

The Gambler's Wax Finger

Charles Legate—A Forger—Studying Him Up—Fifty Thousand Dollars, his “Prize”—Description of Legate—No Two Persons Ever Agree in Describing Another—A Mark Hit Upon—Start for St. Louis—Musings—Curious Incidents of My Journey—A Genealogical “Dodge”—On Legate’s Track at Last—St. Louis Reached—Of My Stay There—Leave for New Orleans Per Steamer—A Genial Crowd of Men and Women on Board—Characteristics of a Mississippi “Voyage”—Napoleon, Arkansas—Some “Characters” Come on Board There—A Gambling Scene on Board—One Jacobs Takes a Part—A Private Conference with Jacob’s Negro Servant—A Terrific Fight on Board Among the Gamblers—Jacobs Set Upon, and Makes a Brave Defence—How I Discovered “Jacobs” to be Probably Legate, in the Melee—He is Badly Bruised—His Life Despaired of—We Arrive in New Orleans—Jacobs’ Identification as Legate—Legate Proves to be Very Rich—A Curious Visit to an Italian Artist’s Studio—A Novel Medicine Administered to Signore Cancemi, the Sick Artist—He Gets Well at Once

by George McWatters

Early in my detective life, I was commissioned by a New York mercantile house to go to St. Louis first, and “anywhere else thereafter on the two continents” (as the senior member of the house fervently defined my latitude) where my thread might lead, to work up a subtle case of forgery to the amount of fifty thousands dollars, out of which the house had been defrauded by one Charles Legate, a Canadian by birth, but combining in himself all the craft of an Italian, with the address of the politest Frenchman, and the bold perseverance and self-complacency of a London “speculator.”

After a thorough study in every particular of the correspondence between Legate and the house, which covered a long period of time, and in which was discovered to me, as I thought, a pretty clear understanding of the man in all his various moods and systems of fraudulent pursuit, and having gathered from the members of the house every particular in regard to the personal appearance of Legate, of which they could possess me, I started on my mission. I was even unusually particular in my inquiries of the firm as to Legate’s mode of dress, the peculiarities of his manner, and all possible personal indices. He dressed neither gaudily nor carelessly, and though my informants all agreed that he was a man of consummate address, yet none of them could by imitation give me any definite representation of his manner.

Almost in despair of learning anything at all definite about his personnel, which might enable me to identify Legate, I finally said, “Gentlemen, almost everybody is in some way deformed or ill-formed— a nose a little to one side—one foot larger than the other, leading to the habit of standing on it more firmly than on the other—one shoulder higher than the other—an arm a little out of shape—hand stiff—fingers gone, or something of that sort.”

“See here,” exclaimed Mr. Harris, a junior member of the firm, interrupting me, and resting his face pensively for a half minute on his hand, the elbow of which was pressed upon the table at which we sat, “Ah, yes; I have it. You’ve hit the nail on the head. I remember noticing once, when Legate dined with me at Delmonico’s, that the end, or about half of his little finger of the left hand was gone. He doesn’t show it much. I remember I looked a second time before I fully

assured myself that what I first thought I discovered was so. He is an adroit about concealing that, as he was in general proceedings.” I felt a great relief to learn so much, and bidding my employers good day, found myself, as speedily as I well could, on my way to St. Louis, taking my course up the river, and on via the New York Central Railroad. It so happened, that when about Syracuse on the cars, I overheard some men, who were evidently enjoying each other’s society greatly in the narration of stories and experiences, speak of “home” and St. Louis; and I fancied they were, as proved to be the case, residents of that city; and I became consequently quite interested in them, hoping that something would occur on their way to allow me, without obtrusion, to make their acquaintance.

Eventually the cars were starting on from a station at which we stopped for a moment, there came on board a fine, brusque, jolly, but courtly-looking man, of the class who bear about them the unmistakable evidences of good breeding, frankness, and honor, and whose associates are never less than respectable people, and who, as he brushed down the aisle of the car in search of a seat, accosted the man upon whom in particular I had my eye—“Ah, Mr. Hendricks! I am very glad to meet you,” extending his hand and giving him a cordial grasp and “shake” which assured me that the man Hendricks was a very different character from the Mr. Legate in search of whom I was making my journey; and so my “air castles,” founded upon suspicions, came to the ground. I know not why, but I really felt a relief to find that it was not Legate, after all, notwithstanding it would have been a happy circumstance for me, had Mr. Hendricks really been he.

