

Leaf The Twentieth
An Adventure At An Inn
by John Williams

(A Leaf from a Physician's Note-Book)

I SHALL never forget to the last day of my life, my emotions of joy when I was called up, on the evening of the Commencement of the University, Medical College, in the city of New York, to receive my diploma authorizing me to practice as a physician. The idea of my being able hereafter to write John Merrifield with M. D. after my name was a sufficient reward for all my hard study; and I remember the next day I did nothing else but write it on a piece of paper to see how it would look. This vanity is perhaps pardonable, when it is remembered that for three years I had been looking forward to that happy day; that it was the end of all my ambition; that for this privilege I had burned the midnight oil, and that I looked upon it as a stepping-stone to a respectable position in the world, if not to fortune and renown. I little knew the trials and difficulties a young physician has to undergo to gain even a moderate competence; but I suppose I expected that I should jump into practice at once, and rich patients, large fees and successful cures formed the staple of my thoughts.

I determined that I would settle in the city, as affording me a larger scope where to exercise the abilities I thought I possessed. The very next day I hired a suitable office in Bleeker Street, fixed my "shingle," in all the glory of gold letters on a black ground, to the side of the house, furnished my apartment in a very moderate style, and then sat down in my office to wait for patients.

And I had to wait days, weeks, nay, even months elapsed, and no patients came. My small means were slowly dwindling away, and I saw no prospect of time eliciting any improvement in my circumstances. I began to despair, and resolved several times that I would give up my profession and seek some other employment, which would at least afford me a means of support. At last I came to a fixed resolution on the subject, and determined that if another week did not bring me a patient, I would at once take down my sign, scratch out M. D. from my name, and endeavor to procure a situation as clerk in a drug-store, for which position my previous education qualified me

Six days passed, and not a soul came; the seventh (it was Sunday, how well I remember it!) dawned. It was a bitter cold day in March, and the streets were covered to some depth with snow. I advanced to my office-window and gazed listlessly into the street. It looked so hopelessly cheerless outside that it struck a chill into my heart, and I sat down in my "Boston rocker" utterly dispirited. I attempted to read, but the words swam before my eyes and I threw down the book. I could only gaze into the fire, and endeavor to read my future in the glowing coals.

I might have been thus occupied an hour or more, when I was aroused by a violent ring at my office-bell. At first I thought it was only my imagination, and rubbed my eyes to see if I had not been dozing. A second ring, even more violent than the first, caused me, however, to start to my feet. I ran to the door and opened it, and found standing there a young girl about seventeen or eighteen years of age. The passage was rather dark, so I could not see her features well.

"Does Doctor Merrifield live here?" she asked, in a sweet musical voice.

"I am Doctor Merrifield," I replied.

"Would you be kind enough to come and see my father? He is very sick, and wishes you to come immediately."

At last, my first patient had come?

"Where does your father live?" I tremblingly asked.

"He lives in Third Avenue, near Sixteenth Street. I will accompany you, if you have no objection. You might not find the house, as there is no number on the door. I have a hack at the door."

To put on my hat and overcoat was the occupation of but a moment, and in another minute I found myself seated by the side of the young girl in the hack. It was only then that I had an opportunity of seeing her features, and I was immediately struck with her extreme beauty. As I have before said, she was about eighteen years of age. She was above the medium height, and her features were faultlessly regular. Her hair was bright auburn, her eyes dark blue, and her long eyelashes gave that dreamy expression to her face so charming in woman. She evidently possessed a fine mind, for her forehead was lofty, and her actions and motions showed that she had been endowed with a refined education.

We spoke but little while in the carriage. She answered my interrogations as to her father's symptoms, with an eagerness which showed that her whole thoughts was centered in him, and perceiving her pre-occupation, I did not attempt to discuss any other subject.

At last we stopped before the door of her father's house, and I descended from the vehicle and having assisted the young lady to alight, I glanced at the building in which my first patient resided. It was a substantial-looking edifice, standing a little back from the street, and everything around it betokened easy circumstances, if not wealth. The young lady led the way, and in answer to her summons at the front door, it was speedily opened, and we entered a spacious hall. Requesting me to remain in the parlor for a moment or two, my fair companion tripped nimbly up stairs.

