

Life and Death

Shortly after the celebrated expedition of Lopez terminated so disastrously in the Island of Cuba, fashionable circles in this city were thrown into a state of excitement over the advent of a young Cuban, whose great wealth, elegant manners, and fascinating address, made him eagerly sought for by society. The peculiarity of his appearance and character enhanced rather than diminished the interest he excited. Very youthful—indeed almost girlish in personal and *physique*—there was yet about him a haughtiness of [manner], and sternness of demeanor that revealed anything but a feminine spirit. He took lodgings at a fashionable hotel, and the splendor of the style in which he lived, the innate refinement and elegance that he managed to infuse into everything about him, went far to preserve the interest which his exclusiveness might otherwise have repelled.

“I remember to have seen him,” said Mr. F., “shortly after he came here. It was an accidental meeting, but it struck me then that there was something singular about him. His face was smooth and beardless; as soft and fresh in its delicate outlines as a woman’s. The luxuriant hair and small beautifully shaped head possessed none of the peculiarities of a man born and reared under the fervent sun of the tropics. There was no lack of fire, however, in the great black eyes. They flashed with intelligence and seemed instinct with pride and character. The frame was small and willowy—slender and trim, but exhibiting remarkable symmetry and grace.

In short, the young stranger’s personal appearance struck me *as that of a beautiful woman appareled as a man*. I thought at the time that he could readily have masqueraded as a lady and passed undetected. These reflections were, however, soon superceded by more important duties, and the young stranger and the peculiarities of his appearance soon faded from my recollection.

They were destined, however, to recur to me again with vivid force.

One night at a fashionable party a young man named Paul Locey, a soldier in the army of Lopez and one of the few who escaped from that ill-fated expedition, was found stabbed to the heart in the clock room. An hour before, the deceased and the young Cuban had met for the first time. Standing in the full glare of the chandelier, mutual acquaintances had introduced them. There was a sudden and violent agitation visible in both—a recoil on the part of the American, and a cry something like horror escaped his lips. He had been absent in the North for several months, and knew nothing of the stranger’s arrival [until] that moment. Now his livid face and unaccountable agitation revealed an excitement as profound as strange. The friends looked at each other wonderingly. But the Cuban, first regaining his presence of mind, stepped forward, and remarking, “Mr. Locey, we have met before!” locked his arm in that of the startled man and moved away in the direction of the cloak room.

A circumstance so singular could not, of course, pass without remark, and the friends of both of them waited anxiously for their reappearance, yet restrained by feelings of delicacy from intruding on their conference. At last, however, the young stranger came out alone, carefully closing the door. He said to the gentleman who had witnessed the strange meeting: “Our friend is a little agitated and desires to be alone for a few moments!”

He then mingled in the crowd and disappeared.

Waiting for Locey until their impatience could no longer be restrained, they finally entered the room to perceive a spectacle of blood that almost froze them with horror. Stabbed to the heart with a long Spanish dagger that yet clung to the wound the young man had been dead for an hour.

Of course the wildest confusion and excitement prevailed. Many had quitted the house in pursuit of the stranger when Mr. I—— and myself arrived. From these we learned that the stranger had already been to the hotel, had paid his board and removed his effects. That he was yet in the city was evident since no means of transportation afforded him an opportunity to escape. The first step therefore to be taken was to guard the morning packets and see that no stranger sought an asylum on any of the sloops or ships leaving the city. This done, Mr. I—— and myself returned to the office.

I had already formed a theory in regard to the case. I was satisfied in my own mind that the criminal was no man. “Who is it, then?” demanded my *confiere* in a tone that evinced his belief that I had taken leave of my senses. “*A woman in disguise!*”

“What!”

“It is as I tell you. There is an acquaintance here, dating back to Locey’s recent sojourn in Cuba. That knife was driven by a female hand, and the motive was a woman’s vengeance.”

I detailed to him as minutely as my recollection would enable me the personal appearance of the fugitive, my first impressions at the time of my casual introduction, together with the facts that had been explained to us at the party.

Locey had been known as a man of extraordinary fascination, a great flirt among the ladies, and as thoroughly unscrupulous and heartless as a man well could be. I could not penetrate the veil of the past. I could not follow his devious pathway in years that had fled among the island beauties, who loved not wisely, but too well. But a sort of instinct told me that if the curtain could be raised, and we could look back upon these scenes, we should see a young girl’s love recklessly despised, her confidence and trust trampled on and betrayed. I did not think the girl, for I was certain now that she was one, would seek to escape. She had performed her mission, and if I read rightly the impulses of that fiery heart, it cared but little for any result that might ensue.

While we were yet debating the case the father of young Locey entered the room.

“Have you found a trace of the fugitive?” he asked.

“None!”

“He cannot have left the city?”

“No!”

“Are all avenues of escape guarded?”

“Yes!”

“Nothing more, then, can be done to-night!”

“No, we are waiting!”

While he was speaking I had been regarding him intently. There was something about his manner that convinced me that he knew more than he cared to reveal. I followed him, therefore, when he left the office.

“Mr. Locey,” I said, “you know this person!”

“I have seen him,” he replied evasively.

“I am alluding to no man, sir, but to the woman who stabbed your son!”

“You know it was a woman, then?” he cried in alarm.

“Yes! and I think I have penetrated the motive.”

“And it is—!”

“Revenge—for an injury that no retaliation is deemed adequate in expiation.”

He hesitated for a moment, and then said frankly: “You are right, Mr. F. It is best that you should know all. I knew of the villainy of my son a year ago. It has been the one besetting sin of his life, and a strange dread has ever haunted him that this girl would yet seek his life. An hour ago, she came to my residence, confessed her identity and acknowledged her crime. She said that she had lived only for redress, and that she was now ready to incur any penalty the tribunals of the country could impose. But that is idle, sir. I cannot have her prosecuted. Already measures have been taken for her flight. I trust you will not interrupt them.” Thus spoke the father, his tears and broken utterance revealing the depth of his emotion.

I wrung his hand in parting. I could not trust myself to speak, but I never saw the Cuban again.

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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.