But I listened still to the St. Louisians’ story-telling, which grew more and more loud as we move on, in consequence, I suppose of their occasional attention to a little flask of wine which each gentleman carried; but they did not become boisterous. Mr. Hendricks was narrating to his friend (whose name by this time I had discovered was Phelps,) what was evidently an interesting story to the latter, when he, striking his hand very heavily upon his leg, exclaimed, “that Legate was one of the most accomplished villains— no softer word will do—that I ever heard of.”

“Ah, ha!” I thought to myself, “now I am in the right company to get a clew to the fellow. But stop, he said *was* not *is*. I wonder if Legate is dead; perhaps he is; and I became quite fearful that he might be, and so my mission prove entirely fruitless. But I could see no chance to break in upon their conversation here or make their acquaintance. “That Legate,” too, might be another than the Charles Legate whom I was seeking. What shall I do? and pondered over the matter. Finally I made the bold resolution to interrupt the gentlemen at the first half-favorable opportunity, my seat being one back of theirs, on the other side of the car, and so near that I might readily do so. While talking of this man Legate their conversation was in the main, more subdued, and as if half confidential, than upon other topics, which made it more difficult for me to interpolate a query, for I had by this time resolved upon my plan.

Presently I heard Mr. Hendricks say, “The last I heard of him, he’d gone to Mexico.” I fancied this must relate to Legate, and began to think that my journey might indeed extend “over the two continents,” according to my conditional orders on starting. Presently I heard the name Legate, and as Messrs Hendricks and Phelps were at this time in the height of their jolly humor, I fancied they wouldn’t mind the obtrusion. I stepped from my seat to theirs and said, “Gentlemen, you’ll pardon me, but I am somewhat interested in the genealogy of the Legate family, both in the West and East; and just hearing you speak the name Legate, it occurred to me that perhaps I could get

a new name to add to my list. Is the gentleman of the western branch of whom you are speaking?"

"O, no, sir," replied Mr. Hendricks, "the man we were speaking of doesn't belong to the United States at all. He was (and is, if alive) a Canadian, who lived for a while in St. Louis. Are you a Legate, sir, or only a relative of the family? allow me to ask."

"No, sir; simply a general genealogist. You know all men have their weaknesses; genealogical studies are among mine."

"I asked," he said, "because, if your name was Legate, you might have been offended, if I had told you that the Legate we were talking of wouldn't add any grace to your family list."

"Ah, ha! then I infer that he might have been at least a man of bad habits—perhaps a dishonest one."

"Well, the public opinion in St. Louis is, that this man Legate wasn't very honest, however good his general habits may have been."

"I am sorry," said I, "that any member of the Legate family should bring disgrace upon the name, but we can't always help these things—a pretty good family generally throughout the country, I find. Permit me to ask, what was this Legate's first name? perhaps I have heard of him before."

"Charles," said Mr. Hendricks, "or, familiarly among his old acquaintances 'Charley Black Eyes Legate,' to distinguish him from a blue-eyed gentleman of the same name. His French friends, too – there are a great many French speaking people in St. Louis,—call him 'Charley *Noir*' (Black—short for black eyes)."

Having learned so much, I was not anxious to press my inquiries at that time, beyond simply asking if he was still residing in St. Louis, and was assured that he had departed—nobody knew to what point—nine months before. I managed before we arrived at St. Louis, to make the further acquaintance of these gentlemen, without letting them at all into my business; indeed so cordial had they become as to insist on calling on me the next day after my arrival at the Planter's Hotel, and giving me a long ride about the city.

During the ride I referred to Legate, and learned from them that he was a swindler and a gambler; that for a while he moved in the best society of St. Louis, and was thought a "pink of a man," possessing good manners, and being an unusually good colloquist and story teller. He was considerable of a "romancer among the ladies," said Hendricks.

"Better say necromancer; that would be nearer the truth," suggested Mr. Phelps.

"O," said I, "a man given in short to wine, women, and cards, you mean?"

"Yes, exactly; but a man might be all that, and not be a Legate," responded Hendricks. "The fact is, sir, this Legate is an unscrupulous villain—a man that would hesitate at nothing. If I am

rightly informed, he made a murderous assault in New Orleans once upon an old friend who happened to cross him in some way. It was in that encounter, Phelps, that he lost his finger, I've heard."