While she was gone I had an opportunity of examining the apartment. It was elegantly furnished, and gave the same evidence of more than a moderate income which the exterior did. The walls were decorated with handsome oil paintings, and from the large number of sea subjects, I judged that my patient had been a sailor. While I was examining the pictures, the young lady reentered the room and informed me that her father, Captain Linton, was ready to receive me. Escorted by Miss Linton, I ascended the stairs and was shown into the captain's bedroom. The bed on which my patient reclined was at the further end of the chamber. The moment I entered, he stretched out his hand, and I took my place by his side.

He was an elderly man, and at first glance did not appear to be very sick. His face was full, and excepting an anxious expression to be traced on it, bore evidence of good health. The moment, however, I placed my fingers on his pulse, I discovered the secret of his malady, for it was intermittent. I knew even before examination, that he was suffering from organic disease of the heart. He answered all my questions calmly and to the point. After an interview of about half an hour, I prescribed a sedative and returned to my office.

The next day I visited him again, and found that he was something better. I conversed with him longer than I had on the first day, and found him to be a highly intelligent man, full of anecdote and valuable information. It was as I had previously supposed; he had followed the sea as a profession, and had been the captain of a privateer during the war of 1812. He had taken many valuable prizes, and from his successful career had amassed quite a fortune.

I need not dwell on this part of my history: suffice it to say that I attended Captain Linton for three weeks. During this time I had frequent opportunities of seeing his daughter, and my acquaintance with her only served to increase the favorable opinion I had entertained on our first interview. She was a charming girl, full of grace, gentleness, and what the French call *esprit*. It was, therefore, with no small degree of pleasure that I heard Captain Linton, when he was able to dispense with my professional services, request me to drop in now and then and pay them a friendly visit. Helen Linton had frequently when I was alone with her, asked me my opinion of her father's condition. Without wishing to alarm her seriously, I thought it my duty to intimate in pretty plain language that his heart was organically diseased, and that he might be taken away at any moment. She heard my opinion with tears in her eyes, and begged that I would do everything in my power to persuade him to follow a strict regimen. This I promised to do, and really think my advice had some weight with the hardy old seaman, for I noticed on subsequent visits that he indulged much less in stimulants than he used to do.

I do not know how the feeling crept on me, or what fostered its birth, but I seemed as it were to find myself suddenly in love with Helen Linton. I suppose it was the thorough awakening of my mind to all her noble qualities, that caused me to draw the conclusion that she would make me an excellent wife. Be that as it may, I found myself visiting there every night, and really looked upon myself as one of the family.

Helen always received me with *empressement*, and yet I could not tell whether she simply viewed me in the light of a dear friend, or entertained any tender feelings in her heart.

One day, however, I determined to know my fate, and taking advantage of her father's absence, I poured into her ear a flood of impassioned eloquence which proceeded from my heart. I had the supreme happiness of imprinting on her lips the seal of an accepted lover. That same evening I asked her hand of the captain, when he returned home. The only reply was to place her hand in mine and repeat a prayer for our happiness. I shall not attempt to paint our joy. It was decided that in a month from that time we should be married. Since my first attendance on Captain Linton, patients began to drop in, and I was getting together quite a good practice.

Three weeks passed on, and the preparations for our wedding were all completed, when I suddenly received a message from Helen, begging me to come immediately, as her father was very sick. I obeyed the summons, but before I got to the house he was dead! Instead of a wedding we had a funeral. Helen was terribly affected by her father's death. Of course our wedding was postponed, and it was decided that she should go and spend a few months with an uncle who lived at a small village called Industry, on the banks of the Ohio. Our parting was an affecting one, but we were cheered by the hope of soon meeting again; for it was agreed between us that after she had been visiting there a month, I should go and see her.

