

The Guest Chamber of The Inn at St. Ives

From The Journal of A Detective

By James Franklin Fitts

"It is strange," said Monsieur Berret, passing strange. I was never so sorely puzzled in my life."

"It is not possible then, that you are laboring under any misapprehension?"

"Certainly not; have I not facts to deal with? Supposing, M. Guillot, that half-a-dozen dead bodies were to be found in a certain neighborhood in rapid succession, and under very suspicious circumstances — would it not be a fair conclusion that there had been foul play somewhere?"

"I should certainly deem it so."

"Well—and if in addition to this let us suppose that no clue could be obtained which would even give color of guilt to any person, notwithstanding that every effort had been made—would it not have been very strange and mysterious?"

"I must agree with you that it would!"

"And by my life it is the strangest thing I have ever known! It is not at all wonderful that men die from disease or from accidents, but when we hear of death without apparent cause, and of which no explanation can be given, I am bound to say that it puzzles me beyond measure!"

"But do you mean to say, M. Berret, that there has been no apparent cause for these mysterious deaths."

"Ah—I forgot. In the back of each was a wound, apparently made by some sharp weapon. This was without doubt the cause of their deaths."

"Such a wound, then, must have been indicated by human hands — nothing can be clearer than this conclusion. Now, Monsieur Berret, be so good as to state any particulars which may throw light upon this subject, that I may determine in what manner to act!"

The foregoing conversation took place between myself and the sub agent, in the diligence between St. Malo and St. Ives. I had received a letter from him several days previously, urgently requesting my immediate presence in the latter place, and in the last few leagues of my journey, I was so fortunate as to meet him. Upon my request, he gave a brief history of the strange occurrences in the investigation of which he wished my assistance.

All, however, that he knew of the matter was that within the compass of a few weeks, a succession of startling murders had been committed at St. Ives, a town within his official guardianship. Bodies had been found in the street, bearing in every instance the wound in the back, of which he had spoken — and thus far suspicion had been entirely baffled and left without a resting place. The excitement consequent upon this alarming state of affairs, had caused the sub agent to decide upon a personal investigation of the matter, and when I encountered him, he had already started for St. Ives, so that our destination was the same.

“You entrapped that rascal, Jacques Guichard, so admirably,” M. Berret remarked, “that I am led to hope for your success in the present case, dark and doubtful as the matter now looks.”

“At all events,” was my reply, “I deem it no more than justice to myself, to make a strong effort. I must ask you, however, Monsieur Berret, to give me the entire management and control of this matter, in every particular.”

“I will do so, and with pleasure. Frame whatever plans and whatever means you please. I will be guided by you in all things pertaining to this business.”

“This will be well. But one thing more, Monsieur Berret. You must be as secret as the grave. Do not, upon any consideration, let it be known in St. Ives that there is a detective officer nearer to them than in Paris; and above all, do not suffer yourself to make an inquiry concerning these murders. Leave me to ask all questions in my peculiar manner,”

The sub agent promised full compliance with my instructions, and in a few moments we were rolling through the darkness and rain into the village of St. Ives. During these few moments, however, an incident occurred, which necessarily has an important bearing upon my narrative.

Our conversation had been held, as a matter of course, in so low a tone as not to be overheard by the other occupants of the diligence; in fact, I had hardly noticed any of their faces. But now, as I finished speaking for the time with M. Berret, and looked around me, I discovered of the elderly gentleman who sat directly behind us, Monsieur Auguste Lemare, a wealthy wine seller of Bordeaux, and with whom I was quite intimate. Upon recognizing me, he greeted me cordially, and we conversed together upon passing topics for a moment.

“You stop at the Hotel of St. Ives, I suppose?” he said, changing the subject somewhat abruptly. I consulted the sub agent, and learning that this was the only place in St. Ives at which he ever stopped, I answered the question in the affirmative.

“Well, I shall stay there also; but it is possible that I shall not see you again, as I intend to leave St. Ives early tomorrow morning. I am now on my way to England, traveling as my business compels me to, in a roundabout way. Contrary to my usual custom, I have neglected to obtain letters of exchange, and have now the sum of five thousand francs

with me; permit me to count this over before you, that in case any unforeseen misfortune should deprive me of it before reaching Calais, you may be able to certify to my creditors as to my possession of the money at this time."

Producing a plethoric pocket-book, the wine merchant counted its contents. The sum was correct, as he had said – five thousand francs. M. Berret, also, at his request, became a witness to his possession of the money.