I could no longer have any doubt that I was on the right track, and I felt that there could be no danger in confiding my special business in St. Louis to these men, who might be able to give me great assistance, possible. So I told them I was hunting this same Charles Legate for the frauds he had perpetrated in the New York house, and that I wished to find him within a given time in order to secure a certain amount of property in Canada, which, after a certain period, would be so disposed as to be of no avail to my employers, and that I was willing to give any reasonable amount for information which might enable me to reach him.

My friends told me that they thought my case an almost hopeless one, that Legate's sagacity could outwit the very d—l, and that he was the most uncertain man to "track" in the world; but they would do all in their power to find out who were his principal associates during the last of his stay in St. Louis, the time, as might be determined when he left, and what course he took. They had heard that he had gone to Mexico; but that was probably only a "blinder."

I staid in St. Louis five days prosecuting my inquiries; but all I could learn of any importance was that the last which was known of Legate in St. Louis, he was constantly with a certain pack of gamblers, of rather a desperate order, and that, with his quick temper, it was possible had got into a fight (as some had suspected) and had been made way with—possibly thrown into the Mississippi. This was not decidedly encouraging, and I was on the point of writing back to my employers that it was useless to search for Legate longer at that time; and that they would have to trust some future accident to reveal him, if still alive, indeed. But having another affair on hand at the same time, which necessarily called me to New Orleans before returning to New York, I thought better of the matter, and merely wrote to my New York friends, that having gotten all possible clue to Legate in St. Louis, I should take the boat next day for New Orleans, from which point they would hear from me duly.

The next afternoon I took the steamer "Continental" after having made all arrangements with my new friends in St. Louis, to apprise me if ever Legate "turned up" in that city; and down the Mighty Mississippi the proud boat bore me and a large number of the most cheerful, genial, and hearty men and women I ever traveled with. There's a certain frankness and generosity about the western and southern people which captivated me, when I first went among them, at once; but though I had often been in the West, I had never encountered a finer class of travelers than departed that day with me from St. Louis, on board the well-tried steamer Continental.

Among the on comers at Napoleon were three men of marked individualities. They came on board separately. One of them was quite large and comely, neatly dressed in the style that prevailed in the North; nothing about him but certain provincialism of speech to indicate that he might not be a northern man. The other two wore long hair and beards, and slouched hats, and had the air of well-to-do planters of middle age. One of them was accompanied by a negro, the most obsequious of his race, and who, whenever ordered to do anything, always took care to indicate his readiness to obey by saying, very obsequiously, "Yes, Marssa Colonel," or "Yes, Massa Jacobs;" by which fact I of course learned what the negro supposed to be his master's

name; but there was something about the man's appearance which excited my suspicion, at first, that he might not be a planter, after all.

It was near nightfall when we departed from Napoleon, and it was not long after the cabin was lighted up that the usual card playing was resumed; and these three men crowded, with others, round the tables, to look on at first, and of course to take part when occasion might offer. Jacobs was particularly observant of the games as they proceeded. Although I saw that he had peculiar talents for the gaming table, I wondered why he waited so long before taking a hand. But he was biding his time. The bar, of course, was pretty well patronized, and the finest looking of the three men in question grew apparently more and more mellow. The stakes at this time were not large, but the players were waxing more and more earnest, when this man—assuming to be slightly intoxicated—exclaimed “Gentlemen, I say, I say—do you hear?—that this fun is rather slow. Is there anybody here that wants to ply [sic] for something worthwhile? See here,” said he “strangers, please let me draw up my seat,” pushing his chair up between those of two players; “see here, there's a cool two thousand that I want to double or lose to-night,” and poured from a red bag a heap of gold, over a portion of which he clapped his hand. “I'm in for it. Is there anybody who wants to make this money?”

“Well, stranger,” said Jacobs, “when these players can give us room, I'm your man, that is till my pile is gone. 'Taint as big as yours, and it ought to go for a nigger down to Orleans. I must have another hand; but your challenge is rather provoking, I confess, and I don't care if I try you.”

The players, moved by that curiosity which such proceedings between “strangers” would be apt to excite, politely made room for the combatants, and in their turn became lookers on. The large man played well, but he was (apparently) intoxicated, and now and then “bungled,” giving the game into Jacobs' hands at times. My curiosity about Jacobs was, I know not really why, constantly increasing, and when the third of the trio had entered the lists with a partner, I managed to slip out down to the lower deck, where Jacobs had ordered his servant, and fell into conversation with him.

