

Under the Shadow

The din of the street had died out that winter night, said Mr. F., and darkness settled down on the city. The lamps at the corner shone weird and dim; the fog and the rain made a mist so dense that the eye could see scarce a yard away. It was a gloomy night, such as crime selects and the outlaw loves. Far down on the street a single sound was heard, that of a footstep, ringing on the pavement with a dreary echo. The dull, gray mist curled around the house tops and shone hueless and dim in the clouds. The rain and the fog grew denser. The cold crept in through the rifts of fog, and the body felt chill with cold. Few were abroad such a night as this—none save the votaries of crime, or those who watched them. To these all seasons were the same. No rest from toil because of cold—no escape from the damp and wet of the night. Mr. I. and myself stood in the shadow of the wall, listening to the echoing footstep and the sough of the wind. The rain fell faster, and the wind gave out a wail like one in distress. Solemn and [weird] its echoes pealed through the quiet streets and the sleeping city. Solemn as the music of a tolling bell or the sob of a heart that is breaking. But suddenly another sound crept in. It mingled with the wind, and seemed like the cry of one in distress. It came from a building across the way, which rose gloomy and grand in the air. For many years the house had been desolate. Once it had been a mansion of wealth and refinement, in the old colonial days. But decay had crumbled its walls, and the wild creeper had strayed in a [network] of vines over its roof. The windows were shutterless, and the glass in the sash all covered with mould. It had been long given up to the bat and the owl—a shelter for lawless men and birds of prey.

Again the cry came out in the air, sobbing and wild like despair.

Hurriedly we crossed the street and stood at the gate. Now that we were nearer, the sounds became louder and more defined. It took but a moment to wrench the lock from its fastenings and enter the building. But if the darkness was intense before, what shall I call it in that house? You could not see your hand before you. Rayless and dense it floated around us like a void or dungeon pit. We were afraid to strike a light, and neither of us knew the interior arrangement of the building. Still, we did not despair and crept silently on. The cry that had alarmed us at first was easily traceable now. It was a woman's voice—a pleading, passionate despair that stirred our hearts. It disclosed one in distress and pleading for help.

We slipped off our shoes and crept in silence through the hall, feeling our way as we went and following the sound of the voice. It led us up a flight of stairs, and back to a room in the attic. A faint light shining through the [crevice] of the door showed us the place for which we were in search.

I have seen crime in all its forms—villainy in nearly all its disguises; sorrow and distress, too, I have seen; but nothing comparable to this. A young girl chained to a ring in the floor; her person almost bare, in the torn and scanty garments that clad it; her hair disheveled, her eyes bloodshot—poor and wan as a skeleton. I shuddered as I looked at the pitiable thing, and a strange horror crept through my veins.

It took but a second to burst in the door, and we stood at the side of the girl. There was no surprise in her glance; no cry of joy at our coming; only an eager demand for bread.

“Give me bread,” she cried, “give me bread; I am starving.”

It was no time to question her then. A little brandy was given to her, and the chain taken from her limbs. Mr. I—— wrapped his coat around her, and we bore her away to the station. But from the moment that we left the room a deep swoon settled on her faculties. A physician was sent for, and restoratives applied, but for hours in vain. At last, however, she revived, and again asked for bread. Slowly life came back to the feeble frame and shrunken limbs—slowly the life blood ebbed at the heart. So reduced was her form that the flesh was worn away from her knees and the blood trickled out from the fevered lips. All speech was forbidden, and days went by, with no clue to the mystery. We watched the house incessantly, in hopes that some one would come. But no one did. It was evident that those who fastened her there had left her to die. In the room where we found her was a broken jug and a piece of mouldy bread, far out of her reach. The horrors of thirst and the craving of hunger were augmented by water and bread, both out of her reach. Few could look upon the scene and not shed tears. How came she there? Who planned a deed so base?

A fever set in, and weeks went by before we could see the girl. But one day we were sent for to the hospital to see our patient. How differently she looked from what we had seen her last. The cheeks were pale, and the form as thin; but a beautiful light shone in the soft dark eyes, and the regal head looked fit to bear a crown. Very young, and fair as a lily as the beautiful waif. With a foreign cast of features, and voice liquid music charmed, is it strange she won our hearts. The tears came into her eyes when she knew that we had [rescued] her; a gently dignity of mien, and an innocence that look and gesture showed as plainly as the day, needed to us no other guarantee of worthiness. She was a Mexican by birth, a native of Vera Cruz, but had been educated here. One night she had been spirited away from the convent with false tales of her father’s dangerous illness, and his desire to see his daughter. She was taken to this house, stripped of her ornaments and clothing, and left as we found her, to perish.

The circumstances of her abduction was told with a minuteness and clearness of detail that left no room to doubt its truth. It showed that there was powerful reason to incite the perpetrators to such a deed. An on inquiry it was found that her father was dead, and that her uncle had taken possession of her estates on the ground *that his niece was dead*.

It did not take long to unravel the web he had woven, and to restore to the heiress the inheritance of which she had nearly been bereft.

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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.