The diligence now came to a stop before the inn, and the passengers hastened to leave the one for the other. After we had taken our supper, I accompanied the sub agent to his room, where for an hour we talked on the subject of our mission to St. Ives, and the probabilities of success; and then, as the hour was quite late, I bade him goodnight and retired to my own chamber, and soon after to sleep. Nothing unusual occurred during the night — if I may make one exception, which it may be well to notice in this place. I had been sleeping for more than two hours, and was lying in a half unconscious state, when I was suddenly awakened by a heavy though smothered groan. I was perfectly sure that I had not mistaken the sound, and mentally deciding that it had been occasioned in some manner in the next room, I sat upright and listened intently. But I heard nothing more, although I placed my ear close to the wall. Whatever the strange sound may have been, it was not repeated.

Upon inquiring for the sub agent the next morning, I was told that he had risen before me, and left the Inn. The idea then occurred to me, that I might have an opportunity to pass half an hour with Monsieur Lemare; and addressing the landlord, a heavy-browed, ill-featured man, I asked for him. The man elevated his brow in surprise, and declared that the wine seller had not been in his house for a month.

"Perhaps you do not know M. Auguste," I said.

"But I do, monsieur, perfectly," he replied. "You must be mistaken about seeing him here."

"He was certainly here – in this town – last night."

"But not in this house — you are doubtless thinking of some other person."

As I walked away, I noticed that he followed me suspiciously with his eyes. His manner seemed strange to me. It was, in fact, rather anxious and overstrained, as though he wished very much to impress it upon my mind that Monsieur Lemare had in reality not been in the hotel. Upon further reflection, however, I was forced to confess that I really had not seen the wine-merchant in the Inn. True, he informed me that he intended to stop there, but I concluded that he had changed his mind, and so I dismissed the subject from my thoughts.

Passing into the street, I strolled along in search of the sub agent. I had continued my walk for but a few moments, when upon turning a corner, I was brought abruptly upon a

singular and terrible scene. A number of persons were crowded in confusion upon the sidewalk – and among them, as it happened, M. Berret. He quickly saw me, and seizing my arm, conducted me forward to the object of common attention. It was, as I had already begun to suspect, another victim of the mysterious assassin of St. Ives — the body of a man lay extended upon the pavement, face downward, the back penetrated by a deep and ghastly wound. But no words can describe my astonishment and horror, when, upon the face of the corpse being exposed, I recognized my good acquaintance, M. Auguste Lamare! The sub agent, too, started back in horrified surprise, and for a moment we both gazed at the body in silence. My habitual caution, however, soon returned, now drawing M. Berret hastily aside, I whispered a few words in his ear.

"Now, Monsieur Berret, if you will follow my Instructions, I think I shall be able to solve this mystery in the course of the next twelve hours. Have the body conveyed as quickly as possible, to some place where it can be kept privately, and then search and see whether those five thousand francs can be found upon it. Do this, and rejoin me in half an hour at the inn. I will wait for you there."

I returned immediately to the hotel, and before the expiration of the appointed time, M. Berret entered my room.

"There is," he said, in a voice laboring under great excitement, "no vestige of that money upon the body of this unfortunate man. It has been plundered of every thing valuable."

"Ah — I expected it. Now Monsieur Berret, let us sit down and talk calmly of this affair. I think I may be able to tell you that which may surprise you."

"Is it possible that you have gained a clue to the author of these murders? Your words and manner lead me to hope for it."

"You are right. I flatter myself that I have not only obtained a clue, but am even able to lay my finger upon the guilty parties. Would you like to hear of my discoverers?"

"Yes – I am all impatience. Please go on." The sub-agent drew his chair close to mine and listened eagerly, while I disclosed the significant facts which I had gained since my arrival at St. Ives.

"In the first place, then, Monsieur Berret," I said, "the discovery of this morning renders it certain that we have selected the right theatre for our operations. There can now be no question that these murders have been committed in this town, since we have ourselves seen one of the victims."

The sub agent nodded affirmatively, and I continued:

"First, then, it seems rather remarkable that these wounds should all be inflicted in the back. As to the manner of their Infliction, I am not prepared to explain; but it seems conclusive to me that these blows must all have been produced by the same hand. In the

next place does it not seem singular that every one of these unfortunate men has been a stranger?"

"Now that I think of it, it does, as I live," the sub agent thoughtfully replied. "But what do you argue from this fact?"

