

## *Charming Madame Auvergne*

by Frank H. Angier

GOODWOOD Street, in the village of St. Leger, is a transverse street connecting two parallel avenues. The village itself is a suburban one, about an hour's ride by railway from the metropolis, and a favorite residence for merchants, clerks, and other business men of small means, whose occupation requires their daily attention in the city. The houses on Goodwood Street are all alike, and stand back some distance from the street, the space in front being pleasantly arranged in miniature gardens, divided from each other, and from the street, by neat fences, and in summer gay with flowers. The houses are all brick, three stories in height, with piazzas, also of three stories, covering their entire front. These piazzas are also divided, on each story, by close board partitions, and are provided, on the upper floors, with railings, breast high, of green lattice, as a precaution against accident. Access to the gardens is had from the street by lattice gates, from which gravel walks conduct to the front doors of the dwellings.

On the thirteenth day of December, 1863, painters were at work upon the piazzas of the third house from the corner of the southerly avenue, on the west side of the street. This house had been for some time unoccupied, but had recently received a tenant, in the person of a gentleman of about forty years of age, who with his family, consisting of a young wife, an infant son and a servant, had taken possession of the dwelling in November. The number of the house was 5. The name on the door was John Davis. So short a time had this family resided in Goodwood Street, that the usual neighborly intercourse had not yet been established with it, and little was known in St. Leger of John Davis, except that he went to the city very early in the morning, and returned to his house considerably after dark on every day in the week except Sundays. Rumor described him as a banker's clerk, but of this the neighbors had no positive information.

The thirteenth of December was a cloudy day, and on the fourteenth a snowstorm set in, which continued throughout the day. At eleven o'clock on the evening of the fourteenth, two men got off the last down train at St. Leger station. One of these men was John Davis; the other was Mr. Henry Austin, a young bachelor who boarded at No. 2 Goodwood Street, nearly opposite the residence of Mr. Davis. The men had apparently made each other's acquaintance on the train, and, as they turned in the direction of Goodwood Street, one of them, looking up, remarked that the storm had evidently ceased, as the stars were shining out.

"We are the first to break a track," said Austin, pointing up the road which lay before them, white and spotless in the starlight.

"This is bad for my newly painted piazzas," replied the other. "I doubt if they had time to dry. But it's just my luck."

"You are not so fortunate as Madame Auvergne. She painted her house entire, a week ago. Perhaps she is a better weather-prophet than you."

"Who is Madame Auvergne?" asked Davis.

“Almost your next-door neighbor. She has recently hired No. 9, for the winter. Is it possible you have not seen her? She is the handsomest woman ever seen in Goodwood Street,” said Austin enthusiastically.

“You must pardon me,” said Davis. “I am away from home so much, that I know very little of my neighbors.”

“And I know little of the Madame,” replied Austin, “except what I have observed from my own window, nearly opposite hers. She is a very beautiful woman, — French, I believe, — and is to open No. 9 as a school for young ladies. So,” continued the young man, again giving vent to his enthusiasm, “we may have Goodwood Street bright, this winter, with pretty faces, by Jove! There’s a light in her window now, and it’s the only light on the street, too. Your folks and mine have evidently gone to bed.”

John Davis looked up at the upper windows of No. 9 as they passed. A light was burning in the chamber on the second story, and the top of a woman’s head could be seen, whose owner was apparently writing or reading at a table.

The men parted at the gate of Austin’s house, and Davis waded across the street, through the deep snow, to his own.

When Austin reached his own room, he went directly to the window, and peered out into the street, before lighting his lamp. Madame Auvergne’s shades being raised, a tolerably good view of her apartments could be obtained, and Austin’s gaze rested for a moment upon her graceful figure, as she sat, with her back to the window, bending over her work, whatever it was, at the table. From this pleasant picture, in the lighted room across the way, Austin looked down into the street, at his friend Davis, who was endeavoring to push away the snow which had accumulated about his gate. A deep drift had formed on the opposite sidewalk, and had been piled high against the fence, along the whole length of the street. John Davis was the first to break its continuous outline, and it was evident that none of the inhabitants of the opposite side of Goodwood Street had opened their gates since the snow ceased falling.

Austin watched the shadowy figure of his friend, scarcely discernible in the starlight, until he had succeeded in opening the gate, and had closed it, with a click, and walked up the gravel path toward his door. Then the young bachelor drew down his window shades, after a parting glance at Madame Auvergne’s studious figure, and turned from his window to light his lamp. As he did so, a sound like a human cry reached his ear, and caused him to halt when half-way across his room. The rattle of the window-shade, as he drew it down, had partly drowned the sound, but to his ears it sounded almost like a cry of murder. He turned again to the window, drew up the shade, threw up the sash quickly, and looked out.

