

A Female Detective

by the Lady Herself

In the summer of 1864, my health being delicate, I was ordered by my physician to spend three or four months by the seaside; my means were limited, and I was glad to take what I could get. After considerable difficulty I found such a place as would suit both my taste and my purse, in a small fishing village called Sandybar, which no one save myself and an eccentric old Frenchman, familiarly known as Monsieur Jacques, had found out. Monsieur Jacques was an old resident. We met generally in our walks about the sea shore, and often he called on me in the quiet little abode where I was boarded, but I could not visit him, because his household consisted exclusively of males: his valet, who came to see him now and then, his nephew, himself, and a sick friend, who had been confined to his room for three years, and long since pronounced incurable. An old woman, called Betty, was glad to spend two or three hours daily in Monsieur Jacques kitchen.

Monsieur Jacques was rich and eccentric. He had made it known that in his will he had left all his property to his nephew, Alphonse Lefebre, and in case Alphonse should die without issue, then it was to go to Martin, the sick man.

Great was the horror of the villagers when they heard, one morning, that Monsieur Jacques had been murdered the night before—his throat having been cut.

Who could be the murderer of so good a man? was the question every one asked of his neighbor. Suspicion fell upon Monsieur Alphonse Lefebre. The young man was arrested and placed in the county jail, a distance of five miles from Sandybar; and his trial for the murder of his uncle followed his imprisonment in a very short time. From the first word of suspicion against him, my sympathies had been entirely with the prisoner; but when I learned that his counsel was my lover and promised husband, Harvey Mellish, I need not say that all my kindest feelings toward the unhappy young man were increased to the highest possible degree. It was the first really important case he had undertaken, and he had set his heart on gaining it. I was equally anxious.

One night—it was just two nights before the day fixed upon for the trial of Alphonse Lefebre—Harvey, having paid me his usual daily visit, had remained quite late in the evening; and, of course, the subject of our conversation had been the case in which he was so deeply interested. When I retired to my room I found it impossible to compose myself to sleep—it was a bright moonlight night perfectly still and quiet,—so that the heavy beating of my heart sounded almost noisily in my ears. I cannot tell how long I lay in this almost painful quiet, but it must have been more than an hour, when I began gently to doze off into sleep. What followed I will not pretend to explain; and, indeed, I was too deeply affected ever to inquire minutely regarding my own feelings at the time. Whether I slept and dreamed, or whether it was a waking revelation, I am utterly incapable of forming a judgment. But, suddenly, the silvery moonlight faded out of my room, and it was filled with a bright celestial radiance, out of the midst of which the quaint, kindly, brown face of Monsieur Jacques smiled gently on me. I heard no voice, yet something said distinctly as though it was spoken within my soul:

“My nephew Alphonse is an innocent man—rise, go forth, and find my real murderer!”

On the instant, I was wide awake. The bright moonlight flooded my room, and I could see distinctly every object about me. I lay stupidly gazing at them for a few minutes, dazed by what had happened; and then, on a sudden, I felt that the words which had been addressed to me were a command. I rose and hastily dressed myself, and noiselessly slipped out of the house. When I had got so far, I asked myself what I should do next, and whether I was not acting most absurdly. But I had been so strongly impressed by the extraordinary circumstances just detailed, that I dared not go back. I walked on and on, till insensibly I found myself taking the way that led to the house formerly occupied by Monsieur Jacques, and which was still occupied by Mr. Martin and Edward. In a short time, I stood before it, and there I continued to stand for several minutes, disposed to call myself hard names, and wondering what on earth I should do next. I began to walk round about the house, taking a view of it from various points of observation, till I paused in the garden and directed my attention to the window of what had been Monsieur Jacques’s room. The perfume of the lilac bushes floated about me, and the almost imperceptible breeze faintly stirred the leaves and flowers with a ghostly noise that gave me a creeping sensation; but as yet I was not afraid, though I began to fancy that I saw a face pressed against the window and vainly trying to peer down into the garden. Another moment, and I was almost stifled with terror—the window-sash began to move gently upward, and a man’s head and shoulders were thrust out of the window. If I had not been weak with fright, I think I would have cried out—the surprise was so sharp and sudden. I shrank back among the lilac bushes and cowered behind their sheltering branches. From where I was I could distinctly see the head and face—so distinctly that I can never forget it, and now see it in my mind as vividly as I then beheld it with my eyes. The head was shaggy, grizzled and unkempt; the face pallid—as much of it as was visible, for the lower part was covered with many days’ growth of beard, which was grizzled and untidy like the hair; the eyes looked out like burning coals, and searching hastily in all directions, almost—to my excited fancy—scorched whatever their gaze lighted upon. Trembling, yet fascinated, I could not choose but look; and presently the head was drawn in again, the window was softly lowered, and I saw nothing but the bright light of the moon reflected from the panes of glass. I was yet too frightened to move, or to connect the extraordinary sight that I had seen with the murder of Monsieur Jacques. But while I tried to gather courage, the sound of stealthy footsteps fell upon my ear, and I saw the same head and face accompanied by the bent figure belonging to them come peering around the corner of the house and then more boldly advance into the garden, till he was directly under the window where his head had appeared. In another moment he was down upon his knees, and two shaking hands were eagerly searching among the long grass. In that moment I knew that the possibility of saving Monsieur Alphonse was within my power; for before me, groveling in the grass and evidently searching for the weapon that had done the deed, was the murderer of Monsieur Jacques. What should I do? My hair was in a whirl—to discover myself would be instant death—I could but mark the villain, and follow him when his search was done. This was the only scheme that suggested itself to me. What is that? The rich pleasant voice of Edward singing a lively French air—but what an effect that simple air produced on the man whose every movement I now intently watched. With a muttered exclamation of rage, fear, and hate, he started up and was gone. I remained perfectly quiet—one thought only in my mind: the weapon! Had he found it, or was it still there awaiting its discovery. Presently Edward entered the garden, looked carelessly about for a minute, and disappeared in the direction of the back

