

## A Detective's Experience

### *The Dago Girl*

The night was very dark that Saturday night, and gusts of wind beat the rain incessantly against the rickety windows of the old Dago building. The light of a single tallow dip, flickered and spluttered in the socket of a worn-out candlestick; but it revealed a pallet of straw, and an old woman bending above the body of a dead girl. The tears ran down the haggard cheek, and the woman wept for her child—a beautiful girl, just in womanhood. The black hair was fine as the floss of silk, and shadowed a face as lovely as that the artist has given the Madonna. Pale indeed, but a trace of the rose was yet on the cheek, and the lips were sunny with smiles. But yet she was dead, and that by violence! That day she had been dragged from the river, and her left temple yet bore the mark where the treacherous blow had been dealt her. Very lovely even in death was the Sicilian girl. Slender and tall, the willowy figure had been grace itself; and now the outline of the cold, dead body disclosed a form that was faultless.

Her story was a sad one—much of it supplied by conjecture; for not even to her mother had she disclosed the name of her lover. He was some one, however, above her sphere in life. He had lured her to the river bank one night, and a blow—a scream—and the treacherous flood rolled on, shutting out the life of his victim. But in falling, her hand had clutched his coat, and the icy fingers yet enclosed the piece of cloth rent from it as she fell. It was our only clue; but I felt it would be sufficient.

“To men like Mr. I—— and myself, who love their profession, and work at it for the excitement and interest it gives us, the smallest possible trace is sufficient,” said Mr. F——. That torn piece of cloth would as surely, some day, place the man in our power as he and we lived. And so it did. It would not, however, interest you to relate the long search we had and the tireless nights we spent in pursuit. But we were rewarded at last. The man was a merchant's clerk—a dissipated, “fast” young man—Martin Dolan—you may yet read an account of his arrest, in the *Picayune* of twenty years ago. I had long suspected him; and one night, seeing him with a suit of clothes on strikingly like the piece of cloth I carried with me. I approached and asked him his name.

He answered me courteously, and readily joined in conversation. I determined to venture all on a bold experiment, and pulled the piece of cloth from my pocket. “I have here something I would like to show you. It is the piece of cloth taken from the Sicilian girl recently drowned in the river. It is strikingly like the suit you wear,” and as I ceased speaking I showed him the bit of cloth I held in my hand.

He trembled violently, and his face was pale as death.

“I did not do it, sir; I did not do it?” he almost screamed, wild with terror and affright.

“You did! do not deny it, sir!”

“My God, my God! what will become of me?” he wailed, as his cowardly fears almost deprived him of reason.

“Oh! sir!” he continued; “I will confess all, but do not arrest me. I did not mean to do it,” and before I had time to check his rapid utterances he commenced his wild tale of a quarrel on the bank of the river—a blow—and before he had time to save her, she sank in the flood.

But the circumstances of the case disproved his tale, and a jury failed to acquit him. He is yet in prison for life; but his brain has grown crazed with the lapse of years, and now, it is said, he talks all day long of the beautiful creature who loved him, and whose life he took long years ago.

*The Daily Picayune* [New Orleans, LA], March 28, 1869

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.