She had been gone about a week, when, to my great surprise and consternation, I received a letter from her uncle, Mr. Henry Linton, stating that she had not arrived at his house, and begging some explanation of the delay, at the same time expressing a hope that it was not occasioned by sickness. I did not think it necessary to answer this letter, for I determined at once to go on. I made hasty arrangement with a fellow practitioner to attend to my patients during my absence, and that same evening I procured a through ticket to Wheeling, and in a few hours had left New York far behind.

When I reached Wheeling, I made the necessary inquiries at the various hotels, and succeeded in tracing Helen there. I also discovered that she had taken passage in a boat to Wellsville. To this last place I hastened with all the celerity I was capable of exercising. Here, however, I lost all trace of her, and nothing was left for me but to go on to Industry, for I thought that perhaps she might have arrived at her relative's house since the letter had been dispatched to New York.

When I reached Mr. Linton's house, I found to my consternation that she had not been heard of. Her uncle was extremely surprised to learn that she had left New York, for he had supposed something had detained her. He immediately dispatched messengers in every direction to search for her. I would have accompanied them, but I was physically unable to do so, for I was so thoroughly exhausted that I could scarcely stand. Mr. Linton insisted on my resting for the night. Much against my inclination I was compelled to comply with his request.

I woke early the next morning, very much refreshed, and hurrying on my clothes descended into the garden, where, through the window, I saw my host walking up and down one of the paths in an agitated manner.

"Good morning, doctor," he said as soon as he saw me. "I suppose you are off again."

"Yes. I will search the earth through but I will find her."

"God grant you may be successful!"

"You speak doubtingly—you cannot think anything serious has befallen Helen."

"I hope not—I trust not, but we live in strange times."

There was something so peculiar in the tone in which he spoke, that I gazed earnestly at the speaker.

"You are alarmed and agitated," I exclaimed. "Tell me what it is you fear."

"Doctor, I ought to tell you, and yet I am afraid of exciting your fears needlessly, but on reflection it is perhaps better that you should know all."

"You do indeed alarm me. You have heard some bad news. Speak, I conjure you."

"No, I have heard no bad news, I have heard nothing at all of Helen. But, doctor, there is something very mysterious transpiring in our neighborhood. No less than four or five of our best citizens and several strangers have suddenly disappeared from our midst, and nothing more has been heard of them, and all this within six months."

"But have they been sought for, and is it certain they did not leave of their own free will?"

"If only one or two had disappeared, it would be a very just suspicion, but it is impossible that five respectable farmers and merchants would desert their wives and children, as these men have done. You ask me if search has been made for them. The most minute and careful search has been instituted; in fact, the whole country has been scoured for miles, but not the slightest trace of the missing individuals could be found."

"How strange! What is supposed to have become of them?"

"Heaven only knows! There are a hundred rumors afloat, but nothing reliable in any of them. The thought struck me this morning that perhaps Helen may have disappeared in this manner."

"That is scarcely possible," I returned—at the same time I felt a chill strike my heart. "Surely no one would harm a young girl. Your suspicions will, however, stimulate me to fresh exertions. Is there any particular locality where these people who have disappeared were last seen or heard of?"

"As I before told you, these parties who disappeared were farmers, and most of them were returning from Rochester, a town eight miles from here, where they had been to dispose of their produce. They were traced to Rochester, where they did their business, and were then traced out of that town; then all their further clue was lost."

"It is certain then that the ambushade, or whatever may be the cause of their disappearance, lies between Rochester and Industry!"

"So it would seem, but every foot of ground has been thoroughly explored without any success at all."

A domestic now came to inform us that breakfast was ready. After a hurried meal, I jumped on the back of the horse which I borrowed from Mr. Linton, and determined that I would explore for myself the road between Industry and Rochester.

It was a beautiful spring morning, and in spite of my anxiety, I could not help noticing the charming country through which I passed. On one side of me was the silvery Ohio, flashing and sparkling in the beams of the morning sun, as if it were greeting its bride. The trees were musical with birds, and covered with the bright green verdure which they assume in the spring of the year. While I was pursuing my journey, I could not help thinking on all I had heard, and the more I reflected on it, the more extraordinary it appeared; at the same time it did not seem to me to be at all probable that Helen had shared the same fate, whatever it might be.

