

The Maniac Wife

A Detective's Experience

Not far from Canal street, towards the rear of the city, is an old house, embowered in trees and shrubs of beautiful foliage. The wide lawn and extensive grounds are fashioned into many a promenade and bower, where the cool shadows linger lovingly all day long. The long galleries of the old mansion are supported by marble pillars, and an Italian *Faunus*, carved from the quarries of Carrara, guards the flight of steps which sweep up from the bosom of the lawn. Bending above the rural deity is a statue of *Diana*, ready, seemingly, to catch the whispered words [*Cybele*] is telling him, as she points to the moon. Scattered over the wide grounds are quaint groups of statuary: *Ino* flying from the rage of her husband, and *Athamas* with her son in her arms; all evening the culture and taste of the owner. But the grass has grown through the crevices of the walks, and the statuary is stained with age. The tangled weeds are choking out the rare exotics, and the fading flowers have a dying odor in their faint perfume. Decay has eaten into the crumbling walls of the grand old house, and the ruined gables creak and cry when shaken by the elements.

The thin, blue smoke that curls from the central chimney rises from a room draped and cushioned as a maniac's asylum. The foot falls light as a snow flake on the rich carpet, and the silken drapery of the couch seems to hide the curious carvings of the grand old mahogany. An *Egyptian Sphinx* is carved from the centre of the marble mantle beneath the twin brothers, DEATH and SLEEP, while many a rare painting is hung from the wall. An old woman sings a low song, crude and disjointed, as she rocks in front of the grate. Her frame is angular and slim, and the hair is grey. The olive tint lingers on face and brow, but it has almost deepened into brown; only the large eyes are unfaded. Bright as the gleam of diamonds, their restless glare, flash and burn as she querulously turns her head. But they are not the soul lit eyes that hallows age; no soul looks through them, the flash of the burning pupil had destroyed intelligence. The woman is a maniac. "Many years ago," said Mr. F——, "she was a happy wife and mother. It seemed as if the wealth of her glorious beauty was a heritage of love, securing her husband's devotion and her children's reverence. She had many a good impulse in her wayward heart, and I have seen her eyes fill with tears and her hands open with an impulse of charity at woe and distress. But despite her many virtues, her friends noted the peculiarities of her mind and manner; warm and loving by nature, her affections were strong and enduring, but notwithstanding this she was jealous and exacting. The fires of a latent insanity burnt in her brain, and one night when the mansion was silent in sleep under the impulse of a jealous pang she killed her husband.

The momentary aberration was like the flash of electricity. It fevered o'er mind and heart for a single moment; but in that passionate interval the cunning of her strange malady had destroyed all traces of the deed.

The next day the papers were full of the sudden disappearance of Mr. C——. His wife was distracted by grief, and her passionate distress made many an eye shed tears that was unused to weep. From the moment he retired at night all trace of him was lost. On the floor by the side of his bed was a single blood stain. It was not so large as your hand, but the crimson blot seemed to have grown into the wood. You may have read the account in the *Picayune* of that day. The

elaborate comment it made attracted attention far and wide, and in no slight degree impeded Mr. I—— and myself in our search for the missing man. From the first I thought he had been foully dealt with; but by whom? That was the one recurring thought. No one that we could conceive had any reason for his removal. And that a man should be taken from the side of his wife—his sleeping children all around him—the house full of servants, and effectually concealed, seemed incredible. But the fact nevertheless stared me in the face. His dress was left just as he had disrobed at night. There was not an article of his wearing apparel missing.

What had become of him? For months we searched incessantly for a clue. Night and day we labored in vain. I was almost at my wits end. But imperceptibly a strange fear was growing on my mind. My constant interviews with Mrs. C—— had gradually forced me into the belief that she was partially insane. And one day coming suddenly upon her, I heard her muttering to herself a strange soliloquy, in which she appeared fiercely to combat the idea of her husband's love.

Again and again she repeated:

“He didn't love me—he didn't love me!”

And springing to her feet, she walked up and down the room in a strange agitation then suddenly pausing, she said:

“Yet would they say I murdered him—that I killed him—the fools know not how I worshipped him; how even the look of his silent dust is to my memory a solace dearer than all the world beside; even the repulsive horror of his charnel cell is love—yes, is love!” And a laugh, cruel and bitter as insanity could make it, issued from her lips.

Turning, she saw me.

I shall never forget her look then. Her face was pale as death, and her eyes glared like two burning coals. The sudden grayness that crept along her lips—that spread over her face—was not fear, but the horror of a slowly returning reason. Slowly the wild light faded from her eyes, and the flush stole back to the face.

“I am sick,” she said, and sunk into a chair. I knew now what had become of Mr. C——, but I knew too his wife was a maniac.

It is useless to detail how patiently we watched for the missing links of the sad homicide. Almost a year fled before we found them, but we did at last. The skeleton was drawn from the crypt where the cunning of the wife had bestowed it; but from that moment reason forsook her utterly. For long years she has lived in the house carefully guarded by relatives. The horror has been lost in the lapse of her weary life. Friends have died, her children are gone, and now the wild vine and the ivy are creeping over the Eden where once her smile was brighter and sweeter than all its beauty. The shadow still play on the marble slabs and the stately columns, but the happy light that lent them beauty has passed away.

The Daily Picayune [New Orleans, LA], February 14, 1869

Pickens County Herald and West Alabamian [Carrollton, AL], April 21, 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.