

A Detective's Story

What life is more thrilling than that of a police detective, what more full of startling adventure? An incident in the experience of two men well known in the city of New Orleans, as the most skillful and accomplished detectives in the Southern country, has been related to the reporter. It is useless to say who they are, their names are household words throughout the valley of the Mississippi. The event about to be related is of recent occurrence. It is one of the unpublished histories of crime, one of the heart-beats underneath the social current of the great city. But the words of the detective invests the relation with an interest more potent than the reporter can accord it. Let him tell the story:

A robbery had been committed in one of our large commercial houses under very singular circumstance. The day preceding the crime a large amount of money had been received and left in the safe over night. Part of this money consisted of \$20 and \$50 bills. Unknown to any one but the proprietor they were marked with a small cross in red ink in the left hand corner. The safe was locked at night, in the morning it was open, the night clerk asleep under the influence of chloroform and the money gone. The cashier was a young man of high social position, and about to be married to the daughter of the proprietor. He alone carried the keys of the safe. It was evident the lock had been picked, or opened with the key. Our observations convinced us it was the latter. Still we kept our own council. At the request of the merchant the whole matter was kept a profound secret. It furthered our chances of detecting the robber that it should be so. Before we had left the store, we had settled in our minds the identity of the thief, but it was necessary to obtain the proof before our suspicions were divulged, or his arrest attempted. Descriptions of the money stolen was left with certain parties, under whose observation it was most likely to come if put in circulation, with instructions to detain the person offering it until we were sent for. This was all that could be done for the present. We went home to await developments. Still we kept our eyes on the cashier. He was young, and although he never drank to excess, was *fast*. He spent a great deal of money, and to use a common expression, was the deuce among the girls. Once or twice we saw him walking in the squares of evenings with a very pretty young English girl, a milliner, working on Canal street. There was something very noticeable about the girl's face—a sort of melancholy and sadness that went straight to our hearts. Any one would have felt kindly towards her by just looking at her. Somehow or other, I felt a presentiment that this girl was mixed up in the robbery. I couldn't get rid of the idea. It haunted me. In this way several weeks passed. One day we received a message in a great hurry to come to the steamboat landing. It was late in the afternoon, and the boats for St. Louis were about leaving. Arriving there, we went at once on board the Republic, and up to the clerk's desk. Standing at the counter was the pretty English girl, and in the hands of the clerk were two of the marked \$20 bills. She had just offered them in payment for her passage to St. Louis. I felt now that the cashier was in my clutches. But it was necessary to proceed carefully and not frighten the girl. As gently as I could, I told her that the money she had just offered at the counter had been stolen; that it was necessary for me to know where she obtained it. At my words her face took the livid hue of death, but she shook her head as much as to say she would never tell me. I plied her with importunities, entreated and begged; but it was of no avail. I had no resource but to take her into custody. Still I hoped to be able to discover from her the proof of the cashier's guilt. He was evidently her lover; but I doubted much if she knew his real name or actual position. I plied her with questions on this head, and although she was on her guard, and her answers evasive, I

was soon satisfied that the real name of her lover was unknown to her. As I left the cell I heard her mutter in the most poignant grief—

“Oh, Charley, Charley, can this be true?” This was, indeed, his first name. I returned on the instant and said to her that I knew the person who gave her the money, that his name was Charley ——. At the mention of this name she clapped her hands and laughed. It was not the name she knew him by. I was almost at my wits end. The girl must confess or the real criminal would escape punishment. I thought, however, of a resource, and put it into execution at once. I went to the store and told the merchant that I wanted a picture of every member of his establishment, himself included. He looked puzzled but complied with my request. Armed with these I returned to the cell. I told the girl I had something to show her—my heart ached as I did so. I knew she worshipped the heartless scoundrel who had betrayed her. I held the picture so that she could see it in fall; as the light flashed on it, I said to her, “Mary, this is the Charley I am after.”

She gave one quick, hurried glance at the pictures, and then, with a low moan of anguish, fell fainting to the floor. The tears would come to my eyes as I looked at the poor, beautiful creature in her agony. Only heaven knows how I pitied her; but justice, as well as her own good, required that the mask should be lifted and the criminal exposed. As soon as she had had time to recover, I went to her again. I found her calm, but with a look of sorrow that pierced me to my heart. I told her who her lover was, his crime, and begged her to reveal all she knew of him. I might as well have talked to stone. She sat deaf, silent in her tearless anguish. Only once she murmured, “he loves me, he is true to me.” I told her she was mistaken—he cared nothing about her—would never marry her. She laughed at me in bitter scorn. As a last resource, I went to the place at which she had been working. I found out all about her friends, and with whom she associated. From these I learned that she was engaged to be married to “Charley,” who represented himself as a young mechanic, that he had persuaded her to go to St. Louis for that purpose, where it was said that he had relatives. I knew it was only to get rid of her while he married the merchant’s daughter. I had got all the information I wanted. As I returned I passed by the theatre, brilliantly lighted for an evening’s entertainment. I stepped in; the beauty and fashion of the city were there. In one of the boxes sat Charley and his betrothed. She was radiant in beauty—he attentive and lover-like. My resolution was taken on the instant. I left the theatre hurriedly and went to the station. In a few moments I returned accompanied by Mary. I took her to a seat commanding a full view of the box. One glance was enough; I saw that her heart was breaking. Silently I lead her out of the theatre and back to the station.

“Will you tell me now?”

“I can die, but I have nothing to tell.”

She never did. It was useless to detain her. We let her go, but three weeks afterward she died of a broken heart. The mystery of the robbery has never been explained.

The Daily Picayune [New Orleans, LA], August 2, 1868
Richmond [VA] *Dispatch*, August 12, 1868

The Daily Phoenix [Columbia, SC], August 21, 1868

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.