution

Far down on St. Ann street is an old frame house, with ruined gables, worm eaten, and hastening to decay. The moss has gathered on its roof, and the wild vines cling to its casements. The lawn is overgrown with weeds, and a single narrow path leads to its door. Yet it is inhibited; and at night, when darkness and gloom pervades the earth, and the noise and stir of the great city grows less distinct, a wild face is pressed to the panes of an upper window and great wild eyes peer out into the darkness. It is an old face now; but it was once beautiful, and the haggard cheeks were rosy with health. There is a madness in the hollow eyes, where dwelt once the fire of genius. Nearly twenty years ago Inez de Castro was the belle of New Orleans.

“I saw her then,” said Mr. F——, “regnant over many hearts. Tall and graceful, with a figure matchless in symmetry, she seemed created for the queen she was. An heiress, courted and caressed, it is no wonder that her pride was flattered, and her faults recounted as virtues. Yet was she not spoiled by adulation. The impulses of a wayward nature were toned and controlled by the instincts of a good heart. Distress never appealed to her in vain; and the cry of grief or sickness would wean her from the giddiest whirl of dissipation or pleasure.

To such a woman the homage of men's hearts are naturally due. She received it as if it were her right; but used, to obtain it, none of the arts which degrade while it flatters a woman's vanity. She was betrothed to a young man whom she had known from infancy. Their parents had been friends and partners in business, and the engagement of their children was designed to perpetuate unbroken the splendid fortune their mutual industry had acquired. An affection fostered from infancy could not help being intense in a nature like her's; it was a part of her being. To the intellect and character of Arthur Bandeau her heart and mind were alike subservient. She believed him possessed of every good quality, and elevated above the reach of weakness or crime.

I did not know all this until after the event that shattered her mind and destroyed in their youth all the hopes of her life. The preparations for the marriage were going on, when, one day, Mr. I—— came to me and requested my presence at the office. Arriving there, we found an old, gray haired man waiting to see us. He was very aged and the wrinkled face was ashen now with a terrible sorrow. It was with many a tear and a faltering accent he told us of the assassination of his grandchild. She was a young girl, scarcely twenty; one of those beautiful Italian girls, whose surprising loveliness are but types of the beauty of their native land. A winsome, laughing sprite was the merry-hearted girl. The warm sun of her native skies had tinted her cheek with brown and put its smile in her heart.

A youth, whom the old man scarcely knew, he said, had courted her. She loved him, as such creatures always love, with passionate devotion. But the old man thought this nameless stranger had wearied of his child. Of late he had come but seldom. It was to meet him she had gone out the night she was murdered. The trysting place was underneath the trees of the neutral ground, far out on Esplanade. She had perished underneath these same trees, strangely.

This was all the old man knew. He never suspected, what was plain to us—the strange lover had killed his mistress. She loved unwisely; it might have been, criminally. The man, no doubt, rid himself of a love that had grown troublesome.

We determined to be present at the inquest and learn, if we could, any additional particulars.

When we reached the place a crowd had assembled, but these gave way and admitted us to the presence of the dead girl. The pale face was beautiful even in death. The braids of purplish black hair were drawn back from a forehead broad and fair, and each feature of the pure Madona face was lovely. She was stabbed in the breast. The nature of the wound was such that it could only have been made while she was standing. I drew my theory of the case at once. She had met her lover. His arm was around her waist—her eyes looking into his—when that treacherous blow was dealt.

On her person a picture was found. The old man identified it as that of the strange lover.

It was the picture of Arthur Bandeau.

I recognized it at once. Yet surely he could not have done this deed. Yet were appearances against him. If my theory of the case was correct, he was a murderer; worse than that, he had taken from his victim all that could make a pure woman want to live, and then had sacrificed the life he had rendered impure.

Still the case admitted of no precipitation. We went to work carefully. We took up the threads of Arthur Bandeau's life many a month back of that day. Silently, stealthily as fate we traced the life he had led. It was a tangled skein we had to unravel; but we did it patiently. The web revealed many a [plan] of which his friends never suspected him. But we traced it out. The net thus drawn around him precluded all hope of escape. It fixed his guilt beyond all question.

Under an assumed name he had courted and betrayed the young Italian girl. He had promised to marry her, and to get rid of her importunities had stabbed her to the heart, out on the neutral ground and beneath the [shade] [trees] where no eye could see the deed.

We found our evidence complete the very night he was to marry Inez de Castro. The guests were assembled; the minister had commenced the ceremony as Mr. I and myself entered the room. We were unbidden guests, and many an eye looked at us curiously. I would have avoided such publicity had it been possible. The step, however, was unavoidable. The criminal was facing us as we entered the room. He turned pale as he saw us, and I knew then he suspected our mission. But my heart ached with a nameless dread as I looked on the confiding trust[.] The modest blush had stained her cheek, but the light of a great joy was in her eyes.

As calmly as I could, I advanced to Arthur Bandeau and requested an interview. He was paralyzed with terror, but the priest reproved me for the interruption, and ordered me to stand aside. "It is impossible, sir!" I replied: "My duty is imperative, and I must interrupt you."

“You are an officer of the law, sir!” he rejoined; “is this an arrest?”

“It is.”

“Of what is he accused?”

I turned an appealing look towards him and remained silent.

“Speak, sir, for God’s sake, speak,” the girl faltered, “of what is he accused?”

Before my faltering tongue could frame a reply. Arthur Bandeau, himself, answered the question.

“Of murder! I am guilty!”

The scene that ensued is indescribable. The shriek of that poor girl yet rings in my ears. From that time she has been a maniac. Alone with a single attendant in that old house, she has passed long years away. Her parents have died, her friends one by one have gone, and yet she lingers, the living body with her dead mind.

Out upon the air, her voice of summer evenings comes faint and low, as she sings some long forgotten song, and youth and age alike pause to hear its melody. But she, too, is passing away. Her form has grown thin, and the lamp of her life is almost out.

The Daily Picayune [New Orleans, LA], December 6, 1868

The Progress-Index [Petersburg, VA], December 21, 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.