entrance. I felt much less fearful now, and only waited till all seemed perfectly quiet before I ventured from my concealment and began searching for the lost or hidden weapon. Heaven aided me, for in a few minutes my hand came in contact with something. I held it up in the moonlight and saw that it was a razor, open, and the blade covered with a dark stain, in which a few bits of loose grass were still clinging, matted together. I shuddered till my teeth chattered, but I was not coward enough to let it go; and clutching it tightly, I left the garden quickly, and stealthily creeping along in the shadow of the bushes, I gave myself no time for reflection, knowing that my courage would not hold out if I thought too much about it; but set off at once to find Harvey Mellish, and show him what I had found and tell him what I had seen.

About two miles from Sandbar, serving as a half-way house between it and a country town, was the pretense of a country town; and there Harvey was lodged. I reached the inn at about half-past twelve—an outrageous hour for a young girl to be out alone and unprotected. I noticed a dim light in one of the rooms. Who could it be up at this hour, save Harvey, in that forlorn spot,— I knew it was he; and I gathered a handful of small pebbles and cautiously began, one by one, throwing them up against the window. But they were light and I was nervous; my hand was unsteady, and it was a long time before I succeeded; and when at last I did strike the window pane I had the mortification of seeing that the noise produced no effect. Again and again I essayed to attract the attention of Harvey; and at last I was rewarded by seeing him stand by it and look out inquiringly into the road. I knew him in an instant, and waved my handkerchief frantically to attract his attention. He raised the window and looked out.

“Salome!” he said, in a deep whisper.

“Yes—come down!” I answered in the same tone; but he hardly waited to hear me. In a moment he was beside me, and asking eager, hurried questions. I was greatly excited.

“Please don’t be so surprised. Harvey, dearest, you ought not be surprised at anything,” I began, speaking fast and almost panting for breath.

“But to see my dear, delicate little girl wandering, at midnight, miles from her home—what does it mean?” he interrupted.

“It means I have come to talk to you about the real murderer of Monsieur Jacques,” I whispered, and then I felt quieter and more self-possessed as soon as I had this weighty expression off my mind.

Harvey regarded me incredulously, but I saw the name I had used impressed him sufficiently to rivet his attention; and, in as few words as possible, I told him my story. When I had concluded, and delivered the razor into his keeping, he clasped me impulsively in his arms, and kissed me several times.

“My good, brave little darling!” he said, “you have saved a life, and done me an incalculable service—Come, now, let me take you home!” and drawing my arm within his, we set forth on our walk.

On the way, we talked over the incidents I have stated, and viewed them from every point. Harvey questioned me minutely as to the appearance of the man, and I described him as vividly as words could do. I saw that he had gained no distinct idea from what I had said; but when I proposed sketching him, he was relieved of all anxiety on that subject at once. I possessed a very considerable talent for drawing, and I felt assured my memory would stand by me in this emergency. So, at the door of my boardinghouse, we separated once more, with many whispered good-nights; and I reached my room safely, and without having attracted any notice from any one in the house.

By this time it was about two o'clock in the morning, but I trimmed my lamp, and at once got out drawing materials. It was bright daylight before I had satisfied myself regarding my sketch; but I was well rewarded for my pains. The likeness was perfect—was, indeed, perfectly good—so much so that I shuddered when I looked at it; and I had to place it quite out of my sight, face downwards, in a drawer, before I could throw myself on the bed to catch a few hours' sleep.

