

An Old Time Mystery

A Detective's Experience

“I will not tell you, sir!”

The young head was thrown back haughtily, and the blue eyes flashed with passionate excitement.

She was a beautiful creature, this fair, golden-haired girl. She was very young and the petite figure looked almost childish. But for the rounded, Hebe-like form and perfect outline, one would have thought her a child—a little girl, indeed, with the sunny hopes and dreaming fancies of childhood—but these disclosed a womanhood full of nameless grace, rich and rare in beauty. Few knew the world as well as she, this brilliant little meteor, that had flashed upon society, turning men's heads and making many a fair lady mad with jealousy.

But a few months before she came to New Orleans the protégé of a wealthy English lady, who had for many years spent her winters here. Her history none knew, and until the events which procured me an introduction to her, none cared to inquire. It was evident to all she was loved by the lady as a daughter, but she was presented to the world as her niece.

There was just the faintest discernible accent in the rich, mellow voice and liquid speech. The fair Canadian queened it royally over the haughtiest belles. Men said that accent charmed as none other could; rival beauties tried to imitate it. But her fascination lay in her winsome face and eyes that seemed so true; in the passionate regret that fevered there at a scene of woe; in the hand open as day to charity.

As she stood before me in her fierce anger, I thought I had never seen a being so lovely. The golden curls, shaded face and brow and the chiseled lips had assumed their naughtiest curve. Proud as a queen she looked, the indignant blood staining neck and brow, while the cheeks flushed and paled alternately; but the blue eyes never lost their passionate flash nor the lips their curl of scorn.

The night before, the house had been robbed and a casket containing diamonds stolen. Myself and Mr. I—— had been sent for by Mrs. M——s to investigate the case. It was evidently the work of an experienced burglar, and as he must have passed through the room of Miss M——s to reach the apartment of the lady from whom the jewels had been stolen, I had asked Miss M——s if she had heard nothing in the night to excite her alarm. At my question, which was somewhat abruptly spoken, she hesitated and appeared unduly excited. I felt surprised at this and repeated the question:

“Did you hear or see anything during the night?”

“I did, sir.”

“May I inquire what it was?”

“I decline to tell.”

“But why, Miss M——s?”

“I cannot inform you.”

“At all events you will tell me if you saw or heard the person who committed the robbery?”

“I both saw and heard him. Sir, you will excuse me; but that I may end an interview extremely painful to me, I will say to you that I saw the person who came into the house, saw the robbery committed, but am withheld by reasons I cannot disclose from giving you his name or description.”

The avowal was made in a low choking utterance that showed how profoundly the young creature felt the shame of the disclosure. Shocked and surprised, I scarcely knew what I said, but I remember appealing to Mrs. M——s to unite her entreaties with mine to induce Miss M——s to change her determination, or at least give a reason for it. But she did not hear me. Her eyes were fastened on the young girl’s face with a wild entreaty that thrilled me to the heart. She seemed to understand why the girl refused to tell, and gazing for an instant threw up her hands, with a wail like one broken hearted, and sank, sobbing, to the floor.

“Miss M——s, this is very strange. You do not wish me to think you a confederate, and, unless you tell me, what else am I to think?”

It was then that her expression changed, and her face lit up with indignant excitement.

“I will not tell you, sir!”

She paused for an instant, and I read her innocence in the look. Whatever the mystery, she was not criminal.

“Think what you please, I will not tell you.”

Before I had time to reply Mrs. M——s rose to her feet, and, taking the young girl by the hand, turned to me—

“You are mistaken, sir, in your impressions. This is a family mystery—the child is not to blame. Had I known it sooner I should have dispensed with your services; but you will oblige me now by retiring, and pursuing your investigations no further.”

It was impossible to resist the grave dignity of this grand old lady. We took our leave in a perfect whirl of amazement. I confess to my share of curiosity, but the events of that morning bewildered me. I thought of nothing all that day save the mysterious burglary. I could not speak

of it to others, for it was evident that Mrs. M——s did not wish it canvassed, and my own powers of reflection were unable to solve it.

The next day I received a note, inclosing a fee for my trouble, and enjoining the strictest silence in regard to the events which had occurred. Of course I obeyed; it was nothing to me, and I tried to forget it; but I could not. No matter what business engaged my attention, I found myself thinking of that, and so a year passed away.

One night a man was shot in a drunken brawl. He was a noted character—a burglar. I was near him when he fell. He called to me and I bent above the stricken man from which the life-blood was oozing fast.

“Will you do me a favor?”

“If I can—yes.”

“You know Mrs. M——s, the English lady?”

“Yes.”

“Tell her I am dead!”

Unutterably surprised, I would have asked him more—would have questioned him as to how the life or death of a burglar could interest her? But he waived me off.

I did his mission—carefully as I could, I imparted my intelligence. It was received in silence—a silence like death.

The next day a single close carriage attended the remains to the tomb. It was not long before a marble shaft rose above it, and the single inscription—

“He died by violence,”

tells to the observer all that is known of the burglar’s grave. Long years afterward I knew he was the English lady’s son, and that her mission here was to see and redeem him.

She failed utterly; and both she and the fair young girl are seen no more in the brilliant society in which the young beauty was once so admired.

The Daily Picayune [New Orleans, LA], January 24, 1869

The [Topeka] Kansas State Record, August 14, 1870

The Guilford [KS] Citizen, August 27, 1870

The Butte [MT] Miner, February 22, 1882

The Pantagraph [Bloomington, IL], March 11, 1882

Smith County Pioneer [Smith Centre, KS], May 12, 1882

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