

A Woman's Fidelity

A Detective's Experience

One of the saddest memories connected with my experience as a detective, said Mr. F. is in reference to a young girl, who many years go, was accused of murder. There are those yet in the city who will remember the details of the case. At the time it created an intense excitement, which subsequent revelations did not tend to lessen.

In one of our fashionable millinery establishments was a young girl named Mary Elliston. She was very young, but with a character formed by the sad experience which is sure to be met within the life of an orphan. She had clear, beautiful, gray eyes, and cheeks soft and delicate as the leaf of the rose; brown curly hair shaded a low, broad forehead, instinct with intellect and intelligence. She was small in figure, but the petite frame was faultless in its exquisite delicacy of outline and contour. It was impossible not to love her, if to such physical beauty is ascribed the generous and kind heart she really possessed.

It is not surprising that such a girl had many admirers. It would be strange if she had not. But there were two whom, from their devotion and her treatment acquired a prominence over the rest. Indeed, the sphere they moved in was far above that of the little milliner. She believed they loved her, and notwithstanding the great distance in their social position, believed they meant her kindly. That they loved her is certain. They were jealous; and more than once a hostile meeting was imminent between them.

Her way home from the store led by Jackson Square. It was not as beautiful then as now; but its rich foliage and elegant bowers at that day even excited admiration. One evening as she passed along the river side of the square she was met by Luisand Lacour, the richest and most persevering of her admirers, but the one whom she favored the least.

Indeed, it was said she disliked him, and on one occasion had resented, bitterly, an insult he had offered her. A passerby heard her voice raised indignantly as he passed them that evening in front of the iron gate. Standing here for a moment, they entered the square from which a half hour afterward she was seen to hurry away, with every sign of distress and intense excitement.

It was but a few moments after this that young Lacour was found—murdered—lying on the iron bench, with a short Spanish dagger through his heart. The girl had been known to possess such a weapon—the gift of one she never named.

This was all.

Of course, almost [everyone] believed her to be the assassin. I could not. I had seen too much of criminal life to mistake its characteristics. That girl was innocent I knew. When arrested she protested her innocence in language frantic and wild. Terror had made her forgetful, seemingly, of look and action, and she gave way to the most excessive paroxysms of grief and distress.

After she was taken to the station, Mr. I. and myself visited her, to see if we could learn anything of the case. We felt more like friends than detectives. The sad orphanage of the young girl touched our hearts—they would have been flinty, indeed, had they not softened at her distress. I never saw such anguish before. The pale, beautiful face was almost wild with terror. She was frantic one moment, and sobbing, wailing, and terror-stricken the next. As we entered the cell she threw herself at my feet, and, lifting her face so pale and beautiful, wailed out:

“I am innocent, sir—I am innocent!”

“I believe you are, Mary; and it was to help you that we came here.”

“I could not do such an act, sir; indeed I could not.”

“I know that, but Mary, do you know who did?”

She lifted her face quickly, and a wild, frightened expression crossed it, and then it grew like marble in an instant. She did not reply, but I never saw one in whom hope seemed so suddenly and utterly to have fled as that girl then. I repeated the question:

“Do you know who did, Mary?”

She shook her head and remained silent. I told her that we were satisfied that she was innocent, but to establish this it was necessary to bring the real criminal to justice. She could help us in this. But she still shook her head.

“Mary, Paul Villiel is the man!”

She sprang to her feet and screamed out rather than spoke her denial.

“No, no, no, not him; it was me, it was me. I did it! I’ll acknowledge it now—punish me if you will, but do not accuse him—do not let him be arrested!” It was plain to me now. My first impressions were correct. Young Villiel had come upon his rival talking with Mary in the Square, and under a first impulse of resentment had slain him.

Her confession to the fact was only lacking to secure her acquittal, but she would not confess; and from that hour acknowledged her guilt.

A few days after young Villiel fled the country, and in time his family furnished evidence that released the girl. She, too, went away, but it was not long before she died. The fright and horror of the terrible crime laid to her charge finally killed her.

I shall never forget the scene I witnessed in her cell. The desolate woman struggling with her anguish and terror haunts my memory yet.

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This story was reprinted as

“Love’s Sacrifice: The Reminiscence of a Retired Detective”

- *The Long Island Traveler* [Cutchogue, NY], July 11, 1878;*
- *The Montclair* [NJ] *Times*, July 13, 1878;*
- *The Cincinnati* [OH] *Enquirer*, August 10, 1878;*
- *The Watertown* [WI] *News*, August 28, 1878;*
- *Mexico* [MO] *Weekly Ledger*, November 28, 1878;
- *The State Journal* [Jefferson City, MO], December 6, 1878;

as “Love’s Sacrifice: The Romantic Story Told by a Returned Detective” in
The Buffalo [NY] *Sunday Morning News*, September 1, 1878;**

as “Love’s Sacrifice” in

- *Public Press* [Northumberland, PA], April 9, 1880;
- *Millheim* [PA] *Journal*, April 29, 1880

All the reprinted versions of this story feature the following introductory paragraph (as opposed to the one featured in the original text):

[The San Francisco *Golden Era* has this story:] It was the last act of my mission as a detective before leaving New Orleans for San Francisco in the spring of 1849; and I may add that it is the saddest memory connected with my career as a detective.

*These versions of the story credit the San Francisco *Golden Era*.

**This version of the story credits the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

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.