

## A Detective's Experience

### *A Stolen Child*

The Italian revolution was at its height. The mountain defiles were swarming with marauders, and the nobility had flocked to the capital, or sought refuge from Imperial avarice in another land. Those who preferred a life of freedom to the servility that attended submission sought refuge here. Among them was Cassina de Rita, in whose veins stirred the blood of the Colonas, and whose sword had been first in defense of his country's outraged liberties and insulted honor. Young in years, he was old in fame; and when resistance was no longer of any avail, with his wife and child, he came to New Orleans. His wife was the daughter of a noble, high in rank and a soldier under the banner of Emanuel—an only child—sole heiress to his riches—her son the heir of his title. "Like our own war," said Mr. F., "the Italian revolution had engendered fierce jealousies and family dissensions. Because the wife had adhered to the fortunes of her husband he disowned her—no rebel's child, he said, should wear his coronet. To the exiled family these threats of the old noble mattered but little. Time, they thought, would appease his resentment, or, if it did not, they could rear a new heritage in the new land they had come to.

Their many accomplishments, their high rank and fame, gave them a place in our best society. The wife was flattered and admired, the husband the observed of all who did honor to virtue or loved a patriot. Years wore away the strangeness of their new home, and their sympathies and feelings rapidly became identified with those of our people. No name stood higher among our merchants than that of the exile, while society lavished upon the beautiful Italian all the admiration it bestows upon its queens. The memories that clung to the past were remembered more as a dream than a reality, and the grief they at first had felt had grown into a regret, just as the clouds sometimes darken with impending tempest yet mellow into golden twilight. The pomp of high estate was an illusion now seen through the mist of years, while content and plenty sat smiling at their door.

As I said before, years had fled, and no word of reconciliation had ever passed between the father and his exiled daughter.

But one night the child disappeared. The mother was frantic—the father wild with apprehension. The city had been searched through and through. In this emergency Mr. I—and myself were applied to. The circumstances under which he had disappeared convinced me at once that he had been abducted; and when the mother explained that only the night before a poor Italian soldier had applied for shelter and protection, I was sure he knew something of the strange evasion. When I said as much to them, they then revealed the family history I have told to you. I knew then the cause. Unappeased in his dislike of the exile, the old noble sought to gain possession of the heir of his title, and rear him himself or crush the young life he hated.

If my conclusions were correct, I had no time for delay. The affair demanded haste. Before midnight Mr. I. and myself had searched the coast from the Barracks to the Forts. In a secluded nook—a quick bend of the river—lay the vessel we were in search of. The Spanish flag was hoisted, but I knew Italian skill had shaped its hull, and now controlled its course. It was a perilous enterprise to board it alone, and even if we succeeded in finding the boy, it was still

more doubtful if we could escape. Still I had no thought of abandoning the enterprise. Just, however, as we were meditating a plan of approach to the vessel, an old man appeared upon deck, leading the child. I knew the child at once. The ebon curls clung around a fair young face, on which the trace of the mother's beauty yet lingered. A moment more and they had descended to the gangway and sought the shore. Now was our time. It took but an instant to snatch the child from the old man's hand and lift him to the carriage. But in the moment of our triumph, a shot was fired from the vessel—it shattered the glass of the door and buried itself in the temple of the child. I sprang from the vehicle, holding the bleeding boy in my arms. The old man saw it, and raising his hand with a gesture-like triumph, sprang down the bank and into the ship. That night it sailed. I returned the child to the parents yet alive, but it died within an hour—a victim of plots and ambitions its young spirit had never known—its life a sacrifice to human pride.

The parents yet dwell in the city, and age has hallowed their grief and solved their sorrow into a memory; but the young wife's beauty faded with the life of her child, and her great black eyes look sad from beneath her snow-white hair. To her the joys of life are gone, and hope beckons from the sky.

*The Daily Picayune* [New Orleans, LA], May 16, 1869  
*Fayetteville [TN] Observer*, August 26, 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.