

## *The Middletown Mystery*

“Shall I kill him?”

“I won’t take the responsibility of advising you, under the circumstances. You say he has proved himself unworthy of her?”

“Yes, but you know her character is one that holds duty to be stronger than love—and those sorts of women are hard to give in. I’ll *have* to kill him.”

“Well, do as you please. But remember, I wash my hands of the murder.”

The speakers walked slowly away with these words. The voices had come from the old arbor at the foot of the lawn, where I had gone to bring in some muslin which lay there bleaching. The tones were low and half indistinct, but I had heard all the above conversation clearly. What should I do! There was no one at home but brother Tom and the two servants. Father had gone away on business for a few days, and I was head manager until his return. There was no one in the house, either, to whom I could tell this dreadful thing! We lived on a pretty little place just out of the city; and this summer, to help pay off the mortgage, which hung upon it like a millstone—father used to say—we had advertised for a few city boarders. It was my proposition, and father and Tom had opposed it at first; father feared it would be too hard for me, and Tom said it was “degrading,” but I proved to father that I could get along admirably with Lucy and Dan to help, and Tom being two years younger than I, and only sixteen, I did not stop to argue with him on the subject. We were seven in family now, instead of usual “trio” (“Haydn’s trio in three flats,” Tom called us, sometimes.) Our addition consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Miles, and two single young gentlemen, Mr. Lewis and Mr. Ray. Mr. Miles was a broker on Third street, and a nice gentlemanly old man he was. Mrs. Miles was a very beautiful, and quiet young woman. We all thought she was his daughter, when they drove up to the door the night of their arrival. They seemed a very loving couple; although I did fancy Mrs. Miles looked unhappy at times, but she was very devoted to her husband, and he appeared very fond of her. Mr. Lewis was a clerk in a publishing house in the city and went to town every day, as did Mr. Miles. Mr. Ray was the friend of Mr. Lewis, and appeared to be in no business. I didn’t like *his* looks the first minute I set eyes on him. He was a moody, sullen sort of man, barely answering civil questions, although he was particularly pleasant, for him, to Mrs. Miles. Mr. Lewis was a favorite with everybody; Tom swore by him and forgot the “degradation.” I often wondered what the bond of sympathy could be between Mr. Lewis and Mr. Ray. The one so full of life and [animation]; the other taciturn and gloomy. Mr. Ray seldom went to the city, but would sit all day long in the room, oftentimes not coming to his meals, and when I would knock sometimes at his door, he would growl out, “Don’t disturb me, I’m busy.” I had told Tom, confidentially, that I felt sure Mr. Ray was not all “right.” “Never mind, Sis,” he answered me, saucily. “I guess he ain’t a counterfeiter; so his money’s “right” enough, and when you get all your *wages* for waiting on his highness, you’ll be ‘right.’” I didn’t like to hear Tom talk so to me, when what I was doing was only to help father along, and not menial service from a selfish purpose. But, what can you expect from boys! I determined I would not tell Tom any more of my suspicions. I lay awake half the night thinking of the conversation I have heard in the arbor; I knew the voices belonged to Mr. Lewis and Mr. Ray. One then, was as bad as the other! But who was the man they talked of murdering so coolly; could it be Mr. Miles? I made up my mind I would watch closely next day, to see if I

could detect any signs of malice against the old gentleman. They all seemed friendly enough, however, and there were no ill words spoken save a little sparring on some political questions, after the usual manner of men. Mr. Miles and Mr. Lewis went to town as usual, and I saw nothing of Mr. Ray or Mrs. Miles until tea time. She had toast and tea in her room at noon, on the plea of headache; and he growled out as usual, to "let him be," when I sent Lucy to call him to dinner. At the tea table Mrs. Miles received a dispatch from her husband, saying "business would detain him over night in the city." I fancied she turned pale and looked very sad, indeed. After tea, Mr. Ray invited her to walk down to the lake with him; she refused at first, but he finally persuaded her, and they strolled off slowly like a pair of lovers. Was I reading the mystery?

Tom and Mr. Lewis were out riding, and so I was left quite alone. I sat in the little sitting-room by the window. There was a faint white curve of moon in the sky, and the dusk was fragrant with the woodbine, and jessamine tint ran over the trellis work by my window. I must have fallen asleep, when I awakened to hear low voices just outside on the piazza.

"Promise me, then, you will not do it until I have had another talk with you." It was Mrs. Miles' voice.