“Are you Mr. Jacobs' nigger?”

“Yes, Massa; I'sa Massa Jacobs' body servant.”

“Your master's a jolly fellow—isn't he? He's a planter, I suppose—has a great number of 'hands'—hasn't he?”

“No, Massa Jacobs don't plant. He's a banker, or a speculator, as they call 'em up there.”

“Up where?”

“Little Rock—we lives about five miles wess of Little Rock.”

“O, then he don't plant. What do those speculators do? I never heard of them before.”

“O, massa, you’s quar – ain’t you? You never knows about speculators. That’s quare.”

“But tell me what they do;” and the darkey, turning up the whites of his eyes in the most inimitable manner, and cocking his head to one side, while he put his big hands in the attitude of one about to shuffle cards, went through the motion of dealing cards with a celerity that indicated that he, too, might be a “speculator,” as he doubtless was, among the darkies, having taken lessons in his master’s office.

When he finished this exhibition, he whirled about on his heel in true negro style, and with great glee shuffled a half-dozen steps, and ended with an air of triumph, which indicated to me that he thought his master a great man. The slaves used, despite all they suffer from a cruel master, to take great pride in him if he excelled in anything, or was a noted man.

“Your master’s a great speculator, then? I reckon I had not better try him, eh?”

“Tell troof, massa, I reckon dare’s nobody on dis heah boat that can beat massa;” and he looked serious, and spoke low, as if kindly warning me.

I had learned enough, and proceeded to the cabin, and watched the play. For a while Jacobs played with the “stranger,” sometimes losing a little sometimes gaining more, and at last gave up the play, having won quite a sum.

Noting Jacobs’ success, and the “stranger,” too, having ordered sundry glasses of liquor during the play, and having become apparently more heedless, others anxiously sought his place. Party of four was made up, and the large “stranger” and the third one formed as partners. Jacobs posted himself where he could signal to the large “stranger,” who, with his partner, went on winning great success. Frequently charges of cheating were indulged in by the losers, and Jacobs was called upon to decide the points at issue, which he always did favorably to the large “stranger.” But as the losses grew heavier, the suffering parties became incensed, and charged Jacobs as co-operator with the large “stranger” and his partner; finally some one on board declared that he knew Jacobs and the large “stranger” to be chums; that they traveled together up and down the river, swindling everybody they could “rope in” to play. This, being whispered about at first, became finally talked aloud; and then commenced fearful criminations and recriminations among parties. Pistols and knives were freely brandished, and a great melee seemed on the point, and it did break at last, fearfully. All the while my eyes were upon Jacobs. I could not for some reason avert it. Somehow he seemed to me to wonderfully resemble the description I had of Legate; but there was difficulty in the way of my suspicion. Jacobs wore upon the little finger of his left hand a large seal-ring, and there was unmistakably a full formed finger, which articulated at the joints properly, and I must be mistaken. During the early part of the disturbance, which the officers of the boat tried to quell, the big “stranger” had been the chief center of abuse and attack; but suddenly some one exclaimed. “That black muzzled wretch is worse than the bog one,” and the whole party of sufferers turned instantly upon him. Jacobs was a brave fellow, and with a cocked revolver in his hand breasted the whole, and swore he would kill the first man who laid hands upon him, standing then on one side of the cabin with his back to the door of a state-room. Suddenly a passenger who had retired for the night, opened the door behind him, and Jacobs, being stiffly braced against it, lurched for an instant, when an agile, wiry fellow of the angry

crowd suddenly jumped forward and grasped his revolver, turning the muzzle up-ward, when off went the pistol—the first shot, which was signal for a desperate conflict, in which Jacobs struggled hard for the possession of his revolver, but was overpowered and most severely beaten, so much so that he had to be carried to his berth; and I followed the crowd that bore him there. He was speechless and nearly dead, I thought, and they laid him in his bunk. I noticed that the ring had gone from his finger, and with it, lo! the end of the finger also, leaving only the first joint and part of the second. I examined the stump and saw that it was old. No further doubt rested on my mind that Jacobs and Legate were one and the same, and I immediately called the attention of the passengers to the loss of the ring and finger, and caused search for the same, which we found evidently unharmed, having somehow fallen into the state-room, the opening of the door of which first threw Jacobs off from his balance. I took charge of the finger, which was made of hardened wax, as my trophy, and some one, I know not who, took the ring.