It was while indulging in these thoughts that I reached Rochester. I visited every portion of the town, but could not learn that anyone answering to Helen's description had been seen there. It was night by the time I had concluded my search, and I must own my mind was considerably relieved that I had heard nothing of Helen—for the conversation I had with some of the inhabitants of the town, only served to confirm all that Mr. Linton had told me.

It was quite dark when I left Rochester for Industry, but as I had only eight miles to travel I set off at a gallop, expecting to reach the latter place in less than an hour. I had, however, not proceeded more than two or three miles, when my horse fell suddenly lame, and I found that he could proceed no further. I dismounted, and leading him by the bridle, walked for a half a mile, when I came to a large inn or tavern, which I had noticed in the morning when I passed along the road.

It was now about ten o'clock, and I determined I would leave my horse there for the night and try and procure another animal from the landlord, which would convey me to my destination. I advanced to the door of the inn, and knocked loudly. Although I could see a light burning in the interior, no reply was made to my summons. I knocked again more loudly than the first, and after a minute or two the bolts were withdrawn, and a man appeared. I made known my request to him; he informed me that he could not let me have another horse but that I could sleep there until the morning, when a stage would pass the house.

I debated a minute or two in my own mind as to what was best to be done. It was late, and I knew that Mr. Linton would scarcely expect me at that hour, and the idea of walking five or six miles on a road concerning which such terrible stories were rife, was by no means an agreeable one. Not that I felt afraid, for I had taken the precaution to arm myself with a revolver. I finally made up my mind to accept the landlord's offer, and consigning my horse to his care, I entered the house and made my way to the parlor, where I found a woman seated by the fire, whom I afterwards learned was the landlord's wife. I sat down after making a few general remarks, and was soon rejoined by the landlord.

He was a strong, healthy-looking man, with a remarkable mild face and pleasant smile, the very impersonation of a jolly host. His wife was also a very fine-looking woman, with an excellent expression of countenance. I felt perfectly at home in a minute, and we conversed on a hundred different topics.

"By-the-by," said I, after a pause in our conversation, "the road between here and Industry bears a bad reputation, if I am to believe all the reports concerning it."

"You may well say reports, sir," said the host of the White Swan. "The fact is, I don't believe there is a word of truth in the matter. I have lived on this road now going on twenty-two years, and I never saw anything wrong here. It's my belief that the first man who disappeared went out West, and anybody that wants to leave takes advantage of the excitement, and by this means conceals his flight."

"That supposition is very reasonable," I returned; "but I am informed the men who have disappeared were all of the highest respectability."

"That may be, sir, but there's no fathoming the human heart—a man may lead a seemingly virtuous life, and yet in his heart may be everything that is bad. What makes me think that any supposition in this matter is a correct one, is the fact that a man was here the other day and stated to me that he had seen one of the missing men in Wisconsin."

"If that is the case, it certainly goes far to explain the mystery. It is a pity the fact is not made public and positive proof adduced; it would tend to disabuse the public mind."

"If the truth could be made manifest, it would do me a great deal of good, for I assure you, sir, since these reports have been circulated, my business has suffered terribly. Formerly my house used to be always full, now scarcely anybody visits it. If it were not for what I make at my business as a carpenter, we should starve."

We prolonged the conversation for some time longer, when I expressed a wish to retire to bed. I noticed for the first time a peculiar glance pass between the man and woman, which afterwards returned with terrible significance to my mind, but at the time I paid little heed to it.

"The white room," suggested the landlord's wife.

"No, the red room," returned the landlord, knitting his brows—which action had the effect of silencing her, for she offered no further objection.

The landlord handed me a lamp and ushered me into my chamber. It was a large, old-fashioned apartment, with a high ceiling and polished floor, strange to say, it was without a shred of carpet or matting to cover it. The bed was a heavy four-poster, with thick red curtains drawn close all round it. The furniture in the room was old but strong and substantial, and the walls were covered with several large sporting prints. The landlord bade me good night and left me to my own reflections.