"I will draw my inference in n moment. You will remember the circumstance of M. Lemare counting his money in the diligence in our presence — this morning, we have come on his dead body lying in the public street, rifled of the money. There is now one question in my mind. Did, or did not M. Lemare lodge in this hotel last night?"

"The landlord told me that he did not."

"So he told me — but I prefer to investigate for myself. We had it last night from Lemare's own lips, that it was his intention to stay at this inn until morning, and I am inclined to the belief that he did put up here last night, notwithstanding that nobody appears to have seen him within the house. It is probable that he retired immediately to his room, and communicated with no one but the Innkeeper or one of the servants. Now, Monsieur Berret, let me recur to a circumstance which happened in the diligence, which I think escaped your notice. Just as M. Auguste was replacing his pocket-book, I happened to glance behind me, and then saw an object which instantly attracted my attention. It was a man, bent forward in an eager attitude, his eyes intently fixed upon the operations of M. Auguste. He quickly became aware that I was watching him, and shrank back out of sight, but not before I had observed his face. I have seen it again this morning — it is that of Antoine the hostler!"

"This is truly an important discovery," the sub agent observed.

"But this is not all. Last night I heard a groan from the chamber adjoining mine. The discovery of the morning, considered with these others of which I have been telling you, leads me to believe that this was the death groan of M. Auguste Lemare! In any event, you can draw your own inferences. It is a fair conclusion that the unfortunate man retired to bed in the next chamber. Whether or not he ever left it alive is a question, which in my mind admits of but little doubt."

"Do you, then, really mean to say that your belief is that M. Lemare was murdered under this roof?"

"I am positive of It — and not only he, but each of the other victims. And I am also induced to believe that every one of these midnight assassination, has been committed in the adjoining chamber."

"I have no doubt that you have arrived at the truth," the sub agent replied. "And now, what do you propose to do first. Would it not be better to arrest this innkeeper and his hostler at once?"

"By no means, M. Berret. I think that would be an extremely injudicious step. What I have been telling you are only conjectures of my own, which although probably true in almost every particular, would, I greatly fear, avail little as proof to charge the villainous innkeeper and his servant (who, beyond all question are the criminals) with these crimes. There is now one decisive step to take. I propose to pass the night in this mysterious chamber."

Monsieur Berret heard my quietly spoken words, and looked perfectly aghast with astonishment.

"What, Guillot! are you mad?" he exclaimed. "Pass the night in that infernal slaughter house! Why – are you tired of life? Consider the danger of the thing, and the great loss to the service which your death would occasion!"

The earnest anxiety with which this last remonstrance was uttered was so perfectly ludicrous, that I refrained with difficulty from laughing outright. But I soon succeeded in silencing his objections, if not in satisfying his scruples.

"You have, I believe," I then remarked, "a considerable amount of money with you."

"Yes. Mon Dieu! Had this rascally landlord known last night, I might now be as cold as poor Lemare! Can it answer you any propose?"

"A very important one. Lend me your pocket-book."

Still holding it in my hand, I descended the stairs, the sub agent closely following me. The innkeeper was sitting behind his bar, seemingly half-asleep and half-awake, but the instant that he saw the pocket-book, his dull eyes lighted up with an eager gleam, and he watched my motions with strict attention.

"The amount is correct," I said aloud, to M. Berret. "Two thousand francs — this, then, discharges the debt." Then walking up to the bar I said to the innkeeper: "The room which you have given me does not suit me in the least — have you not a larger one where I can lodge?"

"Yes, monsieur," the man replied, with remarkable alacrity, "I should have spoken of it myself. There is a large and pleasant chamber next to the one in which you slept last night — do me the favor to occupy it so long as you please."

"You had better decline before it is too late," Berret whispered in my ear. "I fear you will not occupy it for more than one night. If you do, you will accomplish what no person has yet done."

"Show me the room," I calmly replied, paying no attention to the anxious whisper of the sub agent

There seemed nothing remarkable about the room when we had once entered it. It was a trifle larger than the other chambers of the house, and the furniture was of a more antique pattern, especially the High-posted bedstead.

"I think this will answer," I said, after surveying the apartment and its belongings.

"Will you lodge here to-night, then, monsieur?"

"Certainly, the room suits me in every particular."

If the dark-browed host had entertained any suspicions of my intentions, they were certainly by this time entirely dissipated; and he left the room, I have no doubt, gratified in the depths of his black heart that another victim was to fall so easily into his trap.