The cry was not repeated. No sound disturbed the stillness of the night. The stars were glittering in a clear, cold sky; the spotless snow filled the street and gardens. The only living thing visible to Austin’s gaze was the graceful form of Madame Auvergne, bending over her table, in the lighted room across the way.

“It must have been a cat,” thought Austin, “or my imagination. It did not disturb my fair friend opposite, whatever it was.”

And, with this reflection, he closed his window, and went to bed.

At the breakfast-table next morning, strange news awaited him. Goodwood Street, from end to end, was in a state of the greatest excitement. Two constables standing at the gate of No. 5 denied access to all comers except to the properly constituted authorities, while the roadway before the house was filled with an eager, noisy crowd; for John Davis had been found at the steps of his residence stiff and cold, with the snow about him dyed crimson with his blood.

There was an inquest after the funeral, at which all the inhabitants of the village who were able to gain access to the building in which it was held attended. Members of the press from the city were there, and an artist from an illustrated paper, who sketched the house No. 5 Goodwood Street, and drew an imaginary portrait of the murdered man, whom he had never seen. The witnesses examined were four. The first was a village physician, who had examined the body after its discovery. He testified that death had been caused by a blow upon the head with a blunt instrument,—possibly a hammer. The skull was beaten in, and death must have been instantaneous. Did not see the instrument with which the blow was inflicted. From the position and nature of the fracture, should say that it was impossible for it to have been caused by an accident. Deceased might have been able to utter a cry at the moment of being struck, but should think it hardly probable. Witness described the wound in detail in medical language, and was permitted to stand aside.

The second witness was Eliza Fleming, the servant of the Davis family. It was she who first discovered the body, about daylight on the morning of the fifteenth of December. She had opened the front door, with the intention of sweeping the snow from the piazza and front steps, and had found the murdered man lying face upward at the foot of the latter. Was at first too frightened to do anything but scream, but afterward thought her master might not be dead, and so went to him, but found the body quite cold.

The rest of the testimony of this witness excited great interest.

When she opened the door to sweep the piazza, there were no footprints in the snow around the door. This fact she remembered distinctly, as she glanced along the length of the piazza before seeing the body. There was no disturbance of the snow at the foot of the steps, except such as was evidently caused by her master’s fall. Witness was the first to go out to the street and give the alarm. In doing so, she was compelled to step in the footprints made by her master, as the snow was quite deep. She was positive that there were no footprints in the front yard except those made by Mr. Davis. There was no place around the front door where a person would be concealed from the view of any one coming up the gravel walk.

The next witness was Mrs. Amelia Davis, widow of the deceased. Mr. Davis was teller in a bank, which she named, in the city. When his body was found, his gold watch, his pocket-book, gold pencil and seal ring were discovered in their proper places. Witness knew of no enemy to her husband. He was an inoffensive, good man. Eliza Fleming slept in a back room, adjoining the

one occupied by witness, and could only leave it by passing through her mistress's chamber. All the family retired at ten o'clock on the evening of the fourteenth of December, and Eliza Fleming did not rise until half-past five or six next morning. The personal property found on the body of the deceased was in possession of the coroner.

At this point, a man with a sandy beard, who occupied a seat near the coroner, among the audience, arose and requested permission to ask a question of the witness. Permission being granted, the man with the sandy beard wanted to know what the name "Marie" meant, on the inside of the seal ring belonging to deceased. In reply, witness said she did not know. She had never seen the ring, except upon her husband's finger, when the name was of course concealed. She knew of no person named "Marie." To further questions by the coroner, she said she knew little of her husband's antecedents prior to her marriage. It was a love match, entered into against the wishes of her parents. Witness being then evidently in great mental distress, was permitted to stand aside, and the man with the sandy beard sat down, apparently satisfied.

The fourth and last witness was Henry Austin. He briefly described his meeting with John Davis, on the night of the fourteenth of December, their walk home together, and parting at his own gate. He afterward saw from his window John Davis endeavoring to open his front gate by pushing away the snow, which had accumulated against it. There was a deep drift of snow on the sidewalk on the west side of the street. Witness and deceased were the first persons to pass through Goodwood Street after the storm ceased. Was sure of that, because he remarked it to Mr. Davis. He had never known Mr. Davis prior to meeting him on the train that evening.

