

## *An Old Lawyer's Story*

I am a very old man now: So old that I work no longer as I used at my profession. The time of rest has come. It is a happy time. I am not poor. I have all life's luxuries. Best of all, I have a wife who loves me still, and whom I love as well as when I wooed her—nay, better, if that can be, and my children are beautiful and prosperous. What can a man wish more?

I read my favorite authors. I smoke my cigars. I take a glass of wine of an evening. Sometimes we go to a play. Every Sunday morning to church. It is all holiday-time for us. It will not last long. We are both old, but we are happy.

There is no romance about a lawyer's profession. People are disposed to sneer at it, and to speak of its followers as tricky sort of folks, more anxious for their own gain than that of their neighbors. If this is so, we do not stand alone; but I will say for my brotherhood, that they have hearts as well as other men, and that it is not always merely for what we can make by it that we undertake a cause.

Odd things fall into our way very often. I have had no need to read romances. The real stories that have fallen beneath my notice are quite as interesting, and far more singular, than any tales of the imagination could possibly be. I tell them to my children sometimes on winter evenings.

Perhaps it is only to flatter the old man that they assume an interest in them, nevertheless I will tell one of the tales to you—one which I have always had cause to remember.

A great many years ago, while I was comparatively a young man, and still unmarried, I resided in a certain city in Pennsylvania, and enjoyed the reputation of being the cleverest lawyer ever known there. It is not for me to say the praise was merited, but I found myself able to discover loopholes of escape for those whom I defended, which surprised even my fellow-lawyers. I possessed by nature those qualities which would have made me an excellent detective, and I was a thorough student of the law. There was no mystery about it, but among the more ignorant classes I had gained a reputation for more than human knowledge. Perhaps it was not polite for them to say that the devil helped, but they did.

However, I began to tell you about Madam Matteau.

She was an old lady who owned a little house in the suburbs of the city. She herself was an American birth, but her husband had been a Frenchman, and so the title Madame had been bestowed upon her. She was now a widow, and her daughter Gabrielle, and son named Henri, were her only living relatives. Her income was but slender, and she eked it out by taking a few boarders, generally steady old people, who had known her for many years. These respected and liked her; but the city generally had a prejudice against her. There had been two sudden deaths in her house. Each time the victim was a stranger who came at night, and was found dead in his bed in the morning. Each time the jury was divided—some believing that strangulation had been the cause of death, some that the man had died in a fit.

It was a terrible thing that two such deaths should have occurred beneath her roof. Madame's friends pitied her. The rest of the little world hinted that these were strangers, and their trunks, with no one knew what amount of money and other valuable property, remained in Madame's possession. No one said she was a murderess but every one said it was "very strange," in an odd tone, and no one since that second death had visited Madame Matteau.

I myself—perhaps because I admired her a great deal, and her daughter much more—had always insisted that it was merely a coincidence, and that in a world in which apoplexy and heart disease were so common, it was no such marvel that two men should have met sudden deaths in the same house. But my faith in this theory was shaken when one morning it was published over the city that another transient boarder had been found dead in Madame Matteau's house, and that she was arrested on suspicion of having murdered him, his watch and chain having been found in her possession.

Before I had recovered from the shock of this terrible piece of news, a message came to me from Madame Matteau. She desired to see me. Of course I went to see her at once.

She had been taken to prison; and I found her in a little grim room with a barred window, and an insufficient fire upon the hearth. The logs had burned in two up on the andirons, and the white ashes were scattered over the hearth. Almost in them sat Madame Matteau, in her widow's dress of sombre black.

She was chilly with grief and excitement, and had drawn her chair close to the fire.

She shook violently from head to foot, and her face was deadly pale as she turned it toward me and held out her hand.

"O, thank Heaven, you have come!" she said. "I know you can save me. Is it not horrible? How could I kill a man? Why should I? Why do people come to my house to die? To die horribly, with black faces and starting eyes, as if someone had choked them? Ugh! and he was a pretty young man the night before. Oh, good Heaven, how horrible!"

I sat down beside her. I took her hand.

"Madame Matteau," I said, "be calm; collect yourself. As your lawyer, I must know all. Tell me from first to last what happened—what was said, what was done. If you—"

I paused; her black eyes had flashed upon me. I could not ask her whether she had any confession to make. I saw she had not. Unless she was the best actress who ever lived, Madame Matteau was innocent of any crime.

"If you have any suspicions," I added, "tell them all to me."

"There is no one to suspect," sobbed the poor woman.

“In the house were Gabrielle, my daughter, whom you have seen, old Hannah, the cook, Mr. and Mrs. Beauchamp, friends of my poor dead husband in his boyhood—the best, kindest people;—Mr. Gray, a very old man, too feeble to leave the house, poor deformed Miss Norman, and the librarian, Mr. Bassford. None of these would murder a mouse. See how kind they are; they remain in my house; they send me word that they have no doubt of me. Oh, how can anybody?”