"You are determined on this step, I perceive," M. Berret remarked, after he had gone.

"Well, I will not attempt to dissuade you, since I know you cannot be moved, but I promise you, should you be missing in the morning, I will burn the old rookery to the ground, and hang the villainous innkeeper upon his signpost, as surely as I shall myself live till then!"

"Take whatever steps you please when you find me missing, M. Berret — until then, leave the matter in my hands. But there is one material service which you must not fail to render me. You will, if you please, conceal yourself, with two or three trusty men, in the room next to this, which I occupied last night, and there await my signal. When you hear from me, you will instantly rush in and assist me to secure whoever you may find."

These arrangements were at the proper moment put fully into operation. As evening drew on, I saw that the sub agent and his allies were properly secreted, and first enjoining vigilance upon them, I entered the mysterious and fatal guest chamber. The lamp which I carried seemed to reveal every part of it, and I quickly became aware that there was nothing unusual about the appearance of the room. It was very much such a bed-chamber as might be met with in almost every village inn. Nevertheless, I resolved to put no faith in appearances, and immediately I commenced a systematic examination. I searched everywhere—under the bed, in the closet and behind the window curtains — but my search revealed nothing. It was certain that no one was concealed anywhere in the room, and there as certainly seemed no place for ingress, save the door. I was beginning to become anxious. I reflected that the danger might come upon me unexpectedly, and from an unexpected source. I sat down, and for half an hour I waited — waited in restless expectancy for the appearance of the assassin, but still I waited in vain. Looking at my watch, I perceived that it was nearly midnight. My unaccustomed vigil had wearied me, and placing my pistol beneath the pillow, I lay down upon the bed without removing my clothes, I was not long in discovering that this bed was of somewhat singular construction — the formation of the top being rather concave than otherwise, and so adjusted that the occupant could not possibly rest in it in any other manner than upon his back, in the middle.

Upon his back! That seemed rather a singular discovery to make just at that moment. Had not every one of the murdered men been stabbed through the back? Yes — and each of them must have received his death wound while lying in this very bed, just as I —

Click-click-click!

Three sharp, distinct sounds, apparently near at hand, interrupted my reflection. I knew their meaning in an instant — those sounds needed no interpreter. I rose quickly and silently, and grasping my pistol, awaited the next movement of the unseen assassins. Click-click. That noise again, and now like the creaking of a hinge. Next there was a shuffling sound which made me aware that there was a man beneath the bed — and the next instant I saw the blade of a dagger driven up through the thin mattress, in the very place where I had been lying! I gave a low groan, which was answered by a chuckle from beneath the bed.

"An easy death! Now for the spoils," I heard the same voice say. And at the same instant the head and shoulders of the innkeeper were thrust out from behind the bed-hangings. Covering him with the muzzle of one of my pistols, I said:

"Come forth, sir, and deliver yourself up! Your innocent guest is no other than a detective officer! Don't try to escape — I shall certainly fire if you do!"

But he did try, and I speedily sent a pistol ball after him. The report was succeeded by a deep groan, and instantly M. Berret and his assistants rushed in. A hasty search was sufficient to discover the landlord under the bed, weltering in his blood, and the hostler was seized before he had an opportunity to close the secret panel in the wall, through which he endeavored to escape.

This panel, as a short search disclosed to us, opened directly into a hollow partition, which communicated with a lower room. By means of this strange contrivance, the assassins had always been able to enter this particular chamber at any time — and once through the panel without having disturbed the unsuspecting sleeper, their work was easily done. The bed was, as I have said, constructed in such a manner that a sleeper could maintain only one position in it — a hollow had been worn for the passage of the dagger, and a single powerful thrust had been in every instance enough to transfix the heart of the victim. After rifling the body of everything valuable, the murderers were accustomed to carry it out in the darkness of the night and leave it on of the public streets of the town. And so adroitly had this game been played that no shadow of suspicion had attached to the real criminals.

The innkeeper recovered from the wound which I gave him, but it was only, together with his partner in guilt — the hostler — to receive one of a much more serious character from the hand of the public executioner. And when I next came to St. Ives, I occupied the same chamber and the same bed at the inn, with a sense of the most perfect security, undisturbed by any remembrance of my former remarkable adventure.

Flag of Our Union, September 24, 1859

Ballou's Dollar Monthly, December 1859

The Weekly Pioneer and Democrat [St. Paul, MN], August 3, 1860