This closed the testimony, and the jury, after a short consultation, delivered a verdict, that John Davis came to his death by a blow from a blunt instrument, at the hands of some person to the jury unknown. The crowd dispersed, each individual with his own theory as to the tragedy, and Austin walked thoughtfully toward his home. Before he reached the street corner, he felt a hand upon his shoulder, and, turning, found himself face to face with the man with the sandy beard.

"I beg your pardon," said this individual. "My name is Mixer. I have just come from that remarkable inquest, and the coroner is a fool."

Austin looked at him inquiringly.

"I am a city detective," continued Mr. Mixer. "I read of this case in the papers, and came down here, merely out of professional curiosity. I want to make some inquiries. You are the last man, with one exception, who saw Davis alive, and you look reasonably intelligent."

Austin bowed, and thanked him for the compliment.

"In the first place," said Mr. Mixer, "where is No. 5 Goodwood Street?"

"I am going home," said Austin, "and will show you."

They proceeded down the street side by side, Austin glancing at his companion half suspiciously, as though not quite sure of his real character. Mr. Mixer was a short man, not over fifty years of

age, with a keen gray eye which was evidently busy in taking a mental photograph of every step of the way.

“This,” said Austin, at last, “is Goodwood Street, and there is No. 5.”

Mr. Mixer stopped in front of the gate, and looked long and earnestly at the house. Then he opened the gate, and walked slowly up the path toward the steps, at the foot of which he halted. From this position he surveyed the building from roof to basement with the air of one who thought of building a house precisely like it

“The body,” said Austin, “was found here, where we now stand.”

Mr. Mixer made no reply, but continued to gaze toward the upper windows, and along the fronts of the three-story verandas, to the end of the street. The blinds of No. 5 were closed, — the widow and her child having found a temporary home with her parents, and Eliza Fleming having been dismissed.

“Have you any theory in regard to the murder?” asked Austin.

“Yes,” said Mr. Mixer.

“May I ask what it is?”

“No,” said Mr. Mixer.

“It would seem,” said Austin, a little vexed, “as if the blow must have fallen from the clouds.”

“Or from the upper veranda,” said the detective grimly.

Austin started. “Surely!” he exclaimed, “you do not suspect — any of the Davis family!”

“No,” replied Mr. Mixer.

The detective mounted the steps, and bending over, rubbed his hand lightly on the green lattice railing of the piazza. The paint was not yet hard, and some of it came off upon his fingers.

“When was this paint put on?” he inquired.

“On the day before the murder. Davis spoke about it as we walked from the station.”

“Who are the occupants of the other houses on this side?”

Austin named them. All old and well-known residents, who had lived in the same street for years. No. There was one exception, — Madame Auvergne, a French teacher, who had hired No. 9 a short time since. But of course no suspicion could rest upon her, —a woman.”

“Of course not,” said Mr. Mixer.

“Besides,” said Austin, laughing, “she could prove an alibi. I saw her writing in her chamber at the very hour when it is supposed that this murder took place.”

“Ah!” observed Mr. Mixer.

“Can I be of any further service?” asked Austin, not very well pleased at this monosyllabic conversation on the part of his companion. “I am afraid my dinner is getting cold.”

“Not at present, I think,” replied the detective. “I am very much obliged to you. Good-day, sir.” Mr. Mixer nodded pleasantly; and, thus dismissed, Austin turned, crossed the street, and entered his own dwelling.

No sooner had Austin disappeared from view, than Mr. Mixer left the yard of No. 5, and proceeded directly to No. 9. A ring at the bell brought to the door a dark-complexioned maid, and an inquiry for Madame Auvergne elicited the information that madame was out. Would monsieur step into the parlor and wait? Madame was expected to return soon. Mr. Mixer walked into the parlor, and took a seat. Then the parlor door was closed, and he was left alone.

The closing of the door was the signal for Mr. Mixer’s keen gray eye to spring into immediate activity. No deputy sheriff, just put into “possession,” ever inventoried the contents of a room more rapidly or thoroughly than did this active eye of Mr. Mixer’s. The apartment was rather sumptuously furnished, but neither carpets, pictures, nor *bric-a-brac* held the attention of the detective long. One article only, at the farther end of the room, excited in Mr. Mixer any interest whatever. This was a lady’s writing-case, lying open, upon a small table in the corner. Pens, ink, and paper were strewn about it in some confusion, as though its owner had been called away suddenly, and had forgotten its condition.

