

A Detective's Experience

The Bandit

The dark shadows hung dense around the old gray building. The grass on the lawn was tangled and weedy, and the graveled walks were overgrown with turf. Only a single light shone out on the blackness of night. It glinted on the tree-tops, and formed weird shapes far out on the ground. "We watched it intently, Mr. I—— and myself," said Mr. F——, as silently we stood at the gate. The house is far down in the Third District, ruinous now and hastening to decay. The river rolled along, only a single street intervening, and the splash of its dark waves was heard, strangely mingling with a wail of distress that came from the house. It had been tenanted but a few hours; a foreign lady and her two children had applied to the agent for a lease, and as she tendered the rent in advance, no questions were asked. This we subsequently ascertained; but at the moment of which I speak we only knew that the old house had procured a tenant. This had arrested our attention as we passed along the street. Then the face of a woman appeared at the window, trying vainly to peer out into the darkness. The first glance at the anxious but beautiful countenance electrified me. I had seen it before. Framed there in the golden light of the window—the bright glow resting on the beautiful brow and wealth of ebon tresses, it looked like a picture of the Madona or a radiant vision seen in sleep.

I knew it as the face of the wife of a Mexican bandit. For months we had looked for him incessantly. His picture, with that of his wife, had been sent to every city in the Union. His deeds of fearful atrocity had compelled him months before to seek an asylum here, but despite the greatest vigilance, he had evaded an arrest, and it was then generally believed that he had succeeded in making his way to Cuba. Large rewards were offered for his arrest, and his apprehension we knew would make us rich. He could hope for no sympathy, for his cruelty had divorced him from his kind.

Only the beautiful woman clung to him in his despair and shared the misfortunes that beset his life. Now that her children were hushed to sleep the sorrow of her heart found vent in cries and sobs of distress. But the passionate grief was soon subdued, and we knew from her anxious glance she was watching for her husband's return.

What was to be done?

The residence we were satisfied had been selected with a view to escape. If we waited for him to enter the dwelling it was almost certain he would evade us. If we sought to apprehend him before he got there, the dense darkness would aid his escape.

It was at last concluded for Mr. I. to remain outside while I entered the building and awaited his coming. I have rarely performed a more unpleasant duty. I could scarcely tell you why; but I dreaded an interview with the lady, whose devotion and heroism had won my sympathy. But it was but another instance in which the feelings of our better nature have to yield to the impulses of duty. I have had many such instances to occur in my experience, but never one that grated so harshly on my feelings. Reaching the door I finally obtained admittance, and was shown by the servant to the room, from which the light shone out into the darkness.

“May I inquire the nature of this intrusion, sir?” inquired the lady with a grave dignity, and yet with a sorrowful cadence that went to my heart.

“Madam, my business is with your husband.”

Her face blanched as I replied, and her utterance was tremulous when she said: “He is not here!”

“I know it, madam, but he will be soon. I cannot express to you how deeply I regret the duty I am called on to perform, but I come to arrest him, and I cannot permit any of you to leave the room until he enters.”

Even as I spoke, I heard a step on the lawn. Before I could prevent her, the lady sprung to her feet and blew a shrill whistle. The piercing notes sounded far into the night, and could have been heard a mile away. I knew it was a signal of alarm, and was meant to warn the man almost within my grasp. I dashed out of the room, and reached the lawn just as a shot rung out on the air. It was too late. In the darkness, Mr. L.’s aim was bad, and the man escaped. I could hardly feel sorry for it afterward, for a being so hallowed by a woman’s love could not be altogether bad. The next day the family left, and I never heard of them again. Still the event occurs to me often, and with the reflection comes a tribute to that wife’s devotion. It is possible they reached a place of safety, and in other scenes the woman’s tenderness must have whitewashed the crimes of the man into virtue.

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