

A Detective's Experience

A Homicide

“Far down in the old French quarter is an old building, now deserted and hastening to decay. It is a relic of another age, and was built nearly a century ago. Once the seat of opulence, it has sheltered princes and its history is legendary in romance. Somehow an evil name was awarded it, and since I knew it,” said Mr. F——, “it has been inhabited by the vicious and depraved. One night information was brought to Mr. I—— and myself that a murder had been committed there, and we hastened to ascertain the facts and arrest, if it were possible, the criminal. Reaching the place we ascended an old rickety stairway to a room in the back part of the building. A crowd, such as invariably gather to the scene of a homicide, were already there, looking on with pallid, awe-struck faces at the body of a man lying dead on the floor. It was a youthful face that shone pallid and white in the glare of the burning lamps—a calm, proud face, and the broad brow disclosed a mind instinct with intelligence. His apparel, although neat, was coarse, and but for the soft slender hands and the costly jewel that glittered on his finger one might have deemed him a man in humble life. In his hand was a piece of a woman's dress, and the knife that still remained in his breast was a costly knife, fit only for a woman's use. It had destroyed a human life, however, and the hand that had guided the delicate steel, had been urged by passion, or controlled by, skill. It had penetrated the heart, and the man had died without a struggle.

But who had killed him?

It was the question on every lip, and filled the daily papers afterward.

You may have read an account of it in an old copy of the *Picayune*.

No one was living in the house at the time—for weeks before it had been deserted; only the neighbors said that for weeks, at night they had seen a light flash from the window. It was soon put out, and no sound of footsteps was heard—only on the night of the homicide, a cry had been heard—a scream as if from a woman—the patter of running feet and then all was still.

This was all.

We searched the building high and low, but nothing more could be ascertained. On the body of the dead man we found some papers, which showed him a foreigner—a Spaniard, indeed, and the miniature of a woman, young and beautiful, and evincing in the haughty poise of the head—the jewels that dashed from her hair—the air of nameless grace about her—a creature born to a heritage of wealth as well as beauty. It was a singular face, however, and would rivet the eyes of all that looked upon it. The warm flush of her native clime seemed still to rest upon the rounded cheeks and chiseled lips, and the coronal of braided hair rested like a crown upon her head. The eyes were large and soft, and one seemed to see the picture of Genevieve or Evremand, radiant in smiles, looking at him from the painted ivory. It was such a face as poets dream of or painters picture in their visions of the beautiful. But there was a look of life about it which showed it the semblance of a living creature. A little jeweled finger touched the crimson lips, which seemed parted to speak in jest, or laugh, or smile. I could almost swear the cadence of that laugh was

musical, as the sunny smiles were beautiful. It wore a look of joy and brightness such as the rays of a sunbeam fling on the petals of a flower, or the bud of a rose when it sparkles in dew.

There was no name, no address; the jewels and the picture were all we had to identify the man or learn the cause of his death. But less potent auxiliaries had frequently led to the detection of crime and the arrest of the criminal. Both Mr. I. and myself felt a strange interest in the case. We abandoned other matters to look up this. Night and day we studied it, and no clue was left unfollowed, no trace disregarded that might contribute to our success. So the days sped on, from weeks to months—a year had nearly passed and gone. Business of importance called me to New York. One day, in company with some friends, I visited the insane asylum. Imagine my surprise—I had almost said horror—when I tell you that among the inmates I met the original of the picture—a maniac. There could be no doubt of it—here in all the glory of her young womanhood, in all her beauty. The malady that had shattered reason had still left her the wondrous beauty that had first attracted my attention. Here was a clue.

I ascertained that she had been brought there months before by a man who represented himself as her father, and who yet occasionally visited her, but for whom she expressed the utmost horror, and would always address him as a murderer. I asked to see her wardrobe, and among her clothing found an old dress with a piece torn out, similar to that found in the hands of the murdered man. I was satisfied now that I had my man. Cautiously I became acquainted with him. I professed interest in his daughter. I learned his history—all, save a period of a few months, on which he never touched. One day I confronted him in a moment when he appeared to be afflicted with great mental depression. I accused him of the homicide and told him he was my prisoner. I never saw a person so utterly frightened—he said he would confess all—he did.

The girl was in truth his daughter, but had fled with the young man whom she married against his will. They came to New Orleans and hither he followed them. They had met in the old house by appointment; he had provided means to carry off the daughter by force. A struggle ensued, and the man was killed. This was all.

I brought my prisoner back to the city, but before the day of the trial he died. It is one of the sad memories that still lingers around my career. I often revert to it when thinking of the past, and sometimes wish I had never known the truth.[”]

The Daily Picayune [New Orleans, LA], May 2, 1869

Wilmington [NC] *Journal*, June 11, 1869

This story was reprinted as “A True Story” in

The Rutland [VY] *Weekly Herald and Globe*, July 30, 1869

Valley Spirit [Chambersburg, PA], August 11, 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.