"It shall be as you say, but the longer I wait, the worse for him," muttered the deep tones of Mr. Ray's heavy bass. Then she bid him good night and ran up to her room.

How my heart beat. It was getting fearful. Mr. Ray now paced up and down the piazza until the rattle of wheels and laughing voices announced the return of his friend and Tom. Tom went right off to bed, and Mr. Lewis sat down upon the steps to smoke. I held my breath to hear what was to come.

"What makes you so restless, Ray?" asked Mr. Lewis, after a little. "Are you still meditating the murder?"

Ray stopped short in his walk.

"I have had a talk with her," said he, "and she has made me promise to wait a day longer before I decide."

"Well, *I* should carry out my own plans without reference to any one, if I were in *your* place."

"Then—I shall kill him!"

"How?" asked Mr. Lewis. (Oh how could he speak so coolly!)

"Shoot him—it's the easiest."

"Where?"

"In the woods." (Our woods! Oh: I must scream soon, and I held my hand tight over my mouth.)

“Well,” answered Mr. Lewis, “suppose we go and practice the situation—come;” and they walked off together towards the little piece of woodland that lay on our land.

I passed another sleepless night, and looked so haggard next morning at breakfast that even Mr. Ray asked me if my head ached, and he always found “eau de cologne” a speedy relief.

“An easy conscience is a better,” I answered quickly. He looked up at me curiously, and went on with his breakfast.

I hurried up to his room before he finished, and took an inventory of his things. I almost fainted when close beside his dressing-case I discovered—a—pistol! That settled my determination to do what I had resolved upon the night before. Father would not be home for a week yet, and that time *what* fearful scenes might there not be enacted in our peaceful little home! Yes; I would take it all upon my shoulders to avert the calamity.

Therefore without a word to any one, I took the second train to P—, went straight to a detective and explained the whole situation.

“Come with me at once.” I cried; “I am sure he means to kill Mr. Miles this very night!”

The detective looked surprised and amazed at my story, and yielding to my earnest entreaties, accompanied me home. We got back at dinner-time, and Mr. Detective, wearing a clerical suit of black, dined with us without the faintest suspicion being aroused to what his calling might be. I saw him studying Mr. Ray and Mrs. Miles, and wondered if he could read in their faces the tragedy I feared. When the evening train arrived, and Mr. Miles and Mr. Lewis came up the walk together, what was my surprise to see Mr. Detective rush up to Mr. Lewis with a “why, Harry, my dear boy,” and shake his hand with all the heartiness of friendship.

“What in the world are you doing here, Jerold?” asked Mr. Lewis, as he came up the steps.

“Oh, a little pleasure trip, that’s all; we must have our recreation too, you know,” answered Mr. Detective, and he looked at me as though to say “all right, my dear. I won’t tell.” They both went up to Mr. Lewis’ room; just before it was time to ring the tea bell they came down together, laughing. I was alone in the dining-room, putting the last few on dishes little tea-table, when [they] both came up to where I stood, and Mr. Lewis, taking both my hands in his, said:

“My dear Miss Hayden, Mr. Jerold has told me your fears and fancies. I am *very* sorry my friend has been the unconscious and innocent cause of your anxiety, but Mr. Ray is at present engaged in writing an intense drama, of the new school, and is in a great dilemma as to whether he will kill his hero or end his days peaceably. Mrs. Miles was formerly an actress, whose opinion he values very highly, and—so you see—all your little imaginings and fears are wholly groundless.

I thought I should sink—and I guess they thought so too, for Mr. Jerold cried out, “Now, my dear young lady, don’t; you have acted so nobly and brave all through this affair—*don’t*, now!”—and I didn’t. I made them both promise me faithfully that they would never—never tell anybody my

suspicious—not even father. They kept their promise, and to this day when Harry and I—I married Mr. Lewis, he teased me so about the affair that I married him to tease him back—when Harry and I sometimes talk about my “murder case,” father opens his eyes and wonders what we mean. Mr. Ray’s piece “took” beautifully and when I saw the play I was as nervous over the shooting—he shot him—as though it was real. We paid the mortgage off the place; Tom lives there now with his wife and little ones (I throw it up to him sometimes.)] Mr. Miles died shortly after that summer, and Mrs. Miles married Mr. Ray a few years after. When Harry plagues me very much I answer: “Well, who knows but they *did* mean it after all?” At any rate that is the end of my Middletown Mystery.

*Lemoille* [Hyde Park, VT] *Newsdealer*, September 30, 1874