Harvey arrived at about the breakfast hour; and when I presented him with the sketch, he could not repress an exclamation of triumph—almost of delight.

“The old scoundrel!—the hypocritical sneak and villain!—something whispered me that man was a sham and humbug, when I questioned him about the poor old Frenchman.”

“Dearest Harvey, what can you mean?—who can you mean?” I questioned, equally excited.

“One moment before I answer you,” he said; “this face is somewhat changed since I saw it, but not sufficiently for me to make any serious mistake. What would be the effect if this rough growth of beard were removed?”

I hastily rubbed out the beard, and supplied a smooth chin and cheeks as correctly as I could guess at, and then gave the sketch again into Harvey's hands.

“Just as I thought!” he exclaimed. “This man is doubtless the murderer of M. Jacques, and his name is Alexander Martin.”

“The sick man!—have you lost your senses, Harvey?” I screamed. “Mr. Martin is a confirmed invalid—he can't walk alone, and has not even quitted his room for three years.”

“I can't help that, my little kitten—this is the face of Mr. Martin, and Mr. Martin murdered his friend and benefactor. If any further proof was needed than the evidence of your eyes and mine, here it is—on the blade of the razor—the only part of it not obscured by blood. You can distinctly read the initials A.M.”

It was true—the initials were there, plain enough; but I could not reconcile the facts, so I told Harvey that, although I had never seen Mr. Martin, I could not accept his view of the case without more convincing proofs.

He left me to obtain a warrant for the apprehension of Mr. Martin; and before night every one in Sandybar had turned into the streets to discuss the new arrest, and many of them to express unbounded indignation; for Mr. Martin had been carried, utterly helpless, from his sick-bed, and borne on a litter to the prison containing Monsieur Alphonse.

The trial was postponed for a few days, in order to obtain counsel, witnesses, etc., for Mr. Martin; but at length the eventful day arrived, when both prisoners were put on trial for their lives. The courthouse was crammed to suffocation; the people for miles around flocked to hear the result; and when the prisoners appeared the excitement amounted almost to an uproar. Monsieur Alphonse took his place calmly. He was pale as marble, and as quiet. Mr. Martin was carried in upon a litter, his helpless condition creating the most lively commiseration, and increasing the feeling of disapprobation against Harry, who had caused his arrest.

Out of a feeling of kindness toward him, and with a view to remove him as speedily as possible from his painful position, he was tried first. I started visibly when I saw him, for then I knew, before a question was asked, that he must have murdered Monsieur Jacques, for it was the man I had seen under the window searching for the razor. I was the principal witness against him; and was at once put into the witness-box. My evidence was crushing, although it was cleverly met by his lawyer; but when the razor was produced, Edward having sworn to it, and that it had been a portion of the contents of a dressing-case given him by Monsieur Jacques, the audience insensibly changed their opinion of Mr. Martin, and his counsel perceived it. He still combated the evidence most keenly; but the prisoner continued to grow paler and paler; and when the initials were read off from the weapon, he sprang up and cried out in a voice that thrilled all his hearers:

“I killed him!—it is useless to fight longer—murder will out. I have known it, from the moment when in a panic of terror I flung the bloody weapon out of the window, thinking I heard footsteps approaching the murdered man’s room. A score of times I tried to recover it; but each time was baffled. I am not a sick man—my illness was a lie to extort sympathy and money from Monsieur Jacques. I murdered him on the night of his quarrel with Alphonse knowing he would be suspected, hoping he would be hanged, and confidently expecting by that means to come into possession of the dead man’s property.

This appalling and extraordinary confession was heard in absolute silence, every one in the court-room being stunned by it. The silence was soon broken by groans and shouts of execration against the self-condemned man; and so sudden and complete was the revulsion of sentiment that it was with difficulty the infuriated people were held back from tearing him limb from limb.

He was condemned to death, and in a short time the sentence was executed upon him, amid the execrations of assembled hundreds. Of course Monsieur Alphonse was escorted from his ignominious position by a multitude of enthusiastic though new-made friends; and Harvey and myself became, for a time, objects of interest to the surrounding country.

The strange excitement produced as good an effect upon my health as the sea air; and I left Sandybar sooner than I had expected, strengthened in mind and body; and at the eager request of Monsieur Alphonse, named an early day for my marriage, in order that the grateful young

Frenchman might enjoy the pleasure of endowing me with a marriage portion and giving me away to the man who had saved his life, before leaving our shores for his native land.

The New York Ledger, August 22, 1868