

A Mysterious Lodger

In September, 1852, I occupied a room in a two story frame building on Stockton Street. In the house were perhaps half a dozen lodgers—possibly more. As I seldom visited my room during the day, and invariably retired at twelve o'clock, I rarely met any of my neighbors—or, if I did, it was without my knowing them. With two of my fellow lodgers I became partially acquainted. One was a middle-aged man, occupying a room adjoining mine, and divided from it by a thin partition. Against that thin boundary stood our beds—the middle-aged gentleman's and mine—not to exceed three inches apart. The middle-aged man gentleman was weeded to the habit of snoring. And his was a peculiar snore; not a periodical murmur, accompanying every fourth or fifth respiration, but a terrific uninterrupted combination of snorts, groans, and snuffles, with the addition of teeth grinding, and occasional plunges of the extremities against the creaking headboard. For a week I bore up against the clatter. At length, one night, I knocked at his door. I was desperate. He rose, struck to light, and for the first time we met face to face. I had prepared myself to judge him with sarcasm—to abuse him with billingsgate—to sink him with abuse. His face was so round and jovial, and his head so entirely destitute of hair, that I could not summon courage to utter a harsh word. For a moment we peered silently into each other's faces.

“Can I do anything for you?” I inquired.

Smith, for that was his name, must have read my thoughts—must have known that he snored—must have been aware of the object of my visit—for he immediately replied:

“Yes, my friend, join me in a glass of brandy and water—I have a few drops of something genuine. Permit me to insist,” he continued, observing my hesitation, “you will sleep all the better for it,” and he gave me a look welling over with commiseration.

I meekly followed him to the side-board, and we pledged each other in a glass of ancient vintage. He then pressed me to smoke a cigar. I could scarcely do less. Sitting on the side of the bed, with his fat legs swinging good naturedly, Smith was a picture. Together we would have afforded an amusing sketch for Punch. He talked incessantly, and before I left him, we touched glasses several times, and I firmly resolved that he might snore, night and day, for a year to come, and I would not disturb him. I wrung his hand in an ecstasy of friendship, and bade him an affectionate good night. I tumbled into bed, but tried in vain to sleep. Smith's brandy was playing strange tricks with my fancy, and I felt as though something was whispering, as to “Macbeth,” “Sleep no more!” I lit a candle, and found it was two o'clock. Irritated at my wakefulness, I drew on my clothes and was soon in the street. The moon rode high in the heavens, and the night was beautiful as a poet's dream. Strolling along the street as far as Clay, I suddenly turned the corner and encountered a crowd of half drunken rowdies, standing in front of a house they had either just left, or were about to enter. In the act of retracing my steps, I heard some one exclaim, in a boyish tone:

“Not to-night, gentlemen; some other time, but not to-night; please excuse me.”

The speaker, in passing along the street, had been stopped by the rowdies, and invited to drink.

“Bah,” exclaimed a number of voices. “You must come up to the scratch—either drink or fight.”

“But, gentlemen, I cannot,” insisted the stranger, struggling to free himself from the grasp of his persecutors. “I can neither drink nor fight to-night; I am not well.”

“Go now!” Growled the party, attempting to force him into the house.

I felt that, as a conservator of the peace and champion of society, it was my duty to interfere. Smith’s brandy told me so, and furnished the nerve, in addition, to carry out the resolution. Stalking quietly in upon the crowd, I laid my hand upon the boy’s shoulder and requested him to follow me. He turned to comply, when “Give him one!” yelled one of the rowdies, and the next moment I received a blow in the back of the neck, and found myself leaning against the side of a house. I was not stunned, but exasperated beyond measure. The liquor of my bald-headed fellow-lodger steeled my nerves to action, and I threw myself into a position of defense. Not doubting my perfect ability to scatter that crowd over an acre of ground, I invited the unequal contest. The appearance of a policeman spared the impending slaughter, for the party suddenly left the field. My companion informed the officer of what had occurred, and he started in pursuit of the retreating rowdies, enjoying us to find the way to our lodgings. Taking the arm of the lad, we proceeded towards my room. He was a pale faced, interesting looking young man of perhaps eighteen or nineteen years, remarkably well bred and intelligent. He was dressed in good taste, without affecting any of the airs of mature years, and I was quiet taken with him. He told me his name was Richard Jansen; that he was alone in California, but not without means; that he lived on Stockton street, and, visiting a friend that evening, had been detained to that unusual hour. In a few moments we arrived at my lodgings, and observing that he evinced little inclination to part with me, I invited him to accept a portion of my bed for the night. He smilingly declined, stating that he was quite near his own; and I then learned, for the first time, that he occupied a room in the same house on the same floor with myself. Thus I became acquainted with two of my fellow-lodgers.

