

An Italian Mystery

A Detective's Experience

“You have heard me allude to the case in which an Italian mystery so completely baffled us, have you not?” said Mr. F——, as the reporter asked for another incident connected with his experience as a detective.

“Yes, and I should like to hear it very much.”

“You shall, then. I will tell it to you now.”

I have said the mystery baffled us. It did more than that, it surprised us. It is true it was in the end cleared up, but at the time the case was in our hands, it defied the utmost sagacity and experience we were able to employ.

The case was this:

Sometime in the spring of 1852, a young lady living in the Third District, of respectable parentage, and well connected in the city, had mysteriously disappeared from her residence one night, and notwithstanding the most extensive inquiries were made, and large rewards offered for any information about her, no trace of her could be found. The circumstances of her disappearance utterly precluded the idea of an elopement. Her character was above reproach; there was no levity, nothing trivial or light in her disposition. She was a beautiful Italian girl, young, and with a *naïveté* of manner irresistibly attractive. Scarcely on the verge of womanhood, she was tall and elegantly formed. Her lithe, willowy figure had a world of grace in its supple, delicate outlines which would have won the admiration of an anchorite. She had the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen, large almond shaped eyes, over which the long dark lashes drooped and quivered as emotion stirred her, or lifted suddenly in surprise or glee. The soft black pupil had a tenderness in the look that made the hearts of youth strangely uneasy when they flashed on them with all a woman's power.

Her character, as I said before, precluded the idea of an elopement. It was evident to all that she had been kidnapped; but by whom, and for what purposes? These were the questions addressed to Mr. I—— and myself when the case was put in our hands.

As may be supposed, such a girl had suitors, but she was affianced to no one. The warm beauty of her race, the extraordinary grace and loveliness of the young Italian had won the hearts of many, but her own, apparently, was yet free. So her parents said, and I had no reason to disbelieve them. On questioning those most intimate with her, we learned that much unkindness of feeling had arisen between her various suitors. Such a girl would naturally inspire jealousy. But there was one person in particular whose feelings had once found expression in the most bitter and intense animosity towards the rest. But it was only once that he suffered himself to

become so far forgetful of his interests. Naturally he was taciturn, and repelled familiarity. Although young and strikingly handsome, it was said the girl had conceived for this man the most intense repugnance. He had a dark, sinister look, a sort of subtle, secret intelligence about him strangely at variance with her free and open character. She had rejected his suit, but he had sworn yet to possess her. He left her presence with a half uttered threat, and a look that froze her blood.

That night she disappeared. Of course our suspicions fell upon this man. The facts, however, here detailed were not ascertained without patient research and careful investigation. But by slow degrees, we did discover them, and watched “our man” from that hour with incessant scrutiny. At certain hours, however, in the day he left his place of business, and although we invariably attempted to follow him, we were as invariably baffled. In some of the numerous streets that shoot out in every direction in that part of the city, we lost him. Sometimes it was in an alley-way, sometimes by ascending a flight of stairs; sometimes by entering a private residence that we lost him; but in some way he invariably eluded our vigilance. You may reasonably conclude that this neither suited Mr. I. or myself. We determined we would not be cheated the next time. One of these absences occurred about 10 o’clock every night. It was near that time then, and we watched the Italian with an eagerness and intensity doubly whetted by repeated disappointments. A drizzling rain was falling, and the lamps shone along the dark streets feebly. It suited us exactly. The man came out directly and started in the direction he invariably took. We hung on his path like shadows. His iron heel rung on the pavement. Our feet fell soft and light. Up one street and down another the chase led for more than an hour. At last he paused before a large brick building on Music street. It was an old Spanish house, and looked dark and grand enough to be a castle or a bastille. Its shutters were closed, and no ray of light shone from the heavily draped windows. The man paused and looked around before he inserted the key and turned the lock. We crouched low to the walls as he did so, but the door had barely swung on its hinges before we sprung upon him. The struggle was fierce, but brief. He could not contend with two men, either of whom was stronger than himself.

We believed we should find the girl here, and our suspicions were correct; we did find her—a prisoner guarded by an old quadroon woman.

When she saw us, and knew we had come to release her, there was a sudden lightning up of her face—a vivid gleam of pleasure, a scream of delight; but as suddenly it darkened in a look of terror, wild with pain. She implored us to leave her—she talked wildly, her eyes fixed fearfully on the man, while he looked on her with a cold, sullen sneer. I told her it was impossible to leave her; that we must take her to her parents. I told her of their grief and despair. It was plain to see that each word pierced her with a pang keener than the thrust of a dagger. Her face was deathly pale, her very lips writhed in agony. She tried to speak, and as she did so, the man raised his finger and shook it at her warningly. The presence of the arch-fiend could not have alarmed her more. She pleaded again, with a wild, passionate entreaty—full of terror, full of anguish we could neither appreciate nor understand.

She struggled as I lifted her into the carriage Mr. I—— had called, but suddenly became quiet and still. I drove rapidly to her home while Mr. I—— carried the prisoner to the station.

All the way she did not stir. She had fainted and lay pallid and still on the cushions. As we lifted her from the carriage and conveyed her into the house, she opened her eyes, but there was no light in their glance—her reason had fled—*the girl was a maniac.*

Months rolled by—a year had come and gone—but the mystery of the strange occurrence only deepened.

Day by day the hectic flush crept upon the young girl's cheek, and day by day her footsteps pressed closer to the brink of the still waters, whose ley currents lave the shadowy land. Her reason wrecked, her hopes in life had fled. But no word ever passed her lips to tell the secret that was wearing soul and brain away.

At last she sickened mortally. Over her couch kind friends bent hopelessly; but before the spark of her life went out, her reason returned—it was then her secret was revealed: *She had become the Italian's wife.* To escape a fate far worse, she had yielded to a compulsory marriage.

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