

A Detective's Experience

Felo De Se

It was one of those dark, chilly nights which sometimes creeps into February in this latitude, that Mr. I—— and myself, said Mr. F——, stood under the archway of the old court, on Chartres street, so fatal to many an officer in New Orleans. We were watching for a murderer. The damp, chill wind whistled along the wide street, rustling the shrubbery in the square above and lashing the broad river into foam. A dense cloud obscured the light of the moon and the lamps flickered in the darkness, emitting no light. It was a dark, rayless night, and the pattering raindrops were heard at intervals. Far back into the granite block shot the tube-like alley. High above rose story upon story, filled with Sicilian families. All were not the sinful people that had stained their race with crime; some were gentle and good. Few there were, however, whose hands were guiltless of blood. A fierce, remorseless treachery had sacrificed many a brave man to their fears or their revenge.

Our position, we knew, was a dangerous one. A breath of suspicion—an inkling, merely, of our purpose, and our lives would not have been worth a pin's purchase. Yet must our mission be done. We had hunted for one man day and night. Neither rest nor food had we that day; for a sure and secret intelligence advised us that the criminal, whose cunning acts we had been trying so long to unravel, would seek an asylum among his countrymen above.

He was a young man—a native of Sicily. Two years before he had fled from his home—a murderer. Although a nobleman, heir to a duke's possessions, he had not hesitated to imbrue his hands in blood, and sacrifice all men hold dear for a guilty passion. Reckless and desperate he had been, and we were sure he would be as daring now. Loving a young peasant girl, he had betrayed her to ruin. When she stood in his way, and threatened to put an end to new schemes he had formed with reference to another lady, he killed her. His crime discovered, he set sail for England, and from thence to America. The fearful tragedy had interested many in his capture, and large rewards were offered for his apprehension. I had months before gone to Havana in search of him, and from thence had traced him to New York. Though a career of [indescribable] prodigately and licentiousness, I had marked each step he had taken, and waited patiently for the requisition to arrive before I laid my hands upon him. It seemed he surmised he was hunted. By intuition almost, that knowledge comes to the criminal. Suddenly his whole nature seemed to change. From reckless and unsuspecting he became alert and observing; and one day I aroused myself to the certainty that I had lost him.

Months passed by before I recovered the trail; and then a clue reached me of his whereabouts. I had adopted every possible resource as I thought, and almost in despair played what detectives call "the letter dodge." It was the insertion of a paragraph in the *Picayune*, stating that the person answering to his fictitious name would find something to his advantage in this city. It proved successful. The paragraph was seen by him, and he set out for New Orleans, first advising the advertiser by letter of his coming, and enjoining secrecy.

Mr. I—— received this communication, and telegraphed me accordingly. I came at once, and reached the city but a day in advance of him.

In the meantime we had taken steps to obtain intelligence of him the first moment of his arrival.

And now all was in readiness for his arrest. It was a hazardous undertaking. We had counted the cost and knew that our lives hung by a thread. Standing there under an arch of the vault-like alley—the city still—and not a sound, save the weird echoes of the wind, and the rush of the river—counting each second of time in an anxious expectancy, strange fears began to stir my heart. A foreboding of evil came upon me. Why, I could not imagine; still I felt as I ever did, in the presence of death. I was thinking of this when all of a sudden the flash of a dark lantern lit up the gloom. That transient gleam, evanescent and brilliant as lightning, showed me two men—one of them Bertrand Rosser. In that one second of time, thrilling as an electric current, he recognized me as I did him.

The single words:

“Our man!” and the next instant we had them both in custody. It was but a few steps to the station, and we took them there. As soon as we entered the room young Rossa asked for water. I saw him put something in his mouth before he drank it. Then as soon as the water touched his lips [reeled] and fell dead on the floor—a suicide.

An odor, like the scent of almonds, disclosed the fatal poison—*prussic acid*.

He died as he had lived, fearless and defiant. I pitied him as he lay there cold and stiff, but with a rigid pride even in death. The fierce nature had given up—hunted down.

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