When he had gone, I went to the window and looked out on the night. A glorious sight met my gaze. The moon was at its full, and rode through the heavens in all the majesty of its solitary splendor. Through the trees I could see the waters of the Ohio flashing in the moonlight. I put out the light that I might better enjoy the scene, and fastening the curtains back seated myself close to the casement, and supporting my head with my hand, delivered myself up to my own reflections.

In what I have written, I have dwelt but little on the condition of my own feelings since Helen had been lost, but the reader must not imagine on that account that I did not feel this trial poignantly. It was now, especially as I gazed on the beautiful scene before me, that the recollection of her glorious character, of her noble heart, of her devotion, all came back in a flood to my heart, and unmanly though it may seem, the tears coursed each other down my cheeks. Although her disappearance was most mysterious, I could not bring myself to believe that any accident had befallen her. I thought that perhaps, instead of getting off the boat at Wellsville, she might, through accident, have gone on to Pittsburgh, and be detained there from some unavoidable cause.

It was while plunged in the midst of these reflections, that I distinctly heard a stealthy step on the stairs, and almost directly afterwards the door opened gently, and the landlord's wife put her head in.

"Did you want anything?" I asked, rising up in a standing posture.

"We thought you called," said the woman, withdrawing her head.

"No," I returned, "you are mistaken, I did not call. I want nothing."

"I beg your pardon, sir. Good night."

"Good night."

And the woman closed the door, and left me alone again. It was now that suspicion began to creep into my mind. There was something very strange in this woman's visit to my apartment. I could not believe that they thought I had called. The night was too still and calm to admit the possibility of such a mistake. Then recurred to my mind the look which had passed between them when I expressed a wish to be shown to my chamber. Still, my suspicions took no tangible shape, but only determined me to keep all my senses about me. The thought certainly did strike me once or twice that perhaps this innkeeper might have something to do with the mysterious disappearances, but when I remembered his honest face, I repelled the idea as being most chimerical. After a little time, I dismissed the subject from my thoughts, and resumed my occupation of gazing on the silver river.

One sense I possess in a very acute degree, namely, the faculty of hearing. Ever since I was a boy I have been able to distinguish sounds, while to the majority of persons a complete silence reigns. I suddenly became conscious that some one was listening at my chamber door. It may be that I was more on the alert than usual. My plan was immediately formed. It was evident that for some purpose or other, the worthy host and his wife wished me in bed, so without making any preparation whatever, I threw myself, dressed as I was, on the bed. I was immediately conscious that the person left the door, retreating down stairs.

It was now my turn to exercise a little diplomacy, for I was by this time assured that there was something very unusual in all this. I rose quietly from the bed and concealed myself in the folds of the window-curtains, determined to watch and wait. I remained in this position for at least half

an hour, without a single sound reaching my ear, and was about to go to bed in good earnest, when I heard the clanking of iron in the room immediately underneath the one I occupied. It was very faint and resembled, as near as I could tell, the hooking of one iron chain to another. I now felt certain that something extraordinary was about to occur. Another long pause, however, followed. It might have been perhaps half an hour, when happening to turn my eyes in the direction of the bed (on which the moon was shining), I saw the top of it oscillate, and then, to my intense surprise, it began to sink slowly through the floor, a large trapdoor having opened for that purpose.

More determined than ever to penetrate this mystery—for I was now satisfied that the mysterious disappearances were in a fair way of being explained—I stole gently forward, and before the bed had wholly disappeared, I had clung firmly to one of the bed-posts, the bed-curtains concealing me from a casual observer.

The bedstead continued to descend so gently and slowly that its motion was scarcely perceptible, and I am certain had I been asleep, I should not have felt it. I was not aware at the time how far it went, but it seemed to me to be a considerable depth. At last the motion ceased, and I watched with some anxiety to see what was next to be done. I had not to wait long, for suddenly a heavy iron plate, which appeared to come out of the top of the bed, fell with tremendous force on the bed itself. It is certain if I had been lying there, I should have been instantly killed. As it was, I was shaken from my hold and fell on damp earth. I was not hurt, however, and was immediately aware that I must be in a species of cellar, or cave, from the softness of the ground. I rose on my feet, and endeavored to penetrate the darkness which surrounded me, but I was unable to see a single ray of light.