Mr. Mixer, sauntering around the room with his hands behind him, halted before this table. An ebony paper-knife, inlaid with pearl, lay across some papers. Mr. Mixer took it up and turned it over critically. The initials “M. L. from J. D.,” inlaid upon the back, caused a slight elevation of Mr. Mixer’s eyebrows. Lifting the lid of the desk, he looked within. Broken pens, odds and ends of sealing-wax, a few household recipes, some sheets of note-paper, and a small bundle of old letters, tied with a faded ribbon, met his gaze. It was a woman’s writing-case, with the usual contents.

Footsteps sounded through the hall, and Mr. Mixer had only time to close the lid, and slide back to his seat, before the door opened, and the dark-complexioned maid entered the room. With a searching glance at the visitor, she proceeded to the table, swept the papers from it, locked the desk, and, taking it under her arm, again left the parlor.

No sooner had the door closed than Mr. Mixer indulged in some extraordinary proceedings. Rising from his seat, he made a low bow to an imaginary *vis-a-vis*. Then, taking from his pocket, one after the other, a series of documents, he read them rapidly, holding the paper in a position to be instantly concealed, should he be interrupted, and keeping one eye almost ceaselessly upon

the door. At intervals throughout this labor, he danced lightly to the centre of the room, cut a skillful pigeon-wing, kissed his hand to the closed door, and returned to his seat. A disinterested observer would certainly be pardoned for believing that Mr. Mixer had gone mad.

His solitary amusement was interrupted by the entrance of Madame Auvergne, and Mr. Mixer, rising, beheld before him a ravishingly beautiful woman, not over thirty-five years of age, who advanced gracefully to the centre of the room, and greeted him with the slightest possible gesture of inquiry

“I believe,” said Mr. Mixer, bowing, “that I am addressing Madame Auvergne.”

“It is true,” replied the lady in a pleasant voice. “Can I be of service to you?”

“I have called,” said Mr. Mixer, “to make a few, perhaps unimportant, inquiries in connection with that dreadful affair at No. 5. I do not know that you can render me any assistance, but, as you are, I believe, the only native of France in this village, you may aid me in finding one of your countrywomen.”

Madame Auvergne waved her visitor to a chair, and, seating herself deliberately, took time to reply.

“Is it,” she asked, “that this poor man was a friend of yours?”

“He was, madame,” said Mr. Mixer unblushingly.

“And how can I be of benefit?” asked madame. “*Mon Dieu!* the whole affair was too horrible. What can I tell you?”

“Do you know a woman named Marie Ledoux?”

“I do not,” said Madame Auvergne.

“Think a moment,” said Mr. Mixer.

“It is useless,” she said, tapping her foot impatiently upon the carpet. “I never before heard of such a person.”

The petulant motion of madame’s foot attracted the attention of Mr. Mixer’s vigilant gray eye. No sooner had his gaze fallen upon the neat kid boot than he seemed rapt in admiration. Madame Auvergne noticed his observation, and the foot was coquettishly withdrawn beneath her dress.

“You do not know Marie Ledoux?” said Mr. Mixer.

“I have said it. I do not know her. What has this Marie Ledoux to do with this thing?”

“Much,” replied Mr. Mixer. “I am sorry you can tell me nothing of her, for Marie Ledoux murdered Mr. John Davis.”

Madame Auvergne started, and looked at her visitor earnestly. A slight paleness crept over her face, as she exclaimed, —

“*Mon Dieu!* How do you know that?”

“If madame will have patience while I relate a long story,” said Mr. Mixer, “I can give her strange information.”

“I shall be happy,” said madame. “Pray go on, monsieur.”

“If you attended the inquest this morning,” said Mr. Mixer, “you will remember that Mrs. Davis testified that her marriage was a ‘love-match,’ made against her parents’ consent, and that she knew little of her husband’s antecedents. She knew nothing of any person named ‘Marie.’ This was probably true, for her husband doubtless concealed from her the history of his relations with Marie Ledoux.”

“Again Marie Ledoux!” interrupted Madame Auvergne. “In Heaven’s name, who was Marie Ledoux?”

“The mistress of John Davis,” replied Mr. Mixer. “The woman whom, when a young girl, he betrayed, and with whom he lived for years prior to his marriage, at Bordeaux; the woman whom he at last cruelly abandoned, and left, in poverty and alone, when he fled to this country to seek a new fortune to replace the one he had dissipated abroad. The deserted woman treasured up her wrongs. With all the love her heart had held for him changed to hate, she managed to follow him, resolved upon the only revenge with which a spurned and rejected French-woman can be satisfied, —his death. For years she traced him from place to place, and at last found him, — here in this village of St. Leger, here in Goodwood Street.”