Jansen and myself often met after that, but it was always in the street or on the stairway. He never invited me to his room, or accepted an invitation to mine. He visited me but once at my office, and then remained less than five minutes. How he spent his time I did not inquire. He was a mystery. I spoke of him to Smith one day. Strange to say, that gentleman had never seen him, but from my description of him, ventured the opinion that he was either a gambler or a genteel pickpocket. I was reluctantly forced to the conclusion that Smith was right, and after that I treated the young man with unusual oldness. He observed the change, and his look wore a reproach so sorrowful that I half repented having harbored the suspicion of my venerable looking friend, who was fearfully averse to all mysteries.

Occasion called me to my room one evening, at an earlier hour than usual. I heard a soft rap at my door, and on opening it, found Jansen standing in the entry. “Com in, Jansen,” I exclaimed, throwing open the door.

“Would you not prefer taking a walk?” he inquired. “The night is beautiful.”

“I believe not, to-night,” I replied “some other time.” I was a little piqued that he would persist in remaining outside the door.

“I should be much pleased to have you,” he rejoined; “I have a few words to say to you in justice to myself, and—”

“Enough,” I interrupted, “I will go,” I felt sure he wished to tell me something of himself, and I was all anxiety to hear it. It was unpleasant to think him a pickpocket or sharper, and I hoped he might be able to prove to me that he was neither.

We left the house and proceeded along Stockton street towards Happy Valley. For ten minutes not a word was spoken. Several times he seemed on the point of speaking, but he as often checked himself.

“Unless I may call you one, I have not a friend in California,” he at length began, placing in his hand upon my shoulder. I bowed, but made no reply.

“You do not speak, he continued, observing my silence. “I am to understand, I presume, that you are not to be made an exception.”

“To be frank with you, Jansen,” I replied “there is a certain mystery about your movements calculated to give rise to suspicions anything but favorable.”

“Of what nature,” inquired my companion.

“That you are a gambler, or even worse,” I bluntly replied.

“He smiled as he replied. “Yes, yes, I see; yet the suspicion wrongs me.”

“Make it appear so,” I answered “and you shall want a friend.”

“Promise that you will not divulge what I may tell you or attempt by word or act to thwart me in the accomplishment of a purpose to which I have pledged my soul,” he said, looking me earnestly in the face, “and you shall have the proof you require.”

“If your purpose is not criminal, I promise; if otherwise keep your secret,” was my answer.

“’Tis what you would do, or any other man worthy of the name.”

“Then I promise here is my hand.”

“Listen,” he resumed, taking my arm and walking slowly on. “I have a twin sister. We were born in Georgia, our parents were the possessors of a hundred slaves; a plantation large enough to give all employment. When we were fourteen our father died. At the age of sixteen my sister became converted, during a religious revival, and six months after, in the face of the determined opposition of my mother ran away with and married a young preacher, to whose eloquence the

revival owed its origin. Learning they were married, my good mother sent for them, and they returned to receive her blessing. The plantation was placed in charge of my sister's husband, and he relinquished the Gospel. He frequently visited New Orleans, and other of the large Southern cities, during the first year of his marriage, but the circumstances excited no suspicion.

“To be brief, before two years elapsed, the large estate left by our father was swept from us, and we were almost bankrupt. He had induced my mother to mortgage the plantation, with the view, he said, of purchasing more negroes to work it, but the money was squandered, and the slaves we had were secretly sold by fives and tens until less than a dozen remained. When asked to explain by my mother, he had no excuse to offer. In the midst of this great grief, another wife of Mayhew—that was the villain's name—suddenly made her appearance at the plantation. Learning the residence of her husband but knowing nothing of his second marriage, she had left South Carolina to meet him. My poor sister was heartbroken. Mayhew, to escape prosecution, fled from the State. His first wife was sent to the madhouse, and in three months my poor old mother was laid in the church yard. My grief-bowed sister—but I will not speak of her. Turning the wreck of our poverty into money, I started in pursuit of the scoundrel who had dealt such havoc with our peace. Through a dozen States I tracked him, and returned with my mission of vengeance unaccomplished. One year ago, by accident, I learned he was in California.

