

A Detective's Experience

Treachery

It was a dark, rainy day. The dawn had stolen in through ashen clouds and a dense fog wrapped around the houses and lay upon the streets like a winding sheet. A misty wind, steely and cold, now and then, would whistle along the wide avenue and rattle the shutterless casements of the old brick house. A wild, blustering day was that Tuesday, twenty years ago; and many a heart shrank with a strange feeling of horror as they read in the morning Picayune of the tragedy far down on Chartes street. It was one of those densely crowded districts for which certain localities in New Orleans were then noted.

“Mr. I—— and myself,” said Mr. F——, “had been sent for at an early hour, and were among the first to reach the place, where a young girl, in the very flush and beauty of her tender womanhood, lay murdered. On a low cot, the crimson stain on sheet and pillow, and the dark hair thrown back like floss of silk, the dead girl lay. Underneath the linen sheet was traced the outline of the slender limbs and rounded form. Full of grace and exquisitely fashioned had the beautiful creature been in life. Even with the seal of death stamped upon face and form, she looked like a child asleep. One almost expected the glorious eyes to open—the long black lashes to lift from the waxen cheek. A smile yet lingered about the lips, as sun-shine plays on a cloud sometimes—and the olive tint of the brow and neck still looked like life.

The tears fell like rain as we looked upon the dead—this nameless stranger from a foreign land. No one knew whence she came; none knew her history. The house itself had been long deserted—a ruinous building given up to decay. But one night the neighbors heard cries of distress, and the piercing wail of a woman in terror thrill out on the night air; then lights flashed on the windows, and the patter of running feet were heard on the stair. Still later in the night, the sound of low music came out on the silent street—and then sobbings, like some one crying—and after this all grew dark, and the quiet unbroken. But in the early dawn some one went into the old house to search out the mystery. High up they found a locked door which defied all efforts to open it. But they broke it in at last, and saw a poorly furnished room, and a dead girl lying in the cot. There was nothing in the house outside of this room to show it had ever been inhabited. There was no wardrobe; no dresses; nothing but the crimson sheets and the linen gown; and on the floor, near the bed, a bracelet set with diamonds; but it bore no initial mark—a silent jewel, beautiful as the arm it encircled. There was no clue to be found, unless the bracelet would lead to one; a curious trifle, fashioned like a golden serpent, and the jewels flashing like eyes from the head—even the tongue had a diamond flame, and gleamed like a jet of fire.

The girl had been stabbed to the heart, and had died without a struggle. There was an awful mystery about it I could not unravel. To me it appeared there had been a crime committed which, if revealed, would disclose some terrible purpose, that now could not be perceived. But nothing could be done as yet. We must wait and watch, and this we did.

I had heard of a sloop landing below the city, a few days before, under circumstances that created some suspicion. I determined to look up the parties who had seen it, and see if I could find some trace that would help my investigations. From this source I learned that an old man

and woman and a young girl had landed, and the vessel had immediately gone back to sea. Those who had observed its strange conduct then, remembered to have seen it again on the morning of the homicide, at the same place, and the old man and woman were taken on board, but this time they were alone—only the two—*the girl was left behind*. The fisherman and his wife, who told me this, told me, too, that the young lady was richly clad, and the old people appeared to be her servants.

What could it mean?

On this clue, I went to Havana. Sometimes I am led by a strange feeling, which acts as a sort of foreshadowing of what is to come. It was so now. I knew by a sort of intuition that I should find out something about it then. Nor were my impressions deceptive. I did ascertain that such a vessel had left that city, ostensibly on a pleasure excursion; but in reality to spirit away an heiress to an immense estate. The old man and woman had been bribed by a treacherous uncle to put her out of the way. They had persuaded her to go with them by representing to her the evil designs of her relative, and professing to be her friends. In this way they succeeded in bringing her here. Their plans had been craftily contrived, and but for the strange whim that led me to Havana, would have proved successful. The false uncle was arrested and tried by a Spanish tribunal for abduction and murder, the punishment was death. But the real perpetrators I brought back with me. They confessed the homicide, and told immediately how the crime was accomplished.

It was a strange, weird tale, and my heart yet shivers when I recur to the recital. It will do no good to repeat it. The young stranger is dust. Her fate was sad; her life withered and dead in its young springtime; but tears of strangers fell on her grave and immortelles were laid on her bosom by tender hands. The green grass covers the sod beneath which she sleeps, and the rose that blooms at her head scatters its perfume on the air—a stranger's memorial to the beautiful dead.

The Daily Picayune [New Orleans, LA], March 14, 1869

This story was reprinted as “A Detective’s Story” in
The Hicksville [OH] News, March 30, 1882
Independence [KS] Daily Reporter, April 11, 1882
The Peabody [KS] Gazette-Herald, April 20, 1882
The Osage City [KS] Free Press, May 4, 1882
The Pratt County Times [Iuka, KS], May 27, 1882
Catoctin Clarion [Mechanicstown, MD], June 8, 1882

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.