“And this man who—” I began.

“Yes,” said Madame Matteau, “I will tell you; he was fair, young, handsomely dressed; he asked Mr. Bassford at the depot if he knew of any one who could accommodate him. Mr. Bassford brought him home. My only empty room was the one in which those other two strangers died. I could not bear to put him there; but Mr. Bassford laughed at me. We had supper afterward. He talked a long time to Gabrielle. It was late when he retired—late for a quiet household. Hannah had made the fire. She came and told us that she had done so. He said good night.

“After he had gone, we found that he had left his watch on the table. He wore it only with a bunch of seals, and he had been setting it by the clock, and showing it to us as something very handsome. I knocked at his door to restore it to him. He had not left us but fifteen minutes before, but he must have been asleep already, for he made no answer. So I kept it for the night, and wore it down to breakfast next morning. As I came down I met a gentleman in the hall. He inquired for Mr. Glenn. That was the new-comer’s name. I sent Hannah to wake him. She could not do so, and grew alarmed. She had a key that would open the door, and used it. The next thing I knew we were all in the room, and the windows were wide open, and the doctor had been sent for; and the young man who had called was screaming that his brother had been choked to death; and then there was the inquest, and they arrested me. The brother said the first thing he noticed was that I wore Mr. Glenn’s watch and seals. I had forgotten it in my terror.”

“So Hannah had a key to the room?” I said.

“Yes; at least it was a key that would open it. It was the key of Mr. Bassford’s door. She knocked the other out with a stick and put that in.”

“The people who were there on that night were your boarders when the other men were found dead?” I asked.

“Oh, yes!”

“And Hannah was there also?”

“All my married life Hannah has lived with me.”

“Your daughter oversees your household in your absence?”

“Yes, poor child, with Hannah’s help.”

I thought a little while.

“Madam,” I said, “there is some strange mystery in this affair. I do not despair of proving to all the world your entire innocence. Meanwhile, be as calm as possible, and endeavor to remember everything connected with the sudden deaths that have occurred in your house. The incident that seems the most unimportant may really be of the most immense value.”

So I left her and went home. Strange enough, on the way I met the doctor who had been called in. He was a dull, heavy sort of person, considerably given to beer drinking, and my opinion of his ability was not very great. However, I questioned him on the subject, and he replied:

“Well, you see, *I don't* say the old woman murdered him. If she did, I should say it was by sitting on him or smothering him with the bolsters. I suppose the cause of his death was asphyxia. Well, the, what is asphyxia? Why, too little breath to keep on living. He died because he was short of breath. I wash my hands of the matter. Only there's the watch; that looks dark.”

I learned nothing from the doctor. The coroner lived near me. His jury had been twelve of the most ignorant men in town.

This is all he told me.

“He was smothered, that man was; so were the other two. Men don't smother themselves. We made it inscrutable Providence t'other time. We made it murder, this. That there watch, you know.”

Thus, without any new light, I went home and formed my plans. There was but one way in which to penetrate the mystery. I must enter the house; I must see the people there; I must penetrate to the room in which these men had died so suddenly, and I must not be known in my real character. That Madame Matteau was innocent, I fully believed; but that some one beneath her roof was guilty, I made no doubt. It might be Hannah. It might be the librarian, Mr. Bassford, whose key fitted the dead man's door. It was possible;—but no, I would not harbor a mad superstition. There could be no supernatural power beneath which human beings drooped and died. Death as it came to us was mystery enough. What had been said to me by a woman, who had been a spiritualist had she lived to-day, was a mere absurdity.

“I believe that there is some horrible unseen thing in the room,” she had said—“some awful, shapeless spirit, that when it is locked in with its victim, murders him. Let others believe what they will, I believe that.”

The words haunted me, but I laughed at them, of course. Whatever it was, I would try to know. I had a plan.

At dusk that day I went into my bedroom myself. I came out a strange man. I wore a white wig, a pair of great green goggles, and an overcoat, the tails of which reached my heels. I had a muffler about my throat, and a little haunch on one of my shoulders. I carried a thick cane and stooped a great deal as I walked. In my hand I carried a carpet bag, and in my bosom a pair of pistols, well loaded.

As I passed out into the streets the early moon was just rising; she lit me on my way to the door of Madame Matteau's house.

It was opened for me, when I knocked, by old Hannah. Her eyes were red and swollen. Then I told her that I was a stranger and had received Madame Matteau's address from a gentleman in New York, and desired to stay under her roof all night. She shook her head.