As soon as I recovered from a serious illness under which I was laboring, I took passage for this State. I arrived six months ago. He is here, for I have seen him, he cannot escape me now! He is even in this city, but little dreams that the postil so shot to send him to the great reckoning. I have made a few acquaintances, having no wish to implicate other in a work of blood which must be mine alone. Last night I followed him from the El Dorado, where he spends most of his time, to a house on Powell street. He has visited it frequently of late, and to-day I understand that he is paying his addresses to a widow lady of wealth residing there. But he will not marry her, for another week shall not see him alive! You now know all. Have I one friend in California?

To see so much spirit, so much determination, so much manhood exhibited by a beardless boy, surprised me beyond expression. I offered the brave little fellow my hand, and he felt that he was answered. In silence we returned to our lodgings. Bidding Jansen good night, I stepped into Smith's room for a moment. I found the old gentleman somewhat agitated. He had lost a valuable diamond pin that day, and freely intimated that the “slick young cuss,” as he denominated Jansen, had stolen it. I so strenuously endeavored to dissipate the impression, that I verily believe he felt inclined to transfer the odium of the supposed theft to me. That night Smith snored louder than usual.

Three days after, I met Jansen in the street, and learned that he had taken rooms on Powell street. I did not require the reason—I thought I knew it. The next day I again met him. His face was unusually pale, yet he said he had not felt better for a year. “There is to be a wedding on Powell street to-morrow at least so Mayhew says, but there will be no bridegroom! Do you understand?” He placed his finger significantly to his lips, and we separated.

At eight o'clock the next evening, as Isaac Mayhew was mounting the steps of the house to which Jansen had traced him six days before, a pistol ball pierced his heart, and he dropped dead upon the pavement. Some unaccountable influence had drawn me to the neighborhood, and

hearing the report of a pistol Jansen's words flashed through my mind, and I started with a dozen others, in the direction of the tragedy. Before I arrived on the spot quite a crowd had collected. The body of Mayhew was lying upon the sidewalk, and over it in speechless agony, stood the widow who was to have been a bride.

"Who saw this?" inquired a policeman.

"I heard the report of a pistol," said one of the crowd, "and, a minute after, saw a man enter that house yonder," and he pointed to a small frame building on the opposite side of the street.

In an instant the officer, followed by the excited spectators, started for the house. Springing through the crowd, I reached the side of the policeman, and as he knocked at the door I was at his elbow. I felt that Jansen was there. The door was quickly opened, and a well dressed lady calmly inquired the object of the visit.

"We are looking for a man who a few minutes since, committed a murder across the street," said the officer.

"And do you expect to find him in my room, sir?" returned the lady.

"No, madam, replied the policeman, rather politely for one of his calling; "but I will glance through your apartment merely as a matter of form, before proceeding to the other portions of the house."

The officer entered, I closely following. While he was examining the room, I for the first time obtained a fair view of the lady's face. Involuntarily, I threw up my hands in amazement. She detected the movement, and quick as thought, placed her finger to her lips. In a moment I comprehended all. Richard Jansen stood before me. No—Richard no longer, now that she had slain the destroyer of her peace, but Martha Jansen, my former fellow lodger. Heavens, what a discovery! And for me to have been so confoundedly blind, too—but no matter. The policeman searched but did not find the murderer.

The next day I met Martha on Montgomery street. She smiled and bowed, and I confess I thought her an exceedingly pretty woman.

A week after she quietly left the State for Georgia, where she is now residing. After the sailing of the steamer I received a note through the post office from Martha. She explained all, and thanked me for the assistance I had rendered her, and the kindness shown to her imaginary twin-brother, Richard.

When I informed Smith, as I did one evening, that the "sleek young cuss" whom he had viewed with so much suspicion was a woman, he waited for me to repeat the assertion, and then checked himself in the act of calling me a liar. The news excited Smith, and he went to bed drunk that night, and snored as he had never snored before.

She who was to have been the third wife of Mayhew still lives in San Francisco. She was married in August last. I met her in the street a few days ago. How vividly the sight of her face brought to mind the incidents I have related! She will read this little story, perhaps, and learn for the first time, why she did not become the wife of Mayhew, the bigamist.

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