I groped my way along an uneven wall, until at last I came to a round projection. Passing round this by the aid of my hands, I saw the glimmering of a light which proceeded from an opening in this subterranean chamber, for such it proved to be. I cautiously advanced to this opening and glanced through it, and who should I see there but the landlord and his wife! They were conversing together, and their voices distinctly reached my ear.

"You will not, hey? Take that for your trouble then."

And I heard the villain give her a blow which evidently felled her to the ground, for she was silent after it.

I now saw the innkeeper, with a bowie knife between his teeth, stealthily leave the cell, and with a candle in his hand, direct his steps towards the further end of the cavern, where I saw, by the rays of the candle, a circular projection similar to the one he had just left. His fearful purpose was only too apparent. I followed, close to his heels, the soft ground preventing my footsteps being heard.

Another thrilling and heart-rending shriek reached my ears. My only wonder now is, that I did not seize the assassin there and then. But I suppose I was afraid I should never be able to find Helen in that accursed place, unless guided to her place of confinement; at all events, I thought it

better to allow him to proceed. He unlocked a grated door and entered a dismal-looking cell. I glided in after him, and saw my beloved girl bound hand and foot to an iron bedstead.

"Young girl," said the villain, as he entered, "I will give you two minutes to say your prayers in—you must die!"

"O, spare me—spare me!" shrieked Helen. "O, John, John, why are you not here to protect me?"

"*I am here!*" I exclaimed, seizing the villain by the throat, and almost choking the life out of him.

The moment he saw me, he was completely paralyzed, for I suppose he thought I was some one risen from the dead. I bound him hand and foot, and then proceeded to release Helen. I shall not attempt to describe our meeting, for any words I might use would but feebly portray the delights of us both. The use of her appearance there was explained in a few words.

By some mistake, she was landed at Rochester instead of Wellsville, and on inquiring on the wharf the way to Industry, he told her that he was going there and would take her to the stage. This man was no other than the landlord of the inn, and had conveyed her and all her luggage to his dwelling and confined her, as the readers have seen, in the cell underground. His sole motive appeared to have been plunder. He would doubtless, however, have murdered her at once, had it not been for his wife, who had not yet lost every particle of humanity from her heart.

I locked the villain up in the cell where Helen had been so lately confined, and then went to where his wife was lying, still insensible. I found in this apartment a winding staircase, which led to rooms up stairs. I carried the landlord's wife up these stairs and confined her in a bedroom, and then, accompanied by Helen, as soon as it was light, we returned to Rochester.

In a few hours both the man and his wife were in custody, and they were tried a few months afterwards. They attempted no defense, for the remains of all the missing men were found, and the proof was overwhelming. The man was hung and the woman sent to State Prison for life.

The inn, until it was burnt down a year or two ago, was a place of great curiosity, and the proprietor of it reaped a handsome fortune from showing its mysteries. It appeared that the criminal, who, as the reader knows, was a carpenter by business, possessed great mechanical skill, and began the alterations in his house more for his own amusement than for any evil design, but when he had finished them, the thought struck him that he might make them subserve his own private purpose. One thing led to another, and the first crime committed, all remorse was stifled and he plunged boldly and deeply into every description of iniquity. The mechanical contrivances were perfect, and defied ordinary penetration to discover them. There was no other outlet to the cave, excepting through the lower floor of the dwelling, and the trap-door was so ingeniously concealed, that when the secret was known, but few could distinguish the spot where it opened.

I will not attempt to paint Mr. Linton's joy when I confided his niece to his care. His advice to us was to be married immediately. We were of the same opinion, and before I returned to New York, I called Helen by the endearing name of wife.

Leaves from the Note Book of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J. B. Ed. John Williams. Hartford: J. B. Burr, 1865.