

Life for a Life

A Detective's Experience

At no period has fashionable society been so brilliant in New Orleans as in the winter of 1845. Those familiar with it then have not forgotten a young Cuban belle who reigned an acknowledged queen of society. Young, beautiful, and the heiress of untold wealth, it was not surprising that she was sought after and became an object of intense interest, not only to the adventurers who are always in search of a wealthy bride, but the scions of our haughtiest and most aristocratic families. But when to the enumeration of these attractive qualities is added a mind brilliant and fascinating, with a conversational talent rarely equaled, one will not wonder at the success she everywhere met with.

Indeed, few such women as Nina Bartillette are met in a life time. The rich beauty of the topics was hers. Tall and queenly, the majestic figure was faultless in willowy outline and symmetry. There was a nameless grace in everything she said and did. The large, black eyes were lustrous, fathomless; and the purplish black hair, long and shining, would have rivaled the mythical tresses of Bernice herself. She had the happy faculty of so dispensing smiles that, while ever surrounded with a number of admirers, each supposed himself the special object of attention. She never permitted herself to indulge the foibles of the coquette—never assumed the variable and frivolous eccentricities of the flattered beauty; but always courteous, always seemingly pleased with attentions, she never failed to exert an all-controlling influence over her admirers.

One person, however, seemed to be especially singled out as an object of peculiar favor. It was a young creole named Paul Counet. All the arts of the practiced women of the world—all the fascinations none other knew better how to use—were brought to bear on a heart already passionately in love. But at times, when he left, the close observer might note a cruel glitter in the dilating eye, a fierce compression of the lip, that augured any other sentiment than love. But if this emotion, seen for an instant, was indicative of hate, it was strangely belied at her next reception.

Rumor had it they would marry. The Cuban, deaf to all other solicitations it was said, yielded her heart to the young creole. So the winter passed, and the balmy spring and the flowers were near. Of evenings they were seen strolling along the avenues, enjoying the murmur of the leaves, and the perfume from lawns blooming with roses, and whispering of the wedding day. One evening he returned from one of their interviews, strangely affected. A dull, chilly torpor had been creeping over him for months. Whenever he had been in the presence of the Cuban, he left with a flower or bouquet, and the strange languor doubly increased. But this evening it had grown intense, and a faintness like death came over him.

That night he died! The strong man died in agony. Every muscle and nerve thrilled with anguish. The brain felt like fire, and burning coals seemed to scorch and wither mind and sense. And when his reason fled under the torture of the strange disease, he raved of a fair young girl he had ruined years before—a young Cuban girl, who loved him—forgot her faith and all the wealth of virtue, for love of him. He raved of her, the betrayed, but said no word of the stranger to whom heart and soul were given. And even a rumor went out into the city that he had been poisoned.

Mr. I—— and myself were sent for to investigate the case. It was a curious one, and full of many mysteries.

Nothing was hid from us. His family submitted everything to our inspection. A correspondence of many years—every event connected with his life as hunted up.

One day I fell on a bundle of old letters. They were from a lady; reading them, I learned the story of the young girl of whom he raved. This last letter was written by another hand, and said that she had died. It was a sister who wrote, and a vague threat in the letter promised retribution. Somehow the thought occurred to me that the Cuban beauty then in the city wrote this letter. The more I thought of it the deeper the impression grew. Some way I possessed myself of some of her writing. It was the same. Allowing for the lapse of time, one could readily detect the fact that both were written by the same person.

Here was a clue. It did not require much sagacity to discover the agent by whom his death was procured now. But there was another essential—I had no proof. To a detective, my conclusions were sufficient; but a jury would not connect the links I had traced out without other evidence. And besides, I had grown strangely loth to prosecute the case. The girl was right, I thought. She had used a subtle weapon for revenge, but could her weak hand have used a different one? He had brought ruin and death on one she loved; she had brought ruin and death on him. Months slipped away in this useless struggle, and the criminal had left from her home. The summer came and went, and I watched eagerly for her return. But she never came. One day instead, the mail brought me a package of letters post-marked “Havana.” They were his letters, written to the young lady that died. One other accompanied them, traced in characters more familiar to me. It contained a simple sentence: “Life for a life”—that was all. I never heard of her again. Perhaps she is living yet; but the crown of her girlhood’s beauty was stained with blood. But it is not for me to blame her—nor you. Those who have felt her provocation alone may judge.

The Daily Picayune [New Orleans, LA], January 3, 1868

The Daily Phoenix [Columbia SC], January 31, 1869

The San Francisco Examiner, March 22, 1869

Reading [PA] Times, July 20, 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.