A low, inarticulate sound escaped from the parted lips of Madame Auvergne, as she listened, with an expression of intense interest, to this recital. Her face became a shade paler, as Mr. Mixer proceeded, but her white hands lay crossed one upon the other, composedly, in her lap.

“When John Davis returned home on the night of the fourteenth of this month,” continued the detective, “he was felled to the earth at his own door by a single blow from an unseen hand. The snow which covered the ground revealed no trace of the assassin. Why? Because the blow came from above. The person who killed John Davis was concealed behind the railing of the second story of the veranda, and delivered the fatal stroke while leaning over and clinging to the lattice. That person was a woman, as I have said, — Marie Ledoux.”

Madame Auvergne’s eyes were fastened upon her visitor with a look of intense eagerness, but she made no comment. Mr. Mixer proceeded: —



“You are doubtless curious to know how I have become acquainted with these details,” he said, “none of which appeared upon the inquest. Part of them are deductions from my own observation of the scene of the homicide; the rest I have learned since I have been in this room.”

Madame Auvergne’s face was very pale; but her hands lay motionless in her lap, and her eyebrows were raised with an expression of surprise at Mr. Mixer’s statement.

“There was one thing,” he continued, “upon which this woman had not counted. Cunningly as the crime had been planned to escape detection, and perfectly as it had been executed, Marie Ledoux had forgotten the green paint. The piazzas of No. 5 had recently been painted, and the paint was fresh. The murderer had not thought of that as she climbed along the lattice in making her escape. From her clothing, of course, the paint could be removed, or, better still, the clothing could be destroyed; but, when this was done, there remained upon her boot a green mark which wholly escaped her notice.”

There was a quick, almost imperceptible movement of the white hands, and the toe of Madame Auvergne’s kid boot protruded for an instant, ever so slightly, from beneath her dress. As it was drawn back its owner was trembling.

Mr. Mixer drew from his pocket a pair of bright steel handcuffs, and laid them upon the table. Madame Auvergne sprang to her feet in a paroxysm of terror.

“What are those?” she cried, “and why do you bring them here? Take them away! Take them away!”

“These,” said Mr. Mixer, “are for Marie Ledoux, — when I find her.”

She stood before him with her black eyes glittering and her bosom heaving, regarding him earnestly for several moments. At last she pressed her hands to her temples, and said, more calmly, —

“Monsieur will pardon me. I have had several sleepless nights, and am very nervous.”

She turned away, and, unlocking a little cabinet near the door, took from it a small vial, which she placed to her lips.

“A remedy which my physician ordered,” she explained, with a smile. “I am subject to hysteria.”

She placed the vial on the table near at hand, and resumed her seat.

“This tale is interesting,” she said, with another smile. “But how does it concern me? What have you discovered in this room relating to Marie Ledoux?”

The detective made no reply, but, taking from his pocket a packet of letters, tied with a faded ribbon, held them up silently before her.

Madame Auvergne's hand went quickly to her heart, and her lips turned pale as ashes. With a wild cry, she sprang to her feet.

"You do not know all," she said. "You see before you, not the mistress of John Davis, but his lawful wife. I had the justice of Heaven with me in tracking him to his death. I was Marie Ledoux, — wronged and abandoned by this man; but, as Heaven is my witness, I was his wedded wife!"

She tottered unsteadily, and held to her chair for support with one hand; the other still pressed upon her heart.

"I thought," she said more slowly, "that I had provided against all means of detection. It seems that—that I have failed. But — I have had my revenge!"

Her eye brightened at the same time that an expression of physical pain contracted her beautiful features. She sank weakly in her chair, as Mr. Mixer sprang forward to assist her.

"Remember," he said, "that I did not come here to extort a confession from a woman. If I mistake not, you have good ground for establishing what the lawyers call an alibi."

"It is useless," she said painfully, "and too late. The woman that — that was seen — in my chamber that night — was — was my maid!"

The head of Marie Ledoux sank back in the chair, and a convulsion seized her frame. The detective placed his arm beneath her, and endeavored to raise her upright, but she lay in his arms like a mass of lifeless clay. Placing her gently back, Mr. Mixer held up the vial which stood upon the table. It was half filled with a colorless liquid, and, as he removed the cork, a pungent odor of bitter almonds pervaded the room.

Mr. Mixer turned the vial in his hand. The words upon the label were "Hydrocyanic Acid!"

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