The big “stranger,” who was badly bruised, too, was not so much wounded that he could not be about next day, but kept aloof from poor Jacobs, probably because he had protested utter unacquaintance with him, and the next night, with the third “stranger,” got off the boat, it was supposed at the point where the boat stopped to wood, for the next day they were nowhere to be found on board; but poor Jacobs was so severely handled that his life was despaired of by the doctor, and we took him along to New Orleans. Meanwhile I made my suspicions and business known to the captain of the boat, and we took means for Jacobs’ detection on board after the rest of the passengers should leave. But, poor fellow! there was hardly need in his case for so much caution or provision, for when we arrived in the city he could not have left the boat had he tried, so weak and sick was he. I left him on board, and hastened to the office of a friend of mine, once a detective in New York, and told him the story, asking his counsel how best to proceed.

“Why,” said he, “this is a strange affair; but I think I can put you in a way at once of identifying this Jacobs as the very Legate whom you are after. Indeed, rest assured that he *is* your man, without doubt.” Going to his drawer, he produced and showed me an advertisement of a year before, offering a reward of two thousand dollars for the arrest of one “Charles Legate, alias Charles L. Montford,” giving a description of his person, but pointing to the fact that he was wanting a portion of his little finger on his left hand. “You see,” said my friend, “we have an interest in the fellow as well as you. If he is our man, we are all ‘hunky-dory,’” said he, “for he is rich, as we have found out—know where his money is.”

“Rich?” asked I. “Why, then, does he continue to lead the life he does?”

“Why? Why, indeed such a question from an old detective like you astonishes me; it wouldn’t though, if a woman or a fool asked it,” said he, giving me a curious wink. “Don’t you know yet that the Mississippi is infested with gamblers rich as Jews, and who can’t give up their pious trade to save their lives? Come along.” And he took me down St. Louis street a ways, and stepped into a side street, and standing before a door a moment said:

“Give me the finger, and follow me.” We mounted a couple of flights of dirty stairs, and my friend opened a door into a sort of anatomical museum of old gypsum and wax casts, and all sorts of small sculptural devices.

“Mr. Camcemi at home?” asked my friend of a weird-looking lad whose hands were besmeared with the plaster he was working. “Si, Signore,” (yes, sir,) “but my fader is much sick, questo giorno.” (to-day).

“But I must see him a moment.”

The boy hurried off, and presently the father came down with him almost too feeble to walk.

“Camcemio,” said my friend, “you are sick; but I have brought you some medicine that will cheer you up at once.”

“Ah, Dio,” exclaimed the old Italian, “I vish it might be so. What have you brought?”

“See here,” said my friend, “did you ever see this before?” producing the finger. The old Italian seemed a new man as his eyes dilated at the sight of the wonder, and he went into raptures over the matter, the reason for which I could not understand, and in his broken English muttered a thousand exclamations of surprise and joy. Of course he identified the finger as the one he had made for the “villain-scoundrel Legate.” Legate, I found, never paid the old Italian for his skillful handiwork, and he had been promised a portion of the reward, if my friend should succeed in earning it—hence his joy.

We left the old Italian soon, and proceeded to the boat, where we confronted Jacobs and made him acknowledge his identity with Legate. My business was made known to him. I telegraphed to my parties in New York, one of whom came on immediately, reached New Orleans within ten days from that time; and before two weeks had passed from the time of this arrival, we had settled things with the now penitent, because caged Legate; and the New Orleans parties who had offered the reward were now called in by my detective friend, and settled their affairs with him by accepting a mortgage he held for \$25,000 on a sugar plantation in the Opeloussa country, paying the reward to my friend, and losing nothing in the result.

Only for the advertisement in the New Orleans paper, probably Legate would never have thought to procure a false finger; but for which I would never have been able to satisfy myself that Jacobs, in his bruised and battered state, was the identical Legate, and might have left him without further investigation on the boat.

The old Italian recovered his health speedily in his joy over Legate’s capture, and was not forgotten by my friend, who, by the way, but for this old artist, would of course have never known of Legate’s attempt to disguise the only mark about him, and would not, therefore, have been so sure of his identity when I told him my story. “Straws show which way the wind blows,” and “fingers,” though they may be inanimate and waxen, may “point,” you see, unmistakably to a villain.

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