

A Tale of the Theatre

A Detective's Experience

“Some ten years ago,” said Mr. F., “one of the most beautiful women I ever met was a *danseuse* at one of our principal theatres. She was an English girl, named Nellie Gaspard. *Petite* and graceful, her lithe, elegant form was symmetry itself. She had long black hair, and eyes so fathomless, yet so soft and sad, that a glance from them woke involuntary pity in ones heart. She was a favorite with every one. The first glance of the fairy figure, the first movement of the beautiful creature as she flashed along the footlights, was always attended by the most flattering applause from the crowded theatre. Bouquets and flowers, not more beautiful than herself, were literally rained upon her; and diamonds and glittering jewels given her attracted the popular admiration for the beautiful actress. But no brilliant professional triumph (and she had many) ever incited her to pride—no ovation, and each night of her career was an ovation—could bring to her face a sign of joy; a sad, inexpressibly weary look was ever in her eyes. Whatever her life had been, a sorrow was upon it. All respected her—many loved her; but the fascinations of rank and wealth had no power to tempt her, nor cause her to forget the fever of unrest that blighted her life. Whatever her cause of sorrow, she did not reveal it. Secluded and retired, her only public appearance was in the theatre, where she reigned an undisputed favorite. It is not, therefore, surprising that she was an object of constant remark, and her marvelous beauty secured her a universal interest.

She had been here several months, and was in the very zenith of her professional triumphs, when the announcement was made, one morning, that she had been murdered. A thrill of horror went through the community. No public calamity could have stirred men's hearts so, or made them feel more sensibly the fearful nature of the crime that had been perpetrated.

The sun had scarcely risen before an immense crowd had assembled at her residence. It was then that all the fearful particulars of the homicide were revealed.

She had retired at her usual hour. Near daybreak a struggle—a sound of a falling body—a stifled moan of agony, was heard in the room. The inmate of the house awakened, went to ascertain the cause of the unusual disturbance. No wonder they shrunk back appalled at the sight which met their eyes.

Dressed as she had come from the theatre, the beautiful woman lay dead on the floor. Still and cold [was the] sorrowful but venus-like face, stark and stiff each supple limb. Even in death she was beautiful; and her face shone pallid and white beneath a deep wound in the forehead, from which her life-blood welled profusely. The window of her room was open. It was a sheer descent to the pavement of nearly twenty feet. The murderer must have escaped that way. Whoever he was, no trace remained of his identity. The woman, in whose house she stayed, said the *danseuse* had but one friend—a gentleman—but the landlady neither knew his name or had ever seen his face. He generally came with her from the theatre, and left before it was light. Husband or lover, his identity appeared inscrutable.

The jewels of the poor girl were gone, her money too had disappeared. This caused many to think it was the deed of a burglar. I thought differently; so did my friend Mr. I——. Why we thought so it would be difficult to tell; but somehow the impression had fixed itself on the minds of both of us.

With this indefinite clue, and with nothing but our own impressions to guide us, we set out in search of the homicide. I will not repeat to you how we haunted that house, how futilely our inquiries resulted. Yet our hearts were in the work, and professional pride, as well as human sympathy, spurred us on incessantly.

Among the jewels usually worn by the unfortunate girl was an antique ring; it was opal, heart shaped, and had attracted much attention. I had never seen one like it; no one else ever had with whom I talked. I instituted inquiries about this ring secretly, but incessantly. I felt that if we ever hit upon a clue this ring would afford the means. Imagine my surprise, I had almost said consternation, when one night I saw a ring identical to this gleaming on the jeweled hand of a woman in the theatre. My eyes never wandered from it once during the evening. The blood almost burned along my veins as I saw that jewel flash in the gaslight. I needed no proof to assure me that it was that once worn by the murdered girl.

Sitting by the side of the woman was a young man fashionably attired, but wearing on his face the stamp of vice. I knew him well. A swindler and adventurer he had been suspected of even greater crimes. His companion, therefore, could not be above suspicion. I felt that I was on the trail, and I meant to follow it, as the sleuth hound follows that of the deer.

Notwithstanding my anxiety I felt that my course must be cautious, and my movements stealthily as fate. One false move and all would be lost. No photographer ever put upon ivory more ineffaceable impressions than my mind took of those two faces. I watched them as they left the theatre, nor did I lose sight of them until the door of their residence shut behind them.

In less than an hour Mr. I—— and myself were again at the house. We had formed a plan, and although late determined to put it into execution. We rung the bell, and when the servant came, desired him to show us to the room occupied by H—— and the woman whom he had attended to the theatre. He hesitated—began to falter an excuse, but Mr. I—— put a pistol to his head and sternly desired him to lead the way. In a moment more my foot had dashed open the door—and seated at a table sumptuously feasting was the fellow and his mistress.

It is useless to relate the scene that ensued. The prisoners were secured, the ring on her finger removed, and much more of the poor girl's jewelry found in her trunk. To save herself, she betrayed the real culprit. The man H—— had been the real lover of the danseuse. In her young girlhood he had won her love, and had betrayed it. Growing weary of charms that had ceased to please, and maddened by importunities to right her wrongs, he had committed the fatal deed. Possessing himself of her jewelry and money, he fled rightly conjecturing that the crime would be laid to the door of a burglar. His agency, however, in the dreadful act, was pointed out, and he stood before us a self-convicted criminal. By some crook in the law he escaped punishment, and is even yet in the city. But the scorn of men is upon him, and some day a retributive justice will overtake him. Over the tomb of the actress the green mould and the grass have grown for long

years. The form, once so beautiful, is dust, but her sad fate and early death give to our memory thoughts as sad as grief for a friend.

The Daily Picayune [New Orleans, LA], October 4, 1868

Fayetteville [TN] *Observer*, November 12, 1868

Reading [PA] *Times*, December 10, 1868

The Daily Gazette [Wilmington, DE], April 10, 1882

The Daily Union-Leader [Wilkes-Barre, PA], April 12, 1882—with the subtitles “The Fate that Overtook the Pretty Nellie Gaspard. Carrying a Cause of Sorrow with her that She Could not be Induced to Reveal—The Story of a Beautiful English Danseuse as Related by a Detective—A Horrible Crime: Thrillingly Described—Tracked by a Ring. A Sad Story.”

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.