

Foiled by a Woman

“Madam, it is my duty to arrest you!”

“You dare not!”

The lips were white with passion rather than fear, and the lady stood before me like a lioness at bay. Even then I could not help but note the splendid beauty of this grand lady. Tall and slender, eyes black and flashing, almost lurid now, the spectacle she presented standing there in the middle of the apartment, was more the appearance of a queen than a hunted criminal.

“I must,” I replied. “I do not doubt your innocence; looking in your face it is strange that any one could couple it with guilt. But I am constrained to do my duty, madam, however [inimical] it may [be] to my feelings.”

“Will you allow me to change my dress?” she said in a tone almost pleasant. The hard lines around the mouth had relaxed, and the passionate glow on the face gave way to a pleasant smile.

“Certainly, I will wait for you here.”

“I wish also to send a messenger for a friend; will you allow him to pass?”

“Certainly!”

This was my first interview with Eugenia Cornille. I had seen her here for months, the leader of our gayest and most fashionable society. In her splendid mansion she dispensed the most profuse and elegant hospitality.

A Spanish lady—a widow she had represented herself—and had been a resident here almost a year. No one ever suspected her of being aught but what she seemed, until one day I was ordered to arrest her as a [murderess].

It was now alleged, said Mr. F., that this young beauty was none other than the woman who had poisoned her husband in Havana and fled with all his wealth. An immense reward was offered for her apprehension, and the circumstances that had come to our knowledge pointed her out beyond all doubt as the person we were in search of. Yet had the person who had recognized her the evening before at the theatre, advised us to be careful lest she should escape us. I laughed at the idea. Mr. I. and myself were surely sufficient to arrest a lady. We were old enough in the ways of cunning to defeat any such attempt. When the lady left me, I stepped to the window and said to Mr. I., who was waiting at the door:

“The lady desires to send a messenger for a friend; suffer him to pass?”

Almost at the same instant the door of the apartment the lady entered was opened, and a youth—apparently a mulatto boy—came out and passed hurriedly through the room into the hall, and from thence into the street. It was, no doubt, the messenger, I thought, and I picked up a book

and commenced reading. Nearly an hour passed, and still the lady did not make her appearance, nor did the boy return. The friend she had sent for must live at some distance, I thought, or the lady is unusually careful about her toilet; and so another hour went by. At last I grew impatient and knocked at the door.

“Madam, I can wait no longer.”

There was no reply. I knocked repeatedly and at last determined to force an entrance. Strange fears harassed me; I began to suspect, I knew not what. It took but a moment to drive in the door, and, once in that apartment, the mystery was revealed. The robes of the lady lay upon the floor, and scattered over the room were suits of boy's wearing apparel, similar to that worn by the mulatto. On a table was a cosmetic that would stain the skin to a light, delicate brown.

I was foiled, for a surety; the lady had escaped in the disguise of a messenger. I should have detected the *ruse*. I felt humiliated and determined to redress my error. I knew she would not remain in the city an instant longer than she could get away. I hurried to her bankers; but found she had drawn the amount due her an hour before.

“Who presented the check?” I asked the clerk.

“A mulatto boy—it was made payable to bearer.”

There was yet a chance. The French steamer left within an hour; it was possible she would seek that means of escape. I jumped into a cab, and arrived there ten minutes before she left the wharf—just in time to assist an aged, decrepit gentleman into the cabin. There were few passengers; none of them answered the description of the person I sought. I stood on the wharf watching the receding vessel until it disappeared. I was in the act of turning away, when a hackman approached me with the remark:

“Mr. F., did you see that old man on board; he had a long white beard and hair that fell on his shoulders?”

“Yes!”

“Well, sir, there's something curious about him.”

“Why?”

“Why, when he got into my carriage he was a mulatto boy; and when he got out he was an old man!”

I will not repeat the expression I used then—it was neither polite nor refined—for I knew the vessel would be far out to sea before she could be overtaken. I was foiled by a woman. Nor could I help rejoicing, now that the chase was over, that she had escaped.

Innocent or guilty, there was a charm about her none could resist. The spell of her wondrous

beauty affected all who approached her. It lingers in memory yet; and I could not have the sin of her blood upon my conscience.

The Daily Picayune [New Orleans, LA], July 11, 1869
The Bossier Banner [Bellevue, LA], August 21, 1869
The York [PA] Gazette, April 20, 1880
The Minneapolis [MN] Tribune, April 20, 1880
Louisiana Capitolian [Baton Rouge, LA], April 24, 1880
The News and Herald [Winnsboro, SC], April 29, 1880
Millheim [PA] Journal, April 29, 1880
Yorkville Enquirer [York, SC], December 2, 1880
Lincoln Progress [Lincolnton, NC], December 11, 1880
Courier-Post [Camden, NJ], July 19, 1882
The Sedalia [MO] Weekly Bazaar, August 15, 1882
Evening Journal [Vineland, NJ], September 30, 1882

This story was reprinted as “A Detective’s Story” in *The Albany [OR] Register*, February 4, 1871.

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.