

A Detective's Reminiscence

Every one can imagine how varied in experience is a detective's life. The two incidents which have already been published, by no means completes the fund of anecdote the reporter has been favored with. It was, therefore, with the same sort of interest one feels in listening to the narrative of an old soldier telling the history of his battles that we heard the following incident repeated:

“Now remember, don't bother me with questions!”

“Proceed!”

“We had received information that a Sicilian had escaped from Havana and came to this city, bringing with him the proceeds of a large robbery. The reward offered for his apprehension was even greater than usual, since he was regarded as a fierce and desperate criminal. But it was less that than the actual excitement and love of adventure that incited us to the enterprise. If in the city, we well knew he had endeavored to sink his identity in the crowds of his countrymen who swarmed in the lower part of the city like bees around a hive. The peculiarity of their names so difficult to distinguish and the almost perfect sameness of their personal appearance rendered this a matter of easy accomplishment. Besides this, these men have a strange antipathy to the law and its officers. If in their power, they invariably further the escape of one of their countrymen, no matter of what he is accused, nor will they hesitate to fight for him if by that means his arrest can be prevented. Under these circumstances, you can readily conceive that our enterprise was not one entirely free from peril. Over a hundred families were crowded into the block where we suspected our man lay concealed. The approach to this building lay through a dark alley in which more than one police officer had lost his life. But a few weeks before a man had been literally cut to pieces while pursuing a criminal through its mazes; but, nevertheless, we determined to attempt it. A little after midnight we entered the dark vault like alley, and grouped our way to the stairs of the building. Far up in the third story we heard men in angry discussion and their strange accent told of Sicilian origin. This was the place we were endeavoring to reach. Carefully, step by step, we ascended the stairs and reached the room. As we got nearer the voices became louder and the confusion intense, and when we stood at the door it seemed as if a perfect babel had broke loose. We lifted the latch and entered the room—a brilliant light up the room revealing every object in the apartment. It was a hall nearly fifty feet long and half as wide. It was occupied by at least a dozen families. The men were scattered through the rooms, talking angrily. At one entrance, silence like death prevailed. There was not a man there that did not know us. They divined, on the instant, our purpose in coming, and the rattle of their long Spanish daggers had already struck with a deadly chill on our ears. The man we were in search of had a huge scar that disfigured his face. By this we identified him at once. He was seated on a small chest in the upper part of the hall-like room, and this chest, we knew, concealed his treasure. Without a moment's hesitation, we crossed the room, and S—— laid his hand on the felon's shoulder; at the same instant I put my revolver at his head and told him he was our prisoner. There was an instant's silence—a single second—as S——, with a dull clank, clapped the handcuffs on his wrists and slung the small chest over his shoulder by the strap attached to it. Then, suddenly, there arose a yell of hate and vengeance; knives gleamed in the light and fierce forms bounded towards us. It was to be a death-struggle. Fortunately, we were close by the jut of flame that lit

the apartment. With a wave of my hand I extinguished this, and made a rush from the place where we stood, dragging our prisoner. It saved our lives. The peril was not, however, over. The next instant we were again surrounded, and I felt a savage sting, as a knife sunk deep in my shoulder. So far we had hesitated to shoot, but we could do so no longer. The struggle deepened, and knife and pistol did their savage work with fearful execution. Again and again I felt the thrust of a knife, or staggered beneath a blow. At last we reached the door, still dragging our man, determined to die rather than give him up. How we got down those stairs I can never tell. Sometimes we descended a step at a time; at other moments we rolled down a dozen before stopping. We reached the landing, however, our foes still pressing us, and the deadly fight unabated. We could stand it no longer. We were covered with wounds and our strength exhausted. In that wild melee in that dark vault, it seemed impossible to escape. S—— blew his whistle. Fierce and shrill the echo pealed out in the air. God grant it would bring assistance in time. It did. We heard the patter of coming feet, the light of a dark lantern flashed along the vaulted alley way, and then ‘rested soul and sense, and brain and eye.’ When we regained consciousness we were all in the station, our prisoner, too. We had clung to him like death, till assistance reached us. Our foes were beaten off, and our capture made good. It was an awful struggle, such as occurs once in a lifetime, but I shall never forget it. We secured our prize, but it was many a long day before we were able to engage in an adventure again.”

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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.