"I don't think you can," she said. "The lady is away from home. Besides, we are in trouble here. I don't think Miss Gabrielle would—"

But here Miss Gabrielle herself appeared.

"I am an old man, Miss," I said, "and, as you see, quite infirm. I dread another step. I should take it as a kindness if you would accommodate me, and I will pay any price you ask."

Miss Gabrielle looked at Hannah.

"We have only one room," she said, "and that—"

I ended the question of my stay by begging to be taken to it.

"You will have supper, sir?" asked the girl.

But I declared that I had eaten and only wanted rest.

Her reply was:

"Hannah, show the gentleman to the blue room, and make a fire."

I was in the blue room, the scene of three sudden deaths or murders. It was a small apartment, painted blue. It had also blue window curtains, and a blue silk coverlet on the bed; a neat, striped carpet, and a set of old mahogany furniture, and very handsome ewer and a basin of costly China. It was a the time almost a universal custom to burn wood. In this room, however, was a small coal stove. I alluded to this as Hannah came in with the scuttle.

"Yes, sir," she said. "Misses does burn coals. Her son is a clerk, or the like, at them new mines at Mauch Chunk, and he sends it cheap to her; but it's dirty, nasty smelling thing and I hate it. Now it's built and lit and 'twill warm up in fifteen minutes. It takes longer than wood."

She went out of the door and came in a minute with a little tray on which stood a pot and cup and saucer, also a bowl and a tiny pitcher, and something in a napkin.

"Miss sent a bite and a sip," said she. "Tea rests us old folks mightily. Good night."

“Good night,” I said, “I expect I shall sleep soon; I must be up very early, though, for I have bills to pay. I have some hundreds of dollars with me to pay out to-morrow, and it’s in this bag.”

She looked at me in a queer sort of way, and lingered beside me. At last she spoke: “Look ye, sir,” she said, “I think that old folks of your age do wrong to lock doors on themselves. You might be ill at night, and who’d get in to you? Leave your door unlocked.”

The moment she was gone I turned the key.

Was it this woman’s practice to beg travelers who stopped with her mistress not to lock their doors? Was there some baneful potion in the cup she had given me?

It was an innocent looking cup enough—an old fashioned affair covered with little gilt sprigs. Thee tea was fragrant Hyson; but the suspicion that crept into my mind had tainted it. I fancied a strange color, a curious smell. I put it from me, and would not have tasted it for a kingdom.

I had not intended to sleep, and I did not undress myself. I merely removed my disguise, and sat down beside the table, with my pistols beside me. That some attempt might be shortly made to murder me I felt to be possible. I thought of all the old tales that I had heard of trap-doors, and sliding panels, and secret entrances to travelers’ rooms. I was not a coward, but I felt strangely nervous; and singularly enough for a man of my perfect health, my hands were growing cold, and my feet were lumps of ice, while my head was burning hot.

Fifteen minutes had passed, and the fire was kindled, but the room was not warm. The blue flames struggled among the black coals, and flung forked tongues tipped with yellow into the room. There was nothing cheerful about the stove, though it was of that open style now called Franklin. Yet, I drew a chair toward it from habit, and sat with my feet upon the hearth. I do not know how long I sat there.

Suddenly I became aware that I was not myself. I was losing my senses. If unseen hands had been clasped about my neck, and an unseen knee had been pressed against my chest, my sensations could have been no different.

A thought of the evil spirit which my friend had suggested, faintly struggled into my mind. As I staggered to my feet, a noise like the roaring of the sea was in my ears. The flames of the candle turned to a great yellow blur. I barely retained strength enough to stagger to the window and fling it open. The fresh, cold winter air rushed in at it. It gave me intense pain, but it relieved me. In a moment more I was able to clamber out of it upon the shed below.

There I remained until the day-dawn. With my returning senses came the truth to me. That which had murdered the three men who had slept before me in the blue chamber was nothing more or less than the coal stove.

It was provided with what is called a damper, and this was caught in the manner which closed it, and sent the poisonous gas into the room. It had been kindled as a wood fire would have been at the hour of retiring, by one ignorant of the danger possible from coal gas, and they had slept

never to awaken. Had I thrown myself upon the bed, I also should have been found dead at daylight, in all human probability.

As for the fact that neither doctor nor coroner discovered the truth, I have to say that they were not deeply scientific men—that coal stoves were scarcely used in the place, and that it had not been mentioned that the blue chamber was thus heated.

Of course I rejoiced the household by my discovery the next morning, and equally, of course, Madame Matteau, who was not only freed from suspicion, but became the object of universal sympathy. She was always grateful to me, and she proved her gratitude by giving what I soon asked for, the hand of her daughter Gabrielle in marriage.

Expanded version with the following intro in *The Long Island Traveler*, Jan 22, 1874—which **